

Skin Crawl
by
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“Nita... Nita!

Matt rushed down the long hall of his decrepit old San Francisco flat, ducking his head into each room as he passed. Something was wrong. The rooms were wrong. He recognized them, but they didn't belong in San Francisco. Matt backed out of another empty room.

“Nita!”

He was desperate now. He had to find her. His room was right around this corner. She'd be there. Matt pulled up short. Instead of his room, there was another long stretch of hall. Matt's hands clenched involuntarily. He tore down the hall at top speed, but the walls seemed to creep by slower than ever. At last he reached his door and pushed it open. The room was empty, but he knew she was there. The bed was slept in and he could smell her scent.

“Nita?”

A soft, tickling touch caressed his shoulder. She was behind him. He reached his hand up to hers, but instead touched something coarse and shaggy. Matt froze. he whipped his head around and...

“Ooh, you've got a tattoo.”

Matt jerked awake. Who said that? Where the hell was he? He pried his sticky eyes open one at a time and worked his way over on his back. Every move was pain. His brain thudded around in his head like thirty pounds of wet clay in a spin dryer. Hung over. He knew the sensations by heart. Already his stomach was rising to meet his throat like an old friend. But there was a fresh pain, a newcomer to the repertoire, a stabbing in his right shoulder blade.

He peered around the dim, drab room with bleary eyes. It was his own room. That was good. The girl next to him on his futon wasn't Nita. That was bad.

Matt coughed up a throatful of last night's cigarettes. “I don't have a tattoo.” He scratched his sleep thick face and craned his neck for a look at the clock. Ten-thirty. What day was it?

“Yes you do. Right there.” The girl, a scrawny nightmare of dead white hair and smeared black mascara, jabbed his back with a casual finger. The pain zapped through him again. He leapt like a scalded cat and spun around to glare at her.

“Goddamn it! Cut that out. What’d you do, carve me up last night?”

The girl pouted and pulled Matt’s patchy blanket around her naked toothpick frame. “Sorry. How was I supposed to know you just got it?”

Matt snatched up his carefully ripped jeans and pulled them on bare-ass, grumbling obscenities. He buttoned up and padded out and down the hall to the bathroom.

*M*att stood at the toilet. He checked out his reflection in the full length mirror on the bathroom door. He’d been cultivating the half-dead rock star look ever since he moved to San Francisco, but this morning he seemed to have reached the pinnacle. He was tall and too thin, with long dangly arms and a concave chest. His vulpine face peered dully out from under a rat’s nest of shaggy black hair. He gave the mirror his best disenchanting sneer. “Perfect.”

He finished the morning ritual and turned to check his back in the mirror, looking to see what that crazy bitch had done to him last night. He twisted a little farther.

“Holy...!”

The skag was right. Just above his right shoulder blade crouched a big tattooed spider.

“Damn!”

He backed closer to the mirror. It was a beauty. At least it would have been on someone else’s back. It was about the size of a playing card, with long slender legs and a head so detailed you could see the hair-thin fangs. But it was the body that really drew his attention. Violet and yellow, shades that screamed corruption, combined on its teardrop abdomen to suggest the empty eyeholes and sharp cheekbones and teeth of a malevolent skull. The ghost face leered at Matt from the mirror. He shuddered and slumped against the dirty sink and put his face in his hands. What the hell had happened last night?

*H*e remembered lying in bed with Nita, relaxing after his crummy job at the plant nursery. They’d just made love and now his head was in her lap, his arms around her legs. Nita sat propped up with pillows, one hand stroking his hair, the other holding Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*, from which she was reading aloud. Nita was brown-skinned and small-boned, with soft Asian features and long, thick black hair, but she was no demure stereotype. Her eyes were sharp and her wits were sharper. Her mouth had the continual half-hitched smirk of someone whose wisdom came hard won. Matt knew that she was the brains of their relationship.

“I considered the being whom I had cast among mankind and endowed with the will and power to affect purposes of horror, my own vampire, my own spirit let loose from the grave and forced to destroy all that was dear to me.”

Nita flipped ahead to see how far it was to the end of the chapter. “Sorry, Matt, this isn’t anything like the movie. You want me to go on?”

Matt looked up into her face. “I don’t mind. I like the way they talk. All flowery like that. Keep going.”

Nita found her place. The phone rang. Matt sat up.

“I’ll get it.”

Nita reached it before him. “Hello? Yeah, he’s here...What?”

Nita’s face suddenly turned granite hard. “Who is this?”

She jerked the phone away from her ear and then slowly hung it up. Matt looked at her dully. He could tell what was coming. He’d been hoping all night this wasn’t going to happen. Nita’s eyes were fire, but her voice was ice.

“That was ‘Honey.’ She wanted to know if she left her works here last night.”

Matt swallowed and forced out the words. “Um, yeah. Jay and me brought some people back from the party last night.” Nita’s eyes forced him to look away. “One of the girls shot up, I think.”

Nita pulled her legs up to her chest and held them. “Did you sleep with her?”

Matt looked at the blanket. He traced the pattern.

“Did you sleep with her?”

“Everybody was getting crazy. Jay kept feeding me drinks.”

“I don’t want to hear about Jay. I want to hear about you. Did you sleep with her?”

Matt gave a tiny nod. He never could lie to her. Nita pushed away the covers and stood up. She collected her clothes and began dressing. “You slept with a junkie. Did you use anything.”

Matt didn’t move at all.

Nita finished getting dressed with calm and precise movements. She picked up her bag and stepped to the door.

“If you killed me Matt, I’ll cut your heart out.”

*T*he rest of the night was just flashes. Faces, emotions, disconnected with any time or place. There had been a bar he didn't know, and an awful lot of vodka tonics. The only things that came through clearly were his rage and confusion. What right did Nita have? Her past was nothing to brag about. Shit, she used to shoot up herself. He hadn't understood, or at least had forced himself not to understand, what she was so upset about. It wasn't like sleeping with a junkie automatically meant--- She'd forgiven him for stupid stuff hundreds of times before. What was the problem this time? If she was going to be like that he didn't need her. There were plenty of girls that would take him, no questions asked.

Matt shook his swollen head. That was all he remembered. He had vague recollections of more bars and more people, but nothing concrete, and nothing about tattoos. He twisted around for another look at his back. The spider was still there, and the scarecrow girl was still in his bed, both proof that the night had gone on longer than his memory. Matt turned on the cold water and began to splash his face.

*T*he skillet sizzled as Jay, Matt's roommate, buzzed around the dinky kitchen.

"Eggs? Cereal? Jack Daniels?"

"Uh, Eggs is fine." Matt sat at the tiny kitchen table, staring into the steam of his black coffee and holding onto a cigarette like it was a life preserver. He had shoved the scarecrow girl out the door pretty brusquely, and Jay popped out of his room as soon as he heard the door slam. There had been a thousand questions boiling behind Jay's rubbery jester face, but he had held them back. Even Mr. Tactless had seen that Matt wasn't in the mood.

Now however, he was bursting. The effort of being considerate was making him hop from foot to foot like a kid in need of a bathroom.

"More coffee?"

"I'm alright, thanks."

The dam burst. "This isn't all bad, Matt. Don't look so down. I mean, there's nobody sorer than me that you guys broke up, but it shouldn't be the end of the world."

Jay shoveled scrambled eggs onto two plates and grabbed some salsa from the fridge. "I mean, it's not like it was all your fault. Fuck man, part of it's mine. I got you drunk. And Nita isn't in the clear either. Who didn't stick around long enough to talk it out rationally? She over-reacted, man. Everybody makes mistakes now and then. You don't need some bitch that leaves in a huff every time things get a little out of hand. What kind of..."

Jay stopped dead, halfway to the table holding the plates. He stared at Matt's back.

"Jesus Christ! You got a tattoo!"

Matt winced. “Yeah, I guess I did.”

Jay put down the plates and slapped Matt on the arm. “Alright, Matt! You’re a bad-ass at last. A fucking spider tattoo!”

Matt grinned in embarrassment. Jay sat down opposite him and looked him in the eyes, his smirking face as sincere as it could ever be. “See man, that’s what I’m talking about. You always wanted a tattoo, and who wouldn’t let you get one? Nita! And what’s the first thing you do when you break up with her? You get a tattoo. You’re a free man, Matt. That spider’s like... like a symbol.”

Jay was blushing. “I’ve missed you, man. We used to have so much fun together. We used to kick some ass!” A wicked smile spread across his face. “Remember gettin’ thrown out of the Albion?”

Matt held back a snort. Jay was so un-subtle it was painful to watch, but he couldn’t help it. He remembered.

Jay pressed home his advantage. “Remember walkin’ into the bathroom at the Dog House and there’s Tony and Mandy with their pants around their knees, going at it in the stall? They didn’t even know we were there.”

This time Matt laughed out loud. “Flushed the toilet and they still didn’t look up.”

Laughter exploded from them. High and giddy. It went on too long, as if neither wanted to be the first to stop. Finally it died away. Jay sniffed and caught his breath.

“We haven’t hung out in a long time, man. I know a good gig tonight...”

Matt shook his head. “I don’t know. I don’t know if I feel like going out anymore.”

“All right, Matt! Look at that goddamn tattoo!”

The pounding music in the black-walled, black-lit club made it necessary to shout to be heard. Matt accepted the congratulations of his friends with a grin and a shrug. In this noise it was pointless trying to scream any explanations. Matt and Jay continued to push their way through the spiky, shaggy, leather wrapped Dog House crowd.

Matt’s protestations had quickly dissolved before Jay’s prodding and his pride in his new tattoo. The dread and confusion he felt when he first saw it were gone, replaced by tough-guy swagger. Jay was right. He’d finally become the bad-ass he’d always been too chicken-shit to play to the hilt. A tattoo was what separated the men from the boys. It was the membership badge of the truly tough, and he had earned it in the proscribed manner: after a fight with his girlfriend, and so drunk he couldn’t remember getting it. Such was the stuff of legends.

Earlier in the day Matt had hidden the tattoo under a heavy shirt, but now he was back to his usual tank-top, moving slowly to make sure everyone got a good look. Big Bette pushed her way through the crowd to him. “Let me see it, Matt! Let me see it!”

*L*et me see it. Matt.

Matt turned his shoulder toward the girl who sat next to him on the living room floor. Her name was Ruby or Rudy or something. They were propped up in front of the TV, waiting for Jay and this week’s girl to come back from a beer run so they could start the video fest.

“Not that. The cable guide. I’ve already seen your stupid tattoo.”

Matt sighed and handed her the guide. The novelty of the tattoo had worn off quickly. In a scene where every other guy you met had a tattoo and most of the girls did too, one measly spider didn’t keep the crowds coming back for long. But while the glory that had accompanied his break-up with Nita faded by the day, thoughts of her stayed infuriatingly fresh. He found himself turning around anxiously every time someone walked into the room. He found himself wandering toward her house in the middle of the night, and his rage burned brighter every time it happened. He couldn’t miss her. Not the cold bitch who wouldn’t forgive the stupidest mistake, who didn’t even think to wonder how that mistake might affect him. He didn’t miss her. He was a free man. He could do what ever he wanted.

Jay burst into the room and bestowed beers on Matt and Rudy like a dissolute Easter Bunny. The girl followed in his wake, clutching a bag full of chips and dip. Jay shrugged off his coat and dropped heavily onto the couch behind Matt and Rudy.

“Let’s get this show on the road.”

He picked up the remote control and pointed it at the VCR. MTV switched off and the FBI warning appeared on the screen. Jay smiled at the back of Matt’s head. “Ready, Matt? This is going to blow you away.”

Matt laughed. “Maybe it’s just going to blow.” But Jay didn’t hear him. He was looking at Matt’s shoulder. He frowned.

“Uh... Matt?”

“Uh, what?”

Jay’s frown dissolved. He looked at the girls and then leaned back into the couch. “Never mind.”

Matt turned around. “What?”

Jay shrugged and shook his head. “Nothing. I thought... aw, it’s dumb. Forget it.”

Rudy laughed. Matt rolled his eyes. “Come on, Jay. Don’t pull that shit on me.

Jay sighed, embarrassed. "I thought your tattoo looked higher than it was before. Like it had moved or something. I told you it was stupid." The girls giggled. Matt snorted.

"Have another beer, Jay?"

The movie started. They all settled in to watch.

*M*att looked at his back in the mirror. Fuckin' Jay. Of course the spider hadn't moved. But he still had to check. It was like when someone tells you your hairline's receding. You spend the rest of the day checking even though you know they were just giving you shit. There. It was right where it was supposed to be.

"You blew it, Matt. You put it on wrong."

Matt was at his favorite trendy coffee house, heading for his favorite corner table with a much needed triple espresso.

"What?" He turned to see Big Bette grinning slyly at him from behind the counter.

"Your stick-on tattoo. I knew you were too chicken to get a real one. You didn't get it in the same place today."

Matt's head jerked reflexively toward his right shoulder, his heart lurching. He sneered to cover his panic and continued toward his table, trying to master the quiver in his legs.

*M*att's room glowed a dim orange from the streetlights below his window. It was a chilly night, luminescent with fog, but Matt was sweating under the sheets. This was ridiculous. Jay and Bette were messing with his mind. They had to be. Tattoos don't move. But Jay and Bette didn't hang out. They didn't like each other. They couldn't be in on this together.

Maybe he'd been slouching lately, so it looked higher. Maybe... anything. Fuck it. It couldn't be higher, so it wasn't. That was that. Matt turned over and nestled farther down into his pillow. He closed his eyes and opened his mind to sleep. Numbness began to trickle through his veins. He could feel his arms and legs drifting away.

But what if the spider HAD moved? What did it mean? What did he do then? His eyes fell open. It was going to be a sleepless night.

*M*att sat covered in spiders. He wore them like a seething cloak. He lounged on a rough granite throne in a vaulting black cavern, smirking like a cocky king while the spiders weaved their dance from his shoulders to his boots.

But then Nita was there, plucking at the spiders and throwing them to the floor. Matt turned his regal fury upon her. “How dare you! Leave them alone! These have stayed with me. These are my faithful.” But Nita kept plucking, though there never seemed to be fewer spiders.

*M*att woke up stupid. A fog enveloped his head that only time and strong coffee would burn off. He stumbled into the kitchen, put the kettle on, then found his way into the bathroom, humming a one note tune. As he stepped to the toilet, the mirror caught his eye. His little tune cut off like someone had backhanded him in the windpipe.

“What the hell?”

He stepped closer, hands shaking, face white. The spider was right there! Its forelegs were just cresting the top of his shoulder. He didn’t need to twist around to see it. It was right there!

Matt flinched away as if it was a real spider, as if he could get out from under it if he moved fast enough. He stopped himself when he found he was turning small circles in the center of the bathroom. He took long slow breaths. They turned into moans. His rushing thoughts and triphammer heart fought his attempts at control. Slower, slower.

Calm. Good. He could think rationally. He could look at the tattoo and analyze it dispassionately.

He looked at the spider.

“NO!”

His chest tightened with panic. Bile stung the back of his throat. “No. No! NO!” His fingers were clawing at the spider, digging deep into the flesh to tear the horrid thing from him. He couldn’t will himself to stop. Finally he hurled his hand away from his shoulder and smashed the mirror to pieces. He sank to the floor.

*M*att lay huddled against the toilet for a long time, gripped in dread’s terrible lethargy, his mind spinning round and round on the un-merry-go-round. Eventually he stirred, clinging desperately to the only plan his paralyzed mind could come up with. By noon he was weaving through traffic on the back of his big old Norton with the tattoo parlor page from the bay area phone book in his back pocket.

In the end, he would have done as well staying with the toilet. After hours staring at walls of flash and paging through album after album filled with grimy pictures of flaccid tattooed behinds and burly tattooed arms and not finding a spider even remotely like his, after hundreds of shrugs and “Nopes.” and “Can’t help yous.” He was right where he started. No clues, no nothing. He thought he had seen a flicker of recognition in a few of the ink-slingers’ eyes, but not a word could he get out of them. He headed home more depressed and frightened than before.

*W*hen he got home, it was time to change and go to work. He pulled off his tee-shirt and unbuckled his belt. With one hand on his zipper, he froze, staring at his chest. The spider was more than a half inch lower than it had been when he'd shown it to the last tattoo guy. He groaned. Up to now the damn thing had only moved when he was asleep. It wasn't supposed to do this. It was breaking the rules. It was also aimed straight for his heart and its tiny fangs were opened a little wider than before.

Matt's skin was suddenly cold with perspiration. This wasn't just creepy anymore. The damn thing had a purpose. It wanted to kill him! All the vague fears that had been hiding in the dark corners of his mind oozed together into one sickening lump of dread. He was going to die. The spider would keep crawling, day and night, its fangs opening wider and wider until it reached his heart and then...

How long did he have? He had to know. He had to do something. He had to stop it!

It was freezing at work, but Matt wore only a tank-top. The spider never moved when anybody was looking at it, so he kept it in the open the whole cold eight hours.

*M*att held his shirt in his hand and looked at the spider that hunched just a step to the right of his heart. He was sitting on the couch. The TV was on, but all he could watch was the spider.

This morning when he got up it had been an inch away. It had moved four inches while he slept; faster than before, much faster. Now he was just back from the doctor and it had gone that last inch on the short ride home.

The doctor at the clinic had been very nice. She said she was sure he was right, and the spider had most likely done just what he said, but she wasn't really the person to see about this sort of problem. The man Matt wanted to see was just down the hall. His name was Doctor Tobin. He was a psychiatrist.

Well, Matt hadn't expected any better, but he'd hoped she would at least do some tests or something. His eyes glazed as he stared at the spider. He was deadened now, resigned to death. The next time he slept, the spider would bite him and kill him. There was no point in looking for a way out. There was none. No doctor would help him. No knowledge could save him. A great melancholy welled up inside him. All of a sudden, he loved all the things he would soon lose forever: music, riding his bike, San Francisco, Jay, Nita. Even Nita. It surprised him to suddenly realize that it was Nita he loved most of all. God, he missed her. All his hate for her was revealed to him for what it really was.

It wasn't her stupidity and selfishness that had split them up, it was his. He was the one who had fucked a junkie and possibly killed them both in the process. The skull face on the spider's back grinned up at him, mocking his remorse. Now he got it.

He had to call Nita. He had so many things to explain before it was over.

“Hey, I saw Nita last night.” Jay was in the doorway, smiling his loose lipped smile. He crossed to the couch and took one of Matt’s cigarettes off the coffee table. “I did real good. I stuck up for you, man. She asked how you were doing, and I told her you were doing just fine. I said you were hoping never to see her again, except maybe in the obits. Man, she got mad. It was great.”

“Jay...”

“That bitch is poison, Matt. You should have heard what she had to say about you. But don’t worry. If she ever gets on you again, your buddy Jay will be there to pull her off.”

Matt stood up. He walked stiffly out of the room. “Thanks a lot, Jay. Thanks a whole fucking lot.”

Jay looked stunned. “What? What did I do?”

*T*he number you have reached has been disconnected. Please check your number and try again.” Matt slammed down the phone. God damn it all! She must really hate him. But he had to talk to her.

“Hello, Mrs. Chen? Is Nita there? Uh, this is Matt. Could I-- Mrs. Chen? No, wait! Mrs... Dammit!” How the hell was he supposed to beg for forgiveness when she wouldn’t let him get in touch?

“Hello, Vicky, this is... Now wait a minute. Don’t you hang up! Please! Don’t hang up... I don’t care what she said. I want you to tell her something. Vicky, please... Yes. Tell her I know there’s no way I can apologize for what I did, but I want to talk to her anyway, and it’s got to be tonight. What do you mean, ‘oh, yeah?’ Jesus Christ, Vicky, just tell her!”

*N*ow came the hard part, the waiting. He passed the afternoon trying every way he could think of to get a hold of Nita. He left messages for her everywhere; every bar and cafe she might visit, every friend or half friend she might run into.

He didn’t want to leave the house-- it would mean covering the spider and most likely missing Nita’s call-- and anything that required concentration was out of the question. He couldn’t write a letter or read a book. The words never got farther than his eyes, so he found himself doing all the things he perpetually put off; washing the dishes, cleaning his room, polishing his shoes. Later he made some dinner-- his last supper, he couldn’t help thinking-- and alphabetized his CD rack. But now it was evening and he’d run out of things to do. He sat slumped on the couch in the living room, watching the phone and listening to the TV. The phone never rang.

There was another problem too. One that was getting serious. He was tired. Damn tired. He had put off going to sleep last night to slow down the spider (like it had helped), and then this morning he’d had to wake up early for the doctor’s appointment. He needed sleep, but that was the one thing he couldn’t do. Not until Nita called. Sleep meant the end, and he wasn’t ready for the end just yet. There were still things he had to say.

Matt jerked his head up. Goddamn it! Nodding already. It wasn't even nine. There was something dragging him down and it wasn't just a long day and a short night. He felt drugged. His fingers buzzed with pins and needles and his eyelids drooped. He needed help. With an effort he jacked himself out of the chair and stumbled toward Jay's room.

Jay always had plenty of the help he needed. Speed always gave Matt a headache, but he could live with a headache. He might not live without one. He pushed through Jay's door and began to dig through the mess.

Why didn't Nita call? Did she really hate him that much? After what Jay said to her he wouldn't blame her if she did. His mind ground out every worst-case scenario. Nobody had the guts to give her his message. Somebody did tell her, but got the message wrong and she got offended. They got the message right, but he had worded it badly and she was offended anyway. He had worded it just fine but she didn't care.

Found it! He'd been stupid to dig underneath and behind things for a hidden stash. Jay didn't give a shit. The little plastic vial was right on his dresser. Matt popped off the top and peered inside. Only cheap little caffeine pills. They'd have to do. He dumped them into his palm and headed for the kitchen.

The one thing Matt was able to concentrate on was the spider. He found Jay's coke mirror and tilted it at his chest. He studied the delicate demon endlessly, tracing the graceful lines of its long violet legs, the creepy symmetrical patches on its back, the hair-thin fangs, now flexed and gaping directly over his heart. But soon even this morbid diversion was denied him, for it seemed that the longer he looked at the spider, the sleepier he got, and the harder it was to look away. Violet and yellow danced before his eyes and his lids got heavier and heavier.

The sound of the mirror hitting the ashtray as it slipped from his hand jerked Matt's head up. He jumped up with a curse and walked furiously up and down the length of the apartment, trying to clear his head. It seemed even speed wasn't proof against the spider's influence.

Around midnight, Jay clattered up the stairs with some girl, as usual. They disappeared whispering and giggling into his room. His buddy Jay. Always ready to help.

He drank coffee. It didn't work. Nothing worked. He felt the spider spinning a web of languor around him, a soft cocoon of drowse in preparation for the kill. He tried to sit up straight. It was like pushing through molasses. His limbs were numb, unresponsive lumps, his body just a thicker lump.

He finally worked his way upright. One last stand. He checked the kitchen clock. Two A.M. Nita better call soon. He went to his room, rubbing his gritty eyes and scratching his scouring pad skin, and picked up his battered old guitar. He sat down on the bed and strummed out a few purposeful chords. He'd write a song. Something for Nita, something to keep him awake. He picked up the pace, banging out a bright little blues beat, but his hand was lead. It wouldn't come back up for the upstroke.

Try again. Try again, dammit! Keep going! He lifted his hand, but it dropped before it reached the strings. “Goddamn you! Goddamn...”

The musical clang of the guitar hitting the floor wasn’t enough to wake him. He melted into the bed.

The spider was on his chest. Only it wasn’t a tattoo anymore. It was real, and it had grown. Now it’s fat abdomen sat heavily on his stomach. It’s legs reached the edges of the bed. Eight evil eyes looked at him out of a violet and yellow face. It’s jaws, now as big as his fist, flexed out razor sharp fangs. It lowered its head and...

“No!” A sharp pain in his chest jerked Matt awake. “No! No, don’t! Don’t! It hurts!”

“Goddamn it, hold still!”

Matt focused through his panic. Nita was sitting on top of him, bending over his chest. What was she doing? What was that unbearable pain? He held his head up. Blood was running in a rivulet down his ribs. Nita’s hand white-knuckled an X-acto blade.

“Nita..?”

She looked up at him, pale and grim. “You wouldn’t wake up, and it was moving.”

Matt looked at the spider, then back to her. He saw the love and fear in her eyes, saw his future in her eyes. He nodded and gripped the mattress with both hands. He wanted to close his eyes, but he had to watch.

Nita bent to her work again. She set the knife to his flesh and pressed. The point slipped in. Agony roared in Matt’s chest as she continued to cut a careful square around the spider. He tried to hold the pain down-- tried to be a hero-- but it hurt too much. He roared to match his pain. Nita had two sides done. She positioned the knife for a third cut. Matt caught his breath and clamped down on the mattress once more.

The spider was moving! It’s seconds numbered, it’s task unfinished, it had no more need for discretion. It took it’s last step and bit.

It wasn’t a big pain, not like the bright field of agony carved by Nita’s knife. Just a little pin-prick. But it was an unclean pain. Nausea welled up in Matt: a heaving surge that came, not just from his guts, but from his mind as well. He and Nita watched in horror as a lavender stain began to spread from the bite in all directions. It was quick. It reached the two sides of Nita’s unfinished square in seconds, and was stopped by the cuts. But it flowed unrestricted past the beginning of her third cut.

“Keep cutting.” Matt hissed. “Quicker.”

Nita began to slice, trying desperately to outrun the purple blush. Her cut went wider and wider, distending like a bloated stomach. Matt wailed piteously, but kept his body rigid and unmoving. Nita beat out the tide and turned the knife to complete the last leg of the distorted rectangle.

Suddenly Matt's door slammed open and Jay stood there in his underwear, looking at the scene in disbelieving horror.

"Nita, you bitch. What are you..."

Nita put up a hand and opened her mouth, but Jay grabbed her and dragged her off Matt's chest.

"No! Let me go! Let me go!"

Jay threw her across the room. "Matt, buddy, are you still alive?"

Matt's eyes widened in terror as the poison cloud escaped Nita's knifeblade corral and began to spread across his body. Suddenly his chest constricted, squeezing the breath out of him. Nita struggled up, but Jay pushed her back down. Matt stretched out an already stiffening hand and looked for Nita's eyes.

"Let her finish. Let her fin..."

He couldn't talk anymore. Everything was freezing up. All he could do was look helplessly from Jay to Nita. Jay stood over him like a watchdog, still thinking he had saved him. He'd saved him alright.

Matt finally found Nita's eyes, but just as he did, she became a dark blur on the floor. His senses were shutting down. He was nearly gone. His body felt cold and distant. Nita! Don't leave it like this!

He heard struggling, but the mist became a black wall, blocking off the room. He couldn't see. Nita!

The black wall folded in on him, smothering him, pinching out the feeble spark of his life. NITA!

A soft kiss brushed his lips.

Nita.

THE END