

Even Flow



Meet the 3W Gang. Three regular young guys into movies, beer, music, make-up, reading, friends...
and waging violent vigilante war on society

Darragh McManus

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Copyright Acknowledgements

'To avenge, in a sense, was simply to equalise, to seek a requisite balance'
Don De Lillo, *Players*, pages 120-121, Alfred A. Knopf, 1977

'This is ladies' night, and the feeling's right'
Ladies' Night, Kool and the Gang, verse 1 lines 1-2, from *Ladies' Night*, DeLite Records, 1979

'...with the absolute heart of the poem of life butchered out of their own bodies'
Howl, Allen Ginsberg, line 76, from *Howl and Other Poems*, City Lights Books, 1956

'Love may be blind, but love at least knows what is man and what mere beast'
Down, Wanton, Down!, Robert Graves, lines 9-10, from *Poems 1930-1933*, Arthur Barker, 1933

'Causes of homosexuality are not fully understood. According to the most widely accepted theory... Most homosexuals appear no different from other members of their own sex'
Karlfrid B. Broderick, *World Book encyclopaedia*, page 275, Scott Fetzer, 1986

'How can they see the love in our eyes and still they don't believe us?'
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'True terror is a language and a vision'
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'She lies and says she still loves him, can't find a better man/ She dreams in colour, she dreams in red, can't find a better man'
Betterman, Pearl Jam, chorus lines 1-2, from *Vitalogy*, Epic, 1994

'I love you, Mary-Jane'
Hits from the Bong, Cypress Hill, verse 2 line 4, from *Black Sunday*, Ruffhouse, 1993

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'Leave the road and memorize this life that passed before my eyes/
Nothing is going my way'

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'He-Man Woman-Hater'

He-Man Woman-Hater, Extreme, from *Pornograffiti*, A&M, 1990

About the Author

Darragh McManus is a writer and journalist. His first book, *GAA Confidential*, was published by Hodder. He also published a comic novel, *Cold! Steel! Justice!!!*, as an e-book under the name Alexander O'Hara. For more than a decade he has written reviews, features and opinion columns for several papers, including The Irish Independent, The Sunday Times and The Guardian. He lives in the west of Ireland. *Even Flow* is his first crime novel. His second, *The Polka Dot Girl*, will also be published by Roundfire.

www.darraghmcmanus.com

Even Flow

For Majella

To avenge, in a sense, was simply to equalize, to seek a requisite balance.

Don De Lillo, *Players*

Even Flow

Chapter I

Masters of the universe



HE'D never realized how cold it would be hanging upside-down outside a thirty-second storey apartment.

Clifford Hudson hung there, by his ankles, hair falling away from his face, and tried to focus on this. It really was cold up that high, even though it was only September. The wind whipped about his head and bare torso, the hair on his legs pricked awake by the chill. He'd been in similar places before – climbed mountains, gone skiing, dived in deep, freezing water – but this was different. Now he had no protective clothing, no bodysuit made of cutting-edge, futuristic material, gleaming like a silver spaceman in the Alpine sun. Now he was wearing just boxer shorts, the wind was cutting into him like frozen needles and he was *cold*. And now, of course, he was also scared.

Steve moaned again, something like, 'What did I do, what did I do?' Hudson wished Steve would shut up; let him think. Let him remember how the two of them had come to be tied up, in heavy duct tape and women's clothing, strapped together like two slabs of beef in a butcher's freezer, suspended in mid-air by a rope that lead back inside the apartment window. The world spun around his head then, inverted and dizzying. Brilliant Manhattan lights, smaller pinpoints across his namesake Hudson River, the inky sea of night-time, glimpses of those black faces. The bastards were toying with them, he realized. The big one, he was spinning the rope. Playing them like a goddamn human yo-yo. Hudson could picture the other one, the talker, the one with the red bow tie, smiling as he gave his pal the order. That smug smile you could make out beneath the mask; that controlled, terrifying smile.

He felt nauseous; too much blood gone to the head, too many chemicals already in the blood. Nauseous, but still defiant. They were steadying the rope periodically, steadying him before those placards they held up to his face. Red bow tie crouched on the windowsill, leaning over towards him, whispering almost: 'Everyone's watching. Go on. You'll feel better for it.' He wouldn't do it. To hell with them – who did they think they were?

Hudson struggled and kicked against his binds, like a fish squirming on the hook, but it was no use. He was stuck, way up here, with Steve, who was crying like a little pussy and really starting to annoy him. Then Hudson realized that Steve had pissed down on both of them, that unmistakable hot trickle turning cold almost instantly in the night and the height. Well, this was just fucking *great*. These were Lagerfeld, pure silk, not cheap, and that idiot had spoiled them. He'd have throttled the silly little shit if he could only get his hands free.

How did this come to pass, Hudson thought? And then he remembered. Right, the party; Steve's bachelor party. And now *he* felt like crying too, crying from terror and anger but also thwarted pleasure. Fuck the three of them for ruining everything – the evening had been going so well up to that point.

It had gone just fine. Hudson was on several kinds of high by the time he arrived at Steve's apartment block in Tribeca. The stage was set, the guys had arrived; everything had been laid on for them. Steve was *in situ* from an early hour, obviously, as the guest of honour. Hudson had arranged it all: the drinks, the sounds, the little treats scattered about the apartment in broad glass bowls. Steve was his best friend, his bro, his future business partner, in all probability; and now he was getting married, and Hudson was going to make sure it was perfect. This was the least Steve deserved.

He'd popped out for an hour, to meet a few associates, once the vibe was burbling away nicely. Lively but not too crazy, not yet. You had to build up to that point, that pitch where everyone lets go. He knew all about this stuff; he was an expert in helping others to have a good time. Call it a God-given talent. Now Hudson reached forward and pressed the intercom for Steve's apartment. A voice answered, slightly drunk: 'Come on up.' He tried to place it as the door snapped open and he moved inside. Might be that jack-off Leopold, though Hudson couldn't remember inviting him. Leopold – what a stupid name. He'd have to be a jack-off with a name like that.

Hudson moved up several flights of stairs, their bare concrete walls and metal steps, the designer communist sort of look that was so hip with certain types of people in certain areas. Passing the smooth steel doors of the elevator on each floor, and passing them by: he took pride in his physical fitness. Thirty-two stories was nothing, coked up or not; in fact, he considered it a challenge, to complete this trek while under the influence of something or other. Steve was softer, lazier; he was prone to weight gain and the easy option. He'd go to fat within a few years, like both their fathers. But Hudson wouldn't let that happen to him.

He passed a young woman on the stairs, about two-thirds of the way up. She was very good-looking, showing a lot of thigh and a hint of tit. She eyed him nervously as they approached one another, leaning against the wall to allow him by. Hudson snapped on his sharpest killer smile and lifted a hand: 'S'okay. Don't be nervous, baby. I'm going to a party.' She stood there, looking down at the ground, as he continued upwards, and then his cell phone rang. He pulled it out, tiny and beetle-black, flipping open the receiver.

'Wassup? Yeah, it's me. I'm on my way... I'm on the stairs, fucko. I'm right outside your... Yeah, I got it... I *got* it. I told you I got it, you dick... Ha ha ha ha! Yeah, you do that, man. You keep them on the boil for me... Yeah, see ya in a second.'

Hudson kept climbing until he reached a massive, dark wood double-door, pressing the buzzer. The door swung open and he stepped through into an absolutely gorgeous apartment. Man, Steve sure knew how to decorate; or, at least, Christine did. Groovy, mellow dance music slinked from strategically located speakers as he walked into the room, surveying the scene.

The boys were all in town – young, lean, confident, in sharp suits and studiously unremarkable haircuts. They went to the kind of barbers who charge five hundred bucks to make you look as if you haven't just been to the barbers. The drink was flowing down and the talk getting louder by the sentence. Men stood around or lounged on pale-coloured couches, knocking back beers and picking at plates of nuts and discussing business and sports and how close they were to fucking that hot little blonde in marketing. Nobody smoked, oddly. Hudson passed a table over which two of his friends leaned, fingers pressed to their noses and an almost absurd air of concentration about them. He dipped a finger into the bowl beside them and sucked on it – *zing* – that's good stuff. No cheap shit for Steve on his special night. Across the room two others were actually wrestling; real infantile crap. One of them jostled a vase Hudson had bought Steve for his birthday. He made a mental note to self: throw these assholes out within the hour.

At the far side of the room, on a lower level, a group huddled together, looking at something. Hudson smiled – everything was set to perfection – and caught his reflection in a long mirror. His black, clipped hair, dark eyes, hard-earned physique under a suit that couldn't have fit better if it was his own skin. He smiled and nodded to himself. He felt satisfied. Then Steve sprang towards him, seemingly from nowhere. He had always been quieter, smaller, a paler presence; people didn't tend to notice him too often next to Hudson.

Steve yelled, arms outstretched, '*Heeeyy!!* Hud, you faggot! You're back!'

They clasped hands and Hudson said, 'Steve. The pleasure, as always, is yours.'

'Did you bring it? You brought it, right? *Tell* me you brought it...'

Hudson patted his inside pocket. 'Relax, man. I got it right here. Shit. I *got* it, bro.'

Steve reached forward and Hudson slapped his hand away, saying, 'Ah-ah-ah. All in good time, my man. All in good time. A little alcohol and light entertainment first.'

Outside, three figures in tuxedos moved through the black, shining night. Each had a small rucksack on his back. One of them was huge, six foot five, powerful across the chest. One was slim, light-footed, a little shorter than average. The one in the centre was lean and reasonably tall. His dark-red dickey-bow, in contrast to the others' black ties, was vivid against the whiteness of his shirt. It looked like blood on virgin snow.

Hudson strode through the room, grabbing a drink off a table as he walked to the lower level, Steve in tow. The group parted to make way for him – it felt natural, respectful, this movement aside – and revealed two women sitting and embracing on a thick rug as the crowd egged them on. One had her face buried in the crook of the other's neck. They stroked each other's upper arms and hips, languidly, detached somehow. The women stopped then and looked up, eyes flitting from face to face. They were young – one very young – and pretty, dressed in cheap fabrics and gaudy colours. Tight pants, crop tops, large hoop earrings swinging against loosened strands of hair. They looked around uneasily. They looked at Hudson.

He examined them for a moment, nodded and said, 'Mm-hm. Not bad. Not bad at all. They'll do,' then turned back to the group and lifted his drink to eye level.

'Okay, men. Raise a glass and call a toast for our good friend Steve Ainsworth, who has decided to finally make an honest woman out of Christine. How she puts up with the prick I dunno, but I guess all those blow-jobs she's been fortunate enough to give *me* have helped her through it some ways.'

Hudson smiled. The crowd laughed, none more than Steve, who shook his head like an indulgent parent. Hud was the funniest son of a bitch he'd ever known.

'Anyway, anyway, Steve, you're our main guy and I'm proud to be your best man. I'm sure you and Christine will be very happy together, and whatever you need, you know you only gotta ask.'

Steve nodded his appreciation.

'So fellas, raise your glass for a great fucking guy and a great lady: to Steve and Christine.'

A chorus of 'Steve and Christine.'

Hudson said, 'Stevie boy, this is your last night of freedom, so enjoy it well. We got booze, we got coke, we got every fucking thing you could ask for. And, of course...' He pointed behind him at the two women. '...we got, uh...' He turned, stared at them, shrugged. 'Well. Whatever their names are. They're here to please *you*, Steve, so what's it gonna be?'

Steve wiped his hand across his mouth, wiped a smile onto his face as two friends slid a chair under his behind. He settled in, his glassy eyes brightening, staring at the two girls.

'I wanna watch, Hud. I wanna watch 'em.'

Hudson nodded. He took a swig from his drink and said, 'You heard the man, ladies. Do what you're good for.'

Now *this* is the moment: here is where the pitch is reached. Someone dimmed the lights, someone else struck up a spot over that corner of the room; Hudson had all the angles covered. He felt a thrill, an electric jolt, spiral up and down his spine as the girls got into it. The crowd moved in around them, pressing, urging, as the two women pulled each other's clothes off. Their hair mussed up around those pretty faces, asses in the air, panties strewn like rubble around their ankles. The older one fell over, legs splayed and surprise in her expression, and a cheer rose. Hudson slipped a pill into his mouth and let the moment take him over.

He saw everything; he saw them do everything, every fucking thing they were ordered. It became like a film reel then, black-and-white but ultra-defined. No, not a film reel – a photographic slide-show. Image after image after image, metered out, steady, vivid, under his control. The women pressing their tongues into each other's mouths. Plastic toys clutched, or discarded on the shag carpet. Obscure, hardly definable body parts: someone's shoulder or thigh, a scrap of pubic hair, the Sahara ripple of skin over rib cage. The tatty fabrics of their whore outfits. Male hands entering the picture, to guide them, force them together, or clenched in a fist of exultation. The boys whooped and hollered, patting Steve on the back as he sat there, pleased and horny. They encouraged the women to do more, go further, be wilder. Manic expressions on the watching crowd: sex- and booze- and drug-crazed. Grinding teeth, sweat stains on their shirts; nods of validation and camaraderie. The spotlight pure and unflinching, the murky bass on the music echoing throughout the apartment – that subterranean, relentless beat...

Eventually Hudson stepped in and pulled the girls apart. They cowered, scuttling backwards, covering their nakedness with their hands.

They looked dishevelled and beaten-down; their make-up had streaked on their faces.

Hudson said, 'Alrighty. Well, I think we all enjoyed that a *whole* lot. I know you did, anyway, Stevie boy.'

Everyone laughed, including Steve. A guy in a black polo shirt and square glasses said, 'He was moaning like a bitch!'

More laughter. Hudson raised a hand. 'Alright, alright. That's enough of that. We're here to party with Steve, fellas, not to degrade him; 'cause after all...' He looked down at the two women. '...that's what *you're* here for.'

The three men in tuxedos were approaching the apartment building. Ten yards from the main door they pulled black balaclavas over their heads and leather gloves onto their hands. The figure in the red bow tie held his finger poised over the buzzer. He spoke in a deep, quiet, slightly distorted voice without turning back.

'Are you ready for this? Both of you?'

The big one flicked away the end of a cigarette. The small one breathed out loudly through pursed lips. They both nodded and hummed affirmation.

'Okay, then. Onwards we go.'

He pressed the buzzer; no voice answered but the door opened. They entered the building.

Hudson reached into his jacket and pulled out a dead mouse, half-wrapped in tissue. It sat in his hand, limp and disgusting, though he didn't appear bothered by it. The group started jostling, leaning on one another's shoulders, monkey noises, a charge of excitement.

'Oh, *shit!* Oh, baby! You cannot be serious!'

'This is gonna be so fucking *cool!*'

Hudson looked at them, a solemn, almost teacherly expression: 'I can't be serious? I'm always serious.' He turned to the two women. 'Ladies, I'd like you to meet a good friend of mine – Spanky the mouse – sadly, recently deceased.'

He held the animal down to their faces. They turned away in revulsion, eyes down, hands to their mouths. The younger one rubbed her nose, sniffing.

'Well, come on,' Hudson said. 'Don't be rude. Say hello to Spanky. You're gonna be getting a hell of a lot closer to our little pal here, so it's good that you get to know each other a little better first.'

Steve sat up in his chair, gleaming, gazing at his friend. He said, 'Aw, you are the *bomb*, Hud. You are the fucking bomb. You are *it*, man.'

Hudson smiled. 'Anything for a friend, Stevie boy. Now, girls – you know what to do with little Spanky here.'

The younger girl clutched her friend's shoulder and mumbled, 'I don't think... I don't wanna do this...'

The older one drew some fortitude, then, from somewhere. She sat straighter and looked at Hudson directly, her breasts bare, her teeth set, a pulse in the graceful length of her neck.

She said, 'Hey, she doesn't feel too good. My friend is feeling kinda sick, okay? I think we should call it a night here. You can...you know, you can keep some of the money...'

Hudson leaned in close, his lips almost brushing her ear. 'Uh-uh. I don't think we're gonna call it a night. I think you're gonna do what you've been fucking paid to do. What we *tell* you to do.' He stood and addressed the assembled masses. 'Right, guys?'

A great cheer; then, as if by some spontaneous instinct of the collective, they began to chant, unprompted: 'Fuck the mouse...fuck the mouse...' The two women glanced at each other apprehensively. The younger one shook her head, her gaze half-focused on the fuzzy middle-distance. Hudson threw the dead animal onto the rug and glared at them. The chant continued, louder, more playful but also more insistent, the pitch building again. The girls didn't move. Hudson set his jaw and breathed rapidly through his nose; he was not a patient man.

'Fuck the mouse...fuck the mouse...'

Another twenty or thirty seconds, and he'd had enough of this shit. The money had been paid, time for the action. Hudson leaned forward to grab one of them by the hair, either one, to force the little cunt's face down to the ground, when one side of the apartment door crashed open. It blew inwards, the heavy wood lifting at the bottom, splinters like confetti shooting into the air, and hung unsteadily by its upper hinge. The room felt silent, though the music continued to play; a communal holding of breath, as everyone froze in their tracks, waiting to see what was coming next. Even Hudson didn't act.

The three men in tuxedos walked into the apartment, flicking the main light switch on entering. The place flooded with the soft yellow glow of roof spotlights. Two stood with their hands behind their backs; the one in the red bow tie stepped forward, raised a finger to his chin and said, "'Fuck the mouse, fuck the mouse..." Hmm. Fuck a *mouse*? What kinda... Did you ever hear anything like that before, Waters?'

The smaller man replied, 'Nah. Sounds pretty strange to me, Wilde.'

The one calling himself Wilde said, 'What 'bout you, Whitman?'

The big man shrugged lazily. 'Uh-uh. Never heard of that. You?'

Wilde shook his head. 'Can't say I have. But I don't get out much these days, so, you know...'

Hudson acted then, his pride clicking back on like the light switch. He strode towards them, to the front of the crowd, incandescent with rage.

'What...? Who the *fuck* do you think you are, coming in here like this!? This is a private party! What is this? Some kind of fucking *joke*?'

Wilde emitted a short laugh, slightly muffled by his mask.

Hudson spluttered, 'So this *is* a joke, right? Some son of a bitch put you up to this. *Right!*?'

Wilde said, 'No. I realize you can't tell with these balaclavas, but we're not joking. Show him how serious we are, Whitman.'

Whitman and Waters brought their hands around the front – each held a gun with a silencer. Whitman looked to Wilde.

'Who?'

'Anyone.'

Whitman stepped forward and shot one guy at random, through the foot. He dropped to the ground, screaming in pain, an almost comical look of surprise on his face. Everyone gasped in shock but didn't move, didn't panic. There was a weird air of sedation – paralysis by fear, maybe. Hudson stood there, stunned momentarily, then that cocky belligerence reasserted itself once more.

He yelled, 'Wha-? You mother*fuck*er!!' and rushed towards Wilde. But Whitman moved too fast: he was between them, pressing the gun against Hudson's cheek. The barrel pushed into his skin, creating a pallid ellipse.

Wilde sighed, almost inaudibly, and said, 'Don't. Don't move, don't try to knock his hand away, and don't speak another fucking word. We hadn't planned to kill anyone tonight, but we're, ah...*flexible*. Whitman here already has a thing about yuppies, so don't tempt him. Now...' He looked around the assembled company. '...which one of you is Steven Ainsworth?'

No response for a moment; then Steve meekly showed himself, shuffling through the mass of men, a terrified expression, glancing from left to right as if seeking encouragement.

He said, 'What...what is this? Is this a robbery? Do you want...? Here.' Steve took off his watch. It was a beautiful model: Swiss, virtually

nuclear precision in the timekeeping. 'Take this. I've got money. And they've got money. Come on, guys. Give him your money. Give him your fucking money!'

Wilde strolled past Hudson and Whitman, locked in their glacial embrace, and said, 'Keep it. We don't want money. We came here to make a statement, nothing more.'

Steve remained where he was, his watch proffered before him like the alms of a penitent. He looked baffled, and cold somehow, crouched in that ridiculous position; he dared not look to the side as Waters moved past him, flanking Wilde, covering him, waving his gun to clear the crowd. Whitman threw Hudson aside and moved back to cover the door. Hudson took a few steps back, away from the centre, skulking, nursing his bruises.

Wilde bent down to the two women, who flinched slightly. They were very pretty. One was darker, with shortish hair, a strong jaw-line, a plump lower lip and a flash of intelligence in her eyes; the other, the younger one, was fair, pale even, with long hair in a ponytail which had gotten skewed to the side, a slight overbite, ice-grey eyes and delicate, long lashes. Wilde smiled, in a way he hoped would be reassuring; he realized the peculiarity of his garb. He reached out a hand, slowly.

The older girl recoiled and said, 'Don't...! Please. Don't...don't hurt us. Don't hurt her.'

Wilde withdrew his hand, saying gently to her, 'I won't hurt you. Get dressed.'

She looked at him, unsure.

'Go on,' he said. 'It's okay. Get dressed.'

The older girl began scrabbling around for her clothes, sorting through the scattered detritus of the last half-hour. Wilde reached behind for a brightly coloured woollen throw and wrapped it around the younger woman, embracing her shoulders. She was shaking.

He whispered, 'Hey. It's okay. Don't be frightened. We're not going to hurt you. Look at me. Look at my eyes.'

Her eyes remained fixed on the floor.

'It's alright, sweetheart. Are you looking at me? Don't be frightened. What's your name?'

The girl looked up then, her gaze at some point on his forehead. She said, 'It's...Dorothy. My name is Dorothy.'

'Dorothy. Okay. What a pretty name. How old are you, Dorothy?'

A tall, extremely skinny man in an ironically garish shirt and yellow braces bounded forward, waving his arms around. He said, 'Hey,

what the fuck, man? Just let us go, alright? If you wanna do whatever you wanna do with the hookers, man, that's o...'

Waters smacked him in the nose with the butt of the gun, that horrible bone squelch. He crumpled in a heap, blood pouring through his fingers, legs kicking like an upended insect.

'Anyone else feel like they have a contribution to make? Please, feel free,' Waters said.

Wilde turned back to Dorothy. 'It's alright, now. Hey. Are you looking at me?'

She started to cry. Dry sobs at first, her shoulders shaking, and then the tears rolled down her pale cheeks. The other woman, now dressed, scootched across on her backside to console her friend.

Dorothy said, 'I'm...seventeen. I don't know how... I didn't mean to end up doing this. I'm not, um... Amy just asked me to come along...'

Wilde said, 'Okay. It's alright, sweetheart. Get dressed.' He turned to Amy. 'Do you have money?'

She nodded yes. Wilde stood up, looked around, pointed to a heavysset guy in shiny trousers.

'You. Take off your watch, all your jewellery, and give me your wallet. Now.'

The man did as he was ordered. Wilde held it out to Amy, saying, 'Here. Might as well get something, right? Take it.'

Amy took it, holding it gingerly, away from her.

'Help her get dressed and...can you hail a taxi?' Wilde asked.

'Yeah. ...Hey – thanks.'

Wilde nodded, 'Sure', and turned to the group of men. 'Now – Steven Ainsworth. Come here, Steven.'

Steve hesitated, swallowing heavily, forestalling events. Then a realisation: there is no slithering out of this. He could practically feel the heavy hands of his relieved friends on his back as he walked towards Wilde, slowly and nervously. He looked around for support again; his friends looked away.

He said, 'Hey, look. I'm not sure... What's going on here, dude? What are you doing in my place?'

Wilde ignored him and moved to the window, the large window with that coveted view of the river by night. It looked like the backdrop to a late-night chat-show: the twinkling lights, the miniature squares of neon, the blue-black mirror of the Hudson. Almost too beautiful.

'Steven Ainsworth,' he said. 'Steve to his friends. Futures trader with a blue-chip company. Father an investment banker, mother a lady of

leisure. Membership of a country club, a gentleman's club, an expensive health and racquet club...all the trappings of a gilded life.'

He paused, one gloved finger to his chin. Steve moved to speak and Wilde raised the finger, cutting him off, like a hammy detective explaining the murder.

'Engaged to Christine De Beers; Chris to *her* friends. Ceremony in two days' time in a small, beautifully kept uptown church. Guests include several big wheels in finance, industry, the judiciary, and at least one high-profile politician who, if rumour is to be believed, would have fit in quite well at this cosy little *soirée*.'

He turned back to Steve. 'Uh-huh. I know *all* about you, Steven.'

Steve lost his cool, finally: stress and irritation getting the upper hand on terror. He said, 'Look, what *is* this, you shithead? Whaddyou *want!*?''

Wilde nodded at Waters who slapped Steve, with his hand, on the side of the head, not too hard.

'Shut your mouth and open your ears. We're getting to the good part soon.' Wilde returned to that gorgeous, heartbreaking view. 'So Steve and all his friends decide to have a little party; something to mark the occasion, as it were. A select group invited round to these elegant surroundings; a few drinks, a little coke, a lot of bullshit, a couple of beautiful girls...what could be finer?'

Waters shrugged and said, 'I can't think of anything, Wilde.'

'But you had to go overboard, Steven. You weren't satisfied with that. None of you. You weren't satisfied with taking the drugs and talking the bullshit; you weren't even satisfied with having sex with the beautiful girls.'

The women had dressed without anybody really noticing it. They looked different now, even in the same clothes: more grave, more inflexible, but also less tethered to now. It seemed like a part of Amy and Dorothy had come loose and floated away. They stood behind Wilde, who gestured to them.

'Look at them! They're *gorgeous*. What guy wouldn't want to be with a woman who looks like that, even if he is paying for it? Hey, I'm a man – I understand these things.'

He nodded at the two women, and they moved to leave. The crowd parted for them. Dorothy looked at her feet; Amy stared at each man, straight on, with contempt.

Wilde continued, 'But that wasn't enough for you pricks. You had to go a little further. You're so fucking tired and cynical; you've had so many good things for so long, so much sex and money and power, that

you're incapable of feeling real pleasure or joy anymore. You've become empty inside and need to degrade others to fill that hole.' He leaned forward. 'Am I correct, Steven?'

Steve flushed, waved his hands. 'Hey, wait. Look, okay? We didn't... They're okay. We didn't hurt them, alright? We... How the fuck did you know about this, anyway?'

'How did we know? We hear things, Steven. Our reach is long and our friends are everywhere... The truth is we didn't know. We picked you at random. We found out who had hired girls for a party tonight, and we picked you.' Wilde rested his arms on the windowsill, gazed out the window. 'But it doesn't matter, 'cause you're all the same. Could be you, could be some other asshole across town. You're a *type*, Steven: you're a particular kind of guy with particular tastes. We didn't even know what shit you'd pull tonight, but we knew what shit you'd pull tonight, you understand me? And you'll do fine. You'll make the same statement as anyone else.'

Steve pointed behind him, fright in his eyes, saying, 'It wasn't me, okay? It was Hud. Hud arranged the whole thing. I just... Hud brought them here. I just asked for some hookers for my bachelor party and he...'

Wilde said, 'So you're passing the blame to your friend there?'

Waters laughed, sardonic. 'Ah! No honour among thieves anymore, Wilde.'

Hudson took a step forward, squaring himself. He was over that hump of indignity; now he was angry with these cocksuckers.

'Steve, shut your stupid, whiny fucking mouth or I will shut it for you.' He pointed at Wilde. 'And fuck you, okay, pal? Fuck...*you*!! They're *whores*, you asshole! What did they expect coming here? Tea and fucking *cake*!? Look at them! They're just whores!'

Amy and Dorothy had reached the door. Amy walked back towards Hudson and spat in his face, then turned and left. Hudson fumed, itching to react, to slap her down, to show everyone who was the boss of this situation.

Whitman bowed to the two women as they left, an extravagant stoop, and said, 'Night, ladies. Take care, now.'

Wilde stepped forward and addressed the rest of the crowd: 'All the rest of you: get out of here. Take your jackets and get the fuck out. Go straight home. Don't try to catch up with Amy and Dorothy there – we'll be watching.'

The men began gathering their things, sheepishly, awkwardly, furtive glances at the three men with the three guns. And at the two who would remain. Wilde turned to Steve.

'Steven and his belligerent pal – you're staying here. We have big plans for the two of you.'

Hudson shouted, 'Hey, look, you sick bastard. I've got friends, okay? I know people. You don't wanna fuck with me...'

Waters laughed again. 'Oh, yeah – we've seen how *your* friends act, "Hud".'

'We don't want to fuck with you?' Wilde asked. 'Oh, but we *do*, Hud. A sweet-looking boy like you? We want to fuck with you *very* much. Whitman – the door.'

The last partygoer exited, a dissipated shadow stealing away. The door still hung from the hinge. Whitman pushed hard and quick, jamming it into the frame. The wood made a squeak of resistance to set the teeth on edge. He remained there, bulky and soundless, gun resting on one huge bicep. Waters and Wilde faced Steve and Hudson, who had instinctually moved closely together, back to back, their hands out in front, a motion of warding away. Strength in numbers, but now there were only two. For the first time Hudson could feel his spirit, his intrinsic courage, begin to leak away. He looked at the masked men and felt small.

'Big plans, Hud. Big plans and big statements, and you're the first,' Wilde said. 'But consider yourself fortunate: people will remember you for a long time because of this. You *and* your friend.'

Even Flow

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Date: Wed, 15 Oct 2007 17:52:39

From: "Fingal O'Flahertie" <wildeimaginings@hotmail.com> [Add to Address Book](#)

Subject: Tuesday's Musique Non Stop column

To: groganmuso@yahoo.com

Dear Ms. Grogan,

Regarding your piece on Christina Aguilera's forthcoming live DVD: was it really necessary to describe the singer as – and here I quote – a 'slut', a 'tramp', a 'slut' again and, my favourite, 'a music biz version of every small town's guaranteed easy lay'? I mean, what's with the abuse here? What's with the woman-hating language? Correct me if I'm wrong, but you are a woman.

Yours, a puzzled reader.

PS. Personally, I can't abide either Christina Aguilera or her music, but that's beside the point.

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Date: Sat, 18 Oct 2007 13:23:24

From: "Fingal O'Flahertie" <wildeimaginings@hotmail.com> [Add to Address Book](#)

Subject: Re. re. Tuesday's Musique Non Stop column

To: groganmuso@yahoo.com

Dear Ms. Grogan,

Thanks for your reply. I do understand that yours is, as you say, a 'provocative' opinion column, and I never mentioned anything about restricting your freedom of speech. I'm just curious, that's all. Curious as to why a woman would use such language about another woman. And would you use the same terminology to describe, say, a male rock star who screwed around at every possible opportunity? Would you call Elton John a 'mincing little faggot', or whatever? Or have you even thought about this inconsistency?

Yours, still puzzled.

PS. By the way, in response to your description of me as a 'typical uptight moaning feminist anachronism, giving other women a bad name': I'm male. Duh.

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Date: Sun, 19 Oct 2007 20:58:16

From: "Fingal O'Flahertie" <wildeimaginings@hotmail.com> [Add to Address Book](#)

Subject: Re. re. re. re. Tuesday's Musique Non Stop column

To: groganmuso@yahoo.com

Dear Ms. Grogan,

What a charming response. I'm amazed my ISP swear-checker actually let that through.

Anyway: do you know what an 'Uncle Tom' is? Can you spell 'sell-out'?

Yours in disgust (and yeah, still puzzled).