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THE 2ND HAND

PRINT EDITION, INSTALLMENT 20: SPRING 2006

ISSN 1528-1639

ONLINE EDITION: the2ndhand.com



THIS IS HOW YOU PAINT A HOUSE by Lauren Trojniar.

Tomás. He’s a housepainter. He’ll say women are his tragic weakness, but it’s alcohol. He keeps a sketchbook, drawn with the intent of someone some day finding it, detailing all of his sexual encounters. Each girl has a page—composed of an elegant pencil sketch and a broken recounting of her charms. “Lucy: sexy, such legs! She make me feel importante.” Tomás comes from the Dominican Republic. Imagine his Spanish-born father running back to Spain and his Dominican mother leaving her native country for Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, with a fiery twelve-year-old in tow. Tomás admires his mother, Rosa, for her independence. He still lives with her. He had his own pad for a while, which was a far more desirable arrangement for love making, but after the loss of three consecutive jobs (you can’t blame it all on alcohol: one boss was cutting back, another decided he preferred an all-white staff) he moved back home.

Rosa probably lost her patience after the third month of Tomás’s television vigil, but one can never be too sure. Despite her deep love for him, Rosa may have lost her patience right after he moved back home. But following the loss, she turned off the television, smashed his bottle of Jim Beam on the driveway, and handed him the classifieds section of the *Morning Call*.

His first employment as a housepainter was on Sparrow Street. With the attention to detail that artists tend to have, and without Jim Beam, Tomás did a bang-up job.

Greg and Moira. Moira and Greg. They worry about money too, for goodness sakes, just like everybody else. They worry about paying for the boat. Sometimes they lose sleep thinking about putting their kids through private colleges. Greg is a director of price, wage, and productivity analysis for a small economic consulting company, and a deacon at the church. Though the couple isn’t rich, they are well-off.

Moira is tired of Greg. But they are married with children. Moira had many other partners before safe and secure ol’ Greg came along with an invitation to join him in prudent stability. One of those partners wanted to travel the country with her on the back of a fast hog. One of them tattooed her name above his left buttock. But she’s still proud of her decision to marry Greg. How could a man with a butt tattoo be a good father?

Greg and Moira have three spanking new children! There is the two-year-old, Timmy, and there are the twins, Alex and Amanda: they’re newborns. The couple is always busy feeding and playing and cleaning. After work and the babies, Greg and Moira have little time for themselves. Well, Moira has some time while Greg is at work. The twins have little automated swings, and Timmy has a play area in sight of the kitchen where Moira plans dinner.

Because Greg’s deacon job has to fit the congregation’s schedule, he’s often out late doing marriage counseling or leading spiritual groups. It’s often Moira who notices what needs to be fixed in their home. For instance, it was Moira who noticed that the exterior of their house was looking shabby. She brings this up to Greg when he is about to fall asleep. “Greg,” she says, “the paint job on this house is starting to look like shit.” He rolls back toward her. “What?”

Moira explains it to him more clearly. “The exterior paint is all peely and chipped. The trim is practically back to that original green.” Moira props herself up in the dark.

“Well, let’s get it painted.” He rolls back. “I don’t want to use that guy we used last time.”

“I’m sure we can find someone,” Greg says. “I’ll take care of it.”

Moira remembers their conversation the next morning, but fears Greg does not. Not wanting to nag him, she slips in a subtle reminder as she walks in front of his car down the driveway for the paper. At the bottom of the drive, she turns to look at the house and makes a pronounced disgusted-face, shaking her head. She doesn’t see Greg roll his eyes before blowing her a kiss. Moira does not catch the kiss. She lets it board her shoulder,

maybe even whisper in her ear, and shake off into the morning.

Greg has decided to take care of finding a housepainter before the matter gets brought up again. He inquires around the office. He also mentions after Bible study that he is seeking a housepainter, to no avail. Greg takes out the yellow pages. He arrives home before dinner with a full list of housepainters in the area. Moira has beaten him to it, however, and has already contacted our Tomás.

“Janet used him a few months ago. She said he did a bang-up job,” Moira explains to her hubby.

“Well, in case he doesn’t work out, I made this list of painters,” Greg says.

“I already left a message with this one,” Moira says, and it is settled.

But Tomás is booked solid until August, and that’s over a month away. Moira decides they can wait, and Greg is relieved by her patience. So they wait.

July peels by. For the Fourth, the couple goes with some friends to the Jersey shore and brings the little ones. There, they barbecue and talk about their children. In late July Alex says his first word. It is *doo-doo*. Moira and Greg are elated, and promptly record this in their baby books. At the beginning of August Greg opens up a much-needed new class in religious education on Wednesday nights at the church, and Moira begins playing tennis with a selective group of women twice a week. On a Monday, Tomás makes his first appearance.

He begins with an estimate: \$6,000. He is very professional, and Moira is taken with his “adorable” grammatical errors. He shows them color swatches. They settle on American Anthem, but there is some debate over Cheerful Whisper.

The following morning, Tomás arrives with a truck full of scrapers, sanders, buffers, thinners, ladders. He has two assistants with him to help move the process along. By the end of the day, half of the house has received a good scraping. Greg arrives home from work and sizes up the job. “Hey, you guys need a hand?” he asks, but the men are already putting away their tools.

Tomás looks at Greg and replies politely, “No thank you.”

Tomás and his men cannot work the next day because they have another job to finish, but on Thursday they arrive at nine and work the whole day through. On Friday one of Tomás’s men is ill, but he and his partner finish scraping the house. Greg pulls into the driveway that evening as Tomás is loading up his truck.

“Lookin’ good,” Greg says.

“We cannot come here next Monday because the paint it is not ready.” Tomás looks Greg in the eye. Greg appreciates that. He likes a nice, honest worker who can look him in the eye as an equal.

“Well, thank you for telling me, Thomas. I’ll be sure to mention that to my wife so she doesn’t worry when you don’t show up. You know how women can be.” Greg bestows upon Tomás an insider’s wink.

“Yes, yes,” Tomás laughs. “I do know how women can be. I call when the paint arrives.”

Greg brings his bounding good mood through the door with him. “Smells good!” he tells Moira. She continues to add ingredients to a large pot on the stove—they are having chicken gumbo for dinner.

“Daddy!” screams Timmy.

“Hey there, Buddy,” says Greg. Timmy hugs his father then races back to the television set. The twins bounce in their swings and gurgle.

Over dinner, Greg briefs Moira on the status of his new religious education class. He spoons beef baby food into Amanda’s birdlike mouth, and Moira tells Greg that the tennis group has asked her to play with them twice a week. With tennis, yoga, and working out three days of the week, Moira figures she’ll lose the extra baby weight in no time.

“Oh, Thomas won’t be here next week. He says the paint isn’t ready, but don’t worry, he’ll call as soon as the place gets it in.”

Moira takes a big slurp of her gumbo, standing up to get ready for her ikebana class. She turns to Greg to speak, but thinks better

of it and scoots off while he finishes feeding the babies.

Greg cleans the dishes when the children are asleep. Moira still isn’t home, so Greg passes out facedown on the comforter. A book he is reading, *War and Peace*, is breached open by his elbow. Greg is an advocate of reading the classics; he just can’t seem to keep all those damned characters straight. Creeping up his nose are his reading glasses. They are twin circus performers escaping Greg’s face by twisting their skinny bodies from behind his ears. With his face chubbied up on his pillow he looks like any one of his kids. Would you ever know that his teeth are clamped so tightly he will wake up with a headache? When Moira comes home she removes the acrobatic glasses and the book and pulls the covers over his body.

Next Monday, Moira is ironing. “The painter never showed,” she tells Greg.

“He still has to get the paint in from the store. It’s not his fault.” Greg takes the ironed shirts and places them in the basket.

“Well, maybe we should look for someone else. I just want to get this thing finished.” At work, Greg calls Tomás and leaves this message: “Hey there, Thomas! This is Greg—from the house on Windnut Street. Um, my wife and I were just wondering if you had heard anything about the paint being ready yet. I know you can’t do anything until you hear from them, but I was just calling to give a friendly check. I hope everything is going well for you and that you had a terrific week-end. Talk to you soon. Thank you. Bye now.” Tomás calls Greg at work with apologies. He explains that he had been away from his phone and only just got the message that the paint was ready. American Anthem will be on the house the next morning.

Tomás comes home from helping a friend on another job. Rosa has left a note for him—she is working a double shift and there is chicken in the fridge. The wiggly heart she has drawn around his name, Tomasito, keeps him from crushing the paper. Instead, he folds it and puts it in his shirt pocket. The chicken is not so good reheated, but thankfully in his dresser is a bottle three-quarters full of Jim Beam. Tomás spends most of his evening in front of the television, until he hears his mother’s car crunch into the driveway and he is brought to his feet to hide himself. Rosa calls out: “Hola hijo mio!”

Tomás does not want his voice to betray him, but if he remains quiet he knows that will only arouse more suspicion. “Hello Mami.” Rosa wants to see her dear son so that they can sit down and complain about their days. She worked with the most incorrigible woman, Irene, who is new but insists on telling Rosa how to do everything. She also wants to tell her son that she ran into Laura, a nice Puerto Rican girl who goes to church every week. It is too bad that Tomás decides to feign sleepiness, otherwise he could have told his Mami how the boss called him some bad names while working on a job for a friend, how at lunch he finished a new sketch of a farmhouse, how he met a new ladyfriend and they hit it off just splendidly in the back of her car. Tomás sleeps off the Jim Beam and wakes up feeling a little ill.

Tomás’s partners don’t show up, but he still gets the paint and arrives at Moira and Greg’s before nine. Painting goes slowly working alone, but Tomás is very efficient. Greg notices this when he returns from work. The paint is going to look good, but it is going to take too long for Moira’s taste if it is only Tomás working. Tomás assures him that his helpers will be there the next day.

But his helpers are not there the next day, and neither is Tomás. Rosa is at work early and not around to see that Tomás is up and showered. Tomás wakes up at ten o’clock with a wicked hangover and knows that the best cure for one of this caliber is more alcohol. He moves to call Greg, but Rosa has washed the phone number in the pocket of his jeans. After treating himself to a handle of Jack Daniel’s from the nearby liquor store, he resolves to sober up for tomorrow. Before Rosa returns, he bags up all of his bottles and

tosses them in his truck. Tomás decides to drive the heavy bags to the dumpster of a nearby pharmacy. While making a left turn into the parking lot he is broadsided by a Jeep. The driver of the Jeep brakes enough before impact so that neither driver is severely injured. Both vehicles are totaled, however, and Tomás spends the night sobering up with a bruised shoulder, a cut knee, and whiplash.

Greg is kept late by an impromptu marriage counseling session. He calls Moira to say that he won't be home for dinner. "The painter didn't show up today," she says. This makes Greg nervous. He handles her as he would one of his students. "You have to give him the benefit of the doubt, Moira." This answer annoys her. It is too late to call Tomás, but he had better be there the next day.

Tomás does not go painting the next day. He does not drink, either, and Rosa brings him the phone book so that he can find Greg's number. The deacon is very empathetic about the accident. "Whenever you are ready, Thomas. I wish you a speedy recovery." Greg is smiling to the painter through the phone. He likes Tomás so much because he can see that he is really trying hard. Sometimes bad things happen to good people. He's seen it plenty of times in his counseling sessions. Moira is playing tennis that afternoon and will be out for a few hours... Greg has already decided, possibly a while ago, that he has some time to paint that day—that he is even eager to paint that day. The supplies are all there. There will be visible results today. If Moira doesn't smile, at least she can't be upset.

Greg goes to the office until noon, and then drives home to begin. Moira has already left for her game. He dons some old clothes and hurries to open and stir the paints. The ladders are already set up, and while he is not comfortable with heights, he moves up with little hesitation.

Working as a director of price, wage, and productivity analysis has not aided Greg's abilities as a painter. His allergies and distracted thoughts of work keep causing him to pause. It is only at the end of two and a half hours that he begins to relax into the motion of the brush and make progress on the house. He steps down from the ladder with relief and sets to admiring the job. He walks away slowly, looks up once from the front door, then sprints upstairs to change and hide his splattered clothes.

The rest of the week, as Tomás is recovering from his car accident, Greg goes home during his "long" lunch to paint. Moira has commented on how slowly the painting is going, but Greg is happy that she noticed it is going at all. He takes pride in the fact that she doesn't mention a change in painting quality. Greg looks forward to coming home with the house silent. Timmy, Alex, and Amanda are in day care at the health club. Greg feels so human putting on his stained pants and reeking shirt. He is proud of himself for climbing the ladder that scared him so much. The movement of the brush and the heat of the sun relax him the way prayer never has. In this manner, he finishes out the week.

"When is this house going to be finished? It looks half naked," says Moira over the Sunday paper.

"Oh, I don't know, Moira. Did you know that Thomas was in a car accident? He hurt his shoulder very badly."

"Who's Thomas?"

"The housepainter."

"You mean Tomás," she corrects.

"Is that how you say it? Well, he hasn't been painting as quickly because of the accident."

"Is he all right?"

"He's fine. You know, a little bruised, but he says he's ready to go, don't you worry." Daily physical activity has made Greg chipper. "Things always have a way of working themselves out, Moira. What do you say we go out tonight?"

"Are you crazy? We can never get a sitter on such short notice." Moira gets up. "You've been acting so strange lately. I'm going to go check on the twins." Greg shrugs and goes back to reading the funnies.

On Monday Greg decides that if he's paying this guy, maybe he should see some results.

He calls Tomás, and Tomás says that, yes, he is doing much better, and yes, he could paint, but his car has still not been repaired and he has no other form of transportation. Greg says he understands, because he does. Sometimes bad things... They hang up and Greg sits at his desk for twelve minutes thinking and thinking, then calls Tomás again. He offers to drive Tomás to and from his house each day until his car is ready. Tomás sounds a bit put off by this, his speech slurred. Greg believes that Tomás feels bad accepting such a large favor from someone he doesn't know very well. But Tomás does not realize the extent of Greg's generosity.

During his lunch, Greg picks up Tomás for a half day of work. He is surprised to see that Tomás does not appear as fully recovered as he had assured. His eyes are red and his hair unwashed, but Greg tries not to judge the appearance of the man—only the quality of his work. And Tomás does do a quality job that half day.

Things are really going "swimmingly," as Moira puts it, with the tennis clan. They love her. They have planned to meet at her house next Tuesday for lunch after their game, and Moira is busy with her menus. The smear of recipes over the table confuses Greg. Today he is frustrated because he missed a meeting at work (the reason is anybody's guess). The couple kiss and part—he for the study, she for the quiche molds.

Tomás is picked up the following day, this time for a full day. His shoulder is still hurting him, but he refuses to let this be known. A nice strong drink seems to be the perfect remedy. Greg is home by 5:15 to give Tomás a lift home before he goes to the church. There is such a pleasant odor of outdoors on him, wood and whiskey. Greg's usually chipper mood should not be confused with naivete.

"Tomás, you should come to my prayer group tomorrow night. The folks are all friendly and I think you'd really fit in."

"Oh, no thank you, sir. I have plans tomorrow," replies Tomás.

"No, no, I insist. I think you'd feel great afterwards; you'd be surprised."

"No, really, I cannot go."

"Well, you want me to hold onto that for you?" Greg asks, and nods toward the flask that has emerged from Tomás's coat.

"Yes, please," says Tomás. He bows his head as Greg tosses the flask of Jack in the back of his car.

So Tomás is going to prayer group tomorrow. He is nervous as sin. Moira has started to think Tomás had better get his own transportation. With Greg at the church late again, Moira climbs into bed and falls asleep with her clothes on. When he returns from his youth group he finishes the leftovers, tucks in Timmy (the twins have been out awhile), and kisses his beautiful wife.

Uh, oh. No one remembered to set the alarm. Greg wakes up at ten in such a panic that he also wakes Moira. If Greg is to get dressed, collect Tomás, bring him back, and get himself to work he will only be there for a few hours. He calls in sick.

Tomás calls in sick as well. No matter to Greg, he is ready to tell Moira his secret. When Moira learns that it was her Greg doing so much of the work on the house she is this: shocked, amazed, doubtful, proud, horny. In the bed there is a burst of activity. Moira on top, Moira on bottom. Greg sideways, Greg behind. The tousled sheets are kicked to the floor in a final flurry of passionate orgasm. Moira, flushed and glowing, tightens her robe and goes to get the children. Greg straps on his overalls and grins all the way up the ladder.

The painting has become tedious. There are many things about housepainting that Greg does not know—for instance, the correct way to shake out the brush so that it doesn't drip. Although he stops for lunch, Greg works right through dinner. It feels just like Saturday! Greg works right through his prayer group too.

Rosa is very proud to learn the reason her son is all dressed up. She cannot stop talking about how nice it is, and this irritates Tomás. He is ready to see Greg's Subaru sweep up the drive to take him to prayer group. He needs to leave now, but where is Greg?

Father Joe calls Greg's home in the morning. He believes that something is very wrong. It is not like Greg to miss a prayer group and not notify the church. Moira answers the phone and feels funny speaking with the priest. She knows her voice reveals everything about her rare romp with her husband. She tells Father Joe that Greg just fell asleep early the night before. Now he is certain that something is very wrong.

Greg is sore from his full day of painting, yet he still comes home for lunch to do more. His allergies itch his nose as he works on the trim. After painting and work, Greg rushes home exhausted. Tonight is marriage counseling, and he is determined to be on time. He meets with a lovely couple of newlyweds who are just coming in "for a checkup." Eager to get home, Greg wraps the session early. On his way to the church parking lot he hears: "Greg! Greg! Can I have a word with you?"

Greg's allergies are really acting up. "Uh, Father Joe. Sure. If it's about last night, I'm really sorry. I, uh, had some things to take care of at home."

Father Joe catches up with Greg in the parking lot. "Oh, these things happen." He looks into Greg's bloodshot eyes. He gets a glimpse of Tomás's whiskey in the back of Greg's car. The flask gleams in the light of the parking lot's lamps.

After serious discussion with several members of the clergy it is decided that Greg should take some time off in order to recover. Greg is absolutely miffed. He drinks a few more scotch and sodas than he should, and after the fourth one he calls Father Joe. He wants to at least have his youth education classes back. The priest refuses. "But think about all those kids," pleads Greg.

In his cloud, Greg does not pick up Tomás the next day. After work, he paints a little himself then sits down to dinner and five glasses of Merlot. One thing Greg hates is injustice.

Tomás wakes Greg with a phone call. "Do you still want me to work for you?" Tomás's savings are dry.

"Oh, Thom—Tomás," Greg says. "Yes, yes. I'm a little ill today, so I can't get you myself. Can you get a ride with your partners?"

"All my partners got other jobs," says Tomás.

"Well maybe you should too instead of drinking your life away." Greg is shocked by his own words.

When Tomás hangs up the phone he folds his arms and sulks. He had thought Greg was a nice guy. He pours the remainder of his new flask into the sink. When Greg hangs up the phone he vomits.

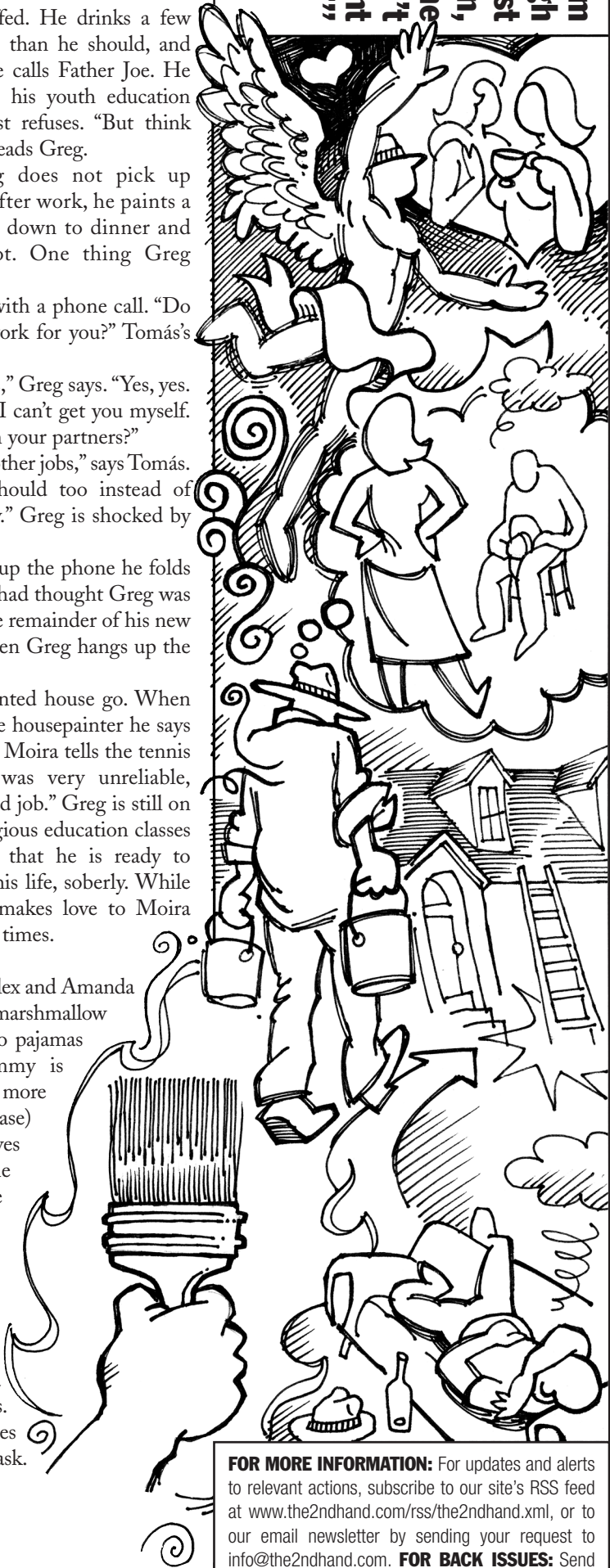
Moira lets the unpainted house go. When she asks Greg about the housepainter he says he's found another one. Moira tells the tennis ladies: "That Tomás was very unreliable, though he did do a good job." Greg is still on probation from his religious education classes until he demonstrates that he is ready to accept God back into his life, soberly. While he waits for that, he makes love to Moira approximately 56 more times.

He and Moira give Alex and Amanda their bath. The little marshmallow bodies are snuggled into pajamas and put to bed. Timmy is allowed to watch one more hour (but no more, please) of television. This gives Greg and his wife some time to talk. But there really isn't much to say, so Moira goes to the phone to cancel her yoga class. She just doesn't feel comfortable doing "downward facing dog" in front of a group of aging yuppies. In one swig, Greg finishes off Tomás's forbidden flask. It sure tastes good.

Lauren Trojnia teaches preschool and writes in Austin, Texas.

—from THE2NDHAND contributor Brian Costello's *The Enchanters vs. Sprawlborg Springs*, his first novel out now from Featherproof Books [featherproof.com]

“None of the bands these and the other nine went on to form after we gave them the little shove they needed were very ‘high concept,’ especially at the beginning. Some were content just using ‘rock’ like the verb it is, like the effusively pensive Bryan, seated across from Cathy, mumbling worries about what the night would bring. ‘I’m wearing my favorite pants, and I don’t wanna shit in ‘em,’ he whined in his cracking, prepubescent voice. ‘I heard that’s what The Enchanters make you do. Shit.’”



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