

Eye of a Fly
by
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Chapter 1

The sudden downpour turned the gutter into a river. With infinite disdain, Ernest eyed the bits of brown debris floating by: scraps of paper, a hypodermic needle, a used condom, a dead rat. A whirlpool at the corner drain sucked everything into the bowels of the city.

Normally, he would have waited out the storm — after all, his first class was at one. He had an appointment, today — one that could not wait.

Swinging his battered briefcase as a counterweight, he jumped the stream and crossed the street. A gust tried to tear the only umbrella he owned from his hands — or ruin it, at least. He cursed. Water soaked through his shoes and cotton jacket. He cursed again and wheezed from a growing asthma attack. That was *all* he needed.

He entered the First Avenue subway station, took a northbound train to Broadway-Lafayette and switched to one bound for Hunter College.

Unable to hold off any longer, he took a drag from his Azmatene inhaler. As always, the acrid mist made his head spin and his tongue sting; sometimes it even made him see spots before his eyes. He used to imagine developing cancer in his tongue from the mist. After all, it irritated his tongue terribly, even making it swell sometimes. He still used it, though. What choice did he have?

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“Please have a seat, Mr. Wentworth,” the lady behind the desk said. Ernest complied, removing his wet jacket and dropping it to the floor. The water that had seeped through rendered his pale blue shirt partially transparent, revealing the shadow of hair across his barrel chest. His breast pocket sagged under the weight of three pens — a blue Bic, a black Bic, and his prized Staedtler Mars Rapidograph. He fastened his shirt's top button and swept hair from his eyes.

Ernest had never been to the Financial Aid Office before. He quietly watched the lady review his file. His classmates said everyone

received these student loans, automatically. All one had to do was apply. He yawned.

"Maureen Prentiss," her nameplate said. She was an attractive brunette who looked to be in her late twenties. Her sweet perfume seemed to fill the room, intoxicating Ernest.

It matches her face, he thought.

Her ruffled white blouse opened just wide enough for him to see the gentle rise of her breasts. Tiny gold hoops glinted on her ears, winking at him as she turned her head. Ernest wondered what the rest of her looked like.

The barely inaudible rasp of nylon mesh against itself caught his attention.

She's wearing a dress, he thought, *and she crossed her legs.*

No, no! he told himself. I mustn't think of this! The blood pounded in Ernest's ears as he felt an all-too-familiar throbbing between his legs. He crossed his legs, folded his arms, hunched forward, and rested his elbows on his knees.

He even visualized the Binomial Theorem in the case $n = 101$ but other images flashed through his mind, blotting out the equations. Images of a naked Ms. Prentiss. Or of a Ms. Prentiss wearing lacy black lingerie, garters and stockings, moaning with delight as Ernest's hands explored her body — or threw her onto the desk and thrust into her again and again.

I'm sick, sick, sick! Ernest thought, rubbing his face. He felt like a character in a movie he'd seen once — someone slowly turning into a vampire, beset by irrational urges to bite people. He knew he was the only one on Earth with such urges. And worse, that Ms. Prentiss sensed them and — any moment now — would call Campus Security.

"I think everything's in order, Mr. Wentworth," she said, looking up at him and smiling. "You'll hear from us in two weeks. Be sure to get your parents to sign the A-6 form or we won't be able to process your application."

"Thank you," he said, picking up the forms.

Oh God, he thought, *I can't stand up now!* He picked up his briefcase and shoved it down into his lap. Unfortunately, he found the pressure erotically stimulating.

"Are you all right? Are you having an allergic attack, Mr. Wentworth? You're so flushed!"

"I'm OK," he croaked, standing and wheeling around in a single motion. Perhaps he'd turned fast enough, and she hadn't noticed. He stumbled from her office, almost tripping over his feet, and headed straight for the Men's Room.

His erection began to subside, leaving behind a small but growing wet spot on his trousers. He spent ten minutes in a toilet stall trying to dry out his underpants.

Life is so embarrassing, he thought.

He wondered why everyday encounters aroused him, while seemingly more erotic ones left him cold. A particularly humiliating incident came to mind. One sultry afternoon last summer, while he strolled down East Houston street on an errand, a girl from his neighborhood beckoned. And when he went to her, she'd answered his hello by grabbing his crotch and massaging it. This had startled him and he'd run away — to her mocking cries of “Faggot!”

Perhaps it was her youth that had unnerved him; he doubted she was even fifteen. Perhaps it was seeing her fellating a middle-aged drunk the night before, behind garbage cans in his hallway, amid the stench of cat urine and vomit, all but blocking his front door.

He shoved it out of his mind and went to class.

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That evening, his mother — Patricia — signed the A-6 form.

“Harry's supposed to come by tomorrow, but I wouldn't hold my breath about him signing,” she said.

“It just says we don't make more than \$15,000 a year,” Ernest complained. “That's true, isn't it?”

“That's for sure!”

Harry, his father, didn't live with them, insisting he couldn't work around screaming brats — meaning Ernest, his brother Warren, and his sister Tiffany. He was a writer.

Many years ago — before Tiffany was born — Harry had written screenplays for TV, and they had lived in California.

“At the very edge of Hollywood,” Harry had always said — where Aunts Jocelyn and Cynthia lived. They had been movie stars and used their connections to get their brother a job.

Hollywood was a plastic world, though, and writing for it was the worst form of prostitution imaginable. Harry would say this whenever he got drunk. Ernest never argued the point, although he thought worse forms surely existed — right out the door, for instance. Ernest hated confrontations.

Once, his mother confided to Ernest that showing up drunk at Story Conferences was really what got Harry fired. She didn't talk this way often — and never when Harry was around.

Liberated from the West Coast's plastic world, Harry embarked on finishing his magnum opus. Patricia supported the family by working as a waitress, and Ernest and Warren got Christmas jobs in the department stores and worked other odd jobs when they could.

Tiffany was still too young to work.

Harry had always dreamed of drinking hard, seeing the world, and writing like Hemingway — but had only succeeded at the first. This growing realization shocked him. After all, hadn't he spent years at the fringes of New York's intellectual elite, a crowd that included Paul Goodman, Willem de Kooning, and Mark Rothko? People with paintings in the *Museum of Modern Art*, for Christ's sakes!

Tiffany came home. She was a cheerful, outgoing ten-year-old. Ernest made hamburgers for himself and his sister and washed the dishes. Warren made his own dinner — which was usually something strange like ice-cream with mustard or hamburger with orange-juice spread on it.

Tiffany did her homework while Ernest went into the bedroom and read — and wondered how he'd spend his student loan. If there was enough money, he might be able to move into a dorm room or share an apartment with roommates.

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That night, Ernest lay in bed masturbating himself to sleep — trying not to disturb Warren and Tiffany sleeping beside him. A needless concern — the screams and sirens outside easily drowned out any noise he made.

He thought, again, of Maureen Prentiss and made love to her a hundred times, a hundred different ways — whisking her off to London, Paris and Rome. He cruised the world with her, aboard an elegant ocean liner that converted to a spaceship. He imagined never again returning to this place.