

Men in Brown

THIS IS HOW BAD IT'S GOTTEN: I dream about the U.P.S. man. I order household items I neither need nor want: extendible fan blade dusters (I do not have a fan); silver serving spoons (I do not have dinner parties); tulip bulbs (weeds strangle my flower beds); and this morning, complicated underwear with clips and flying buttresses and lace and thongs and garters. (I already own thirty-two Miracle bras, and on me they look like penance). And, yes, I regret it already. When the discreet brown-papered package arrives will *he* snicker at me, his brown eyes, eyes the flavor of bitter brickle chocolate, lick over me, knowing, secretive, brown, his black shock of hair sending shock waves down my spine? Oh, heart be still. Men in uniform. What *was* I thinking?

It began innocently enough. I joined a book club; I just wanted to belong, to belong to a club. Club, it sounds so chummy, so hail-fellow-well-met. Except that I hate crowds, so I joined a book club. I could be a member but stay home. I am something of an agoraphobe, but I am a claustrophobe, too. I rattle around in my house like a stray thought. I spend unhealthy lengths of

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time staring out my windows. An agoraphobic-claustrophobe, you can imagine why this might be a problem. But once a month, the books arrived, and once a month I could leaf through the catalogues, the cookbooks and self-help books and fill in the tidy little order form with my fastidious fine-tipped pen. The books were a comfort. And once a month the brown truck, the neat little brown truck bumped up my dirt road like a parcel with wheels. The little brown truck with its matching driver, nicely groomed and bearing gifts.

I looked forward to the monthly delivery, anticipated it, counted on it like the full moon, as predictable and regular as the electric bill. Then I got zapped.

I was staring out the window, as was my wont, expecting my latest club order, *A Brief History of Dish Washing Gloves*, when the familiar truck thumped up my drive. But wait. What was this? This was not my militarily neat driver. Who was this man in brown with the Love-Me-Tender lock which he whipped back as he flung open the rear door? His lean brown legs scissored up my walk, cutting my breath short. The knock.

I opened the door. “Gack,” I said like a cartoon cat with its tail in a wood chipper. My mouth clogged with wet sawdust.

I slipped into his eyes like a strawberry dipped in fondue chocolate. Delicious mud-pie eyes. Drowning in cocoa syrup. “Do I have to sign?” I asked, but my oral-motor muscles were shot. “Goo,” I drooled. “Grobble?” I wiped my chin.

He chuckled. He knew. I am sure that he knew. They always know. He bounced the book in his palms. “Your package.”

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“Ung,” I thanked him.

He tucked his pad under his arm. His hands were brown, too, and strong. I imagined him on his Saturdays off, doing brown things, his hands in loam or in his yard creosoting timbers, his shirt off, his chest turning chestnut under the spanning chestnut tree. I swooned. I braced myself against the doorjamb.

“I belong, too,” he said. He nodded at the package.

Heavenly days. He read. All that well-packaged pulchritude, and he could read, too.

“Pynchon’s latest was more accessible than the previous one. What’s the title?” He jutted his star-studded chin at my package.

“Huh?”

“The title?”

I sank to my enfeebled chin in the mushy brown slurp of his eyes.

“What are you planning on reading there?”

I stared at the package in my hand with lickerish aphasia. Lust lapse. I snapped my synapses back together. “Immanuel Kant,” I said. “The complete works.”

We both stared at the tiny package. The Categorical Diminutive.

“The miracle of digitization,” I said. “E-books.”

He chuckled again, made a cute little salute with that Saturday tanned hand and said, “Be seeing you,” and sauntered off in his bister serge, my heart a lurch behind him.

That was how it began. I tried to reason with myself. He was just a dun-colored suit on a new route. But I began ordering more books, more dusters, more pie servers,

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more satin tap pants. What was I doing? I imagined myself tap-dancing my heart out on little Jack Horner's plummy pie while reciting sonnets, the couplets rhyming like door chimes, like thee and me. I inked in order forms, one a day, then two, before I knew it, seven or eight a day, and, driving to the post office I startled, did triple and quadruple takes, thinking that I spotted his sporty van jaunting along the road, here, no there, turning the corner in the corner of my eye.

It had been a while since I'd been interested in anyone. When I first stopped teaching and moved to my home here in the Vermont hills, I thought, that's it. I had a free lance job editing text books. No more dates.

That was before the root canal. While I gagged on drains and drills and torture devices, my dentist told me about his divorce. He asked me out to dinner. He had trays full of sharp instruments at his disposal. I had a mouth full of hardware. How could I say no?

As I recall, the date ended miserably on the edge of a snowy field in his parked truck. When he tried to kiss me, all I could think about was dental hygiene. Had I flossed that morning? He told me that one of his fillings picked up a local radio station. He had a metal plate in his head, a consequence of brain surgery. He kept humming. *The Copacabana*, I think. I kept praying for the tooth fairy to swoop down, whisk me home, and tuck me under my own pillow. There was no second date.

About a month later driving back from a power-struggle lunch with my publisher, I stopped at The Pioneer House for a double. A man at the end of the bar sent up another. A double double. He sidled onto the