



PORN CHANEL by Max Blagg

I was wandering through Artie's deli, looking for something for my roommate Arturo's seven-year-old son to eat. Arturo was away for the day and I was in charge of feeding the boy. Eggs, tuna fish – what did children eat? My roving eye settled on the Victorian illustration of a dead lion with a cloud of bees buzzing around it imprinted on a can of English treacle. “*Out of the strong came forth sweetness*”, read the scroll beneath the drawing. *It sounded wise*; it reminded me of the small list of Latin tags learned by rote in school so many years before. *Per ardua ad astra* (*Through hard work to the stars*), a pertinent mantra I had long ignored, and then the one inscribed on the badge of my school blazer, *Ex pulvere palma* (Out of the dust, the palm).

► Just then, a woman cruised into view, perusing the shelves as absently as I was. She was tall like a palm, undulating slightly, made taller by heels and a carefully structured coil of curly hair, and beautifully dressed in a brown tweed suit. When she turned and briefly glanced in my direction before returning to her study of can labels, discreet gold buttons glinted on the front of her jacket. Dark stockings covered her shapely legs. Her shoes were crafted from the skin of some endangered reptile, with long pointed toes like an anteater's snout, feet doubtless all crunched up in there and longing to be sprung from their leather bindings. The hosiery: was it Fogal or Wolford? Stockings or tights? Was that rough tweed rubbing against the outside of her bare thighs? It was probably lined in silk taffeta or some similarly expensive material, tailored to

protect her smooth, well-oiled skin. An elegant anomaly in the industrial desert around Canal Street. I could break her like a butterfly on a wheel. Was that another Latin tag? Wealthy-looking women always stirred up the old working-class hooligan mechanisms, the Oliver Mellors Syndrome, as it was known among those few who had actually read *Lady Chatterley's Lover*.

I made my selections and contrived to stand behind her as she checked out her purchases, inhaling the subtle fragrance emanating from her nubby tweed. She had bought leeks and eggs and milk, and now she paid for them, knowing surely that I was watching her, smelling her. I could almost taste the delicate omelet she would make after being spread-eagled and ravaged on her fragrant cotton sheets.

She walked out the door as I quickly paid for a can of tuna and loaf of Wonder Bread. Kids will eat anything. I hurried out into the street. She was walking south toward Canal at a leisurely pace. I followed in her wake, hoping to break the ice with a casual remark, but what? Nice suit? How do you cook leeks? Are you Welsh? She wasn't Welsh. She was European, not German or Scandinavian – hopefully French, like Coco. That feminine swagger as she walked, it was so Parisian; I'd seen a couple of Godard films. This was a movie, too, my courtship as unlikely as my breaking into song and climbing a lamppost. She might even have been a young American from the plains, but Midwestern girls just didn't dress this way or walk with this insouciant elegance, not without a few years of practice in the Big Town.

She crossed Canal Street and I followed, doglike. She knew I was there, but continued to ignore me. The streetlamps were just coming on. It was twilight in early March, the small knives of winter dispersing, a promise of spring in the edge of the wind. I hadn't showered in a while. My underwear was three days in, there might be difficulties undressing, if it came to that. I was already entertaining the notion that it might come to that. She was permitting me to enter her force field without acknowledgement, and like a jet intruding into alien airspace, I was liable to be shot down without warning. She turned left on Lispenard, past the shuttered loading dock of the post office, pausing to look south before she crossed Church. The wind blew sharply down the wide, empty street. I looked at my watch. The kid would be all right for a few more minutes. Halfway down the block she stopped and slowly took keys from her purse; I moved closer and waited a couple of feet behind her. Now, surely, she would have to take a stance, or at least actively ignore me. A woman with keys in a door and a stranger right behind her: time for flight or fight, high-decibel screaming and the pepper spray. She opened the door and walked inside, in no hurry to close it. Like a snake in a basket, hearing the first notes of the charmer's flute, I pushed aside the wicker top and slithered after her, committed now to whatever might transpire, jail or joy, on the verge of something criminal or ecstatic.

I had followed a woman, a complete stranger, into a building. She might be insane or she might be a cop, though I knew neither of those possibilities were at all likely, especially when she still didn't turn around or speak. We were standing in a gloomy hallway. A wide wooden staircase ran directly upward for five long flights. My savage eyeball quivered slightly at the beauty of her haunches in motion as she began to climb, the way the bias cut held the shape of the skirt, the line of her calf accented by the elegant shoe. No longer able to resist, I reached out my hand and touched the cleft between her legs. She paused for a brief moment of acknowledgement and then kept climbing until she reached the first floor, where there was an alcove, a small hallway illuminated by a 40-watt bulb. She reached up to unscrew the light, and then the only illumination was an insipid glow at each landing and the gloomy opaque light that fell faintly from a dirty skylight at the very top of the staircase. Square-shouldered in the alcove, still with her back to me, she reached her hand around in a fluid motion and pulled up the back of the tweed skirt. Stockings, not tights. An absence of underwear. White thighs and the globes of an arse across which the skin was stretched smooth as a drumskin. “*Vite! vite!*” she hissed, pushing her glorious bum outward. I kneeled on the wooden floor and began nuzzling the crack between worlds. “No, no. Just fuck me. Quick!” “*Queek,*” it came out as, “*Queek!*” I got to my feet, fumbled open my zipper and pushed against her. Her legs opened like the gates of heaven. The lips of her Courbet-like quim were enlarged, thick as the tyres on a Dinky Toy tractor. She put her hands up on the wall, like a suspect being frisked by a cop. The tweed jacket had a wonderful weave with tiny flecks of pink woven into it. The buttons on

the sleeves had real buttonholes. It was definitely a Chanel. I buried my face in the expensive fabric and pushed into her.

“*Vite!*” she hissed again and the French accent alone was almost enough to make me salute. The tweed skirt was lined with silk, its texture smooth on the backs of my hands as they steadied her hips. I turned up the hem of the skirt with one hand. Sure enough, the material was monogrammed with those interlocking Cs. Suddenly, I was Coco's swinish German captain. She didn't speak, just pushed her arse back against me while I drilled her harshly, toes curling for traction in my shoes, knocking her against the dirty wall of the hallway. To distract myself, I thought of all the things the lovely Coco had given to fashion: pant-suits for women, costume jewellery, harder, patch pockets, twin-sets in jersey and tweed. Oh, the silky hand of that tweed. Like Rommel, I drove deep into Egypt. Sling-back pumps, quilted handbags, pleated skirts, these gilt buttons glittering in the half-light, ribbon bows, chain-weighted hems, multiple strands of necklaces – the woman was a fucking genius! Soon North Africa would be ours! My partner's hands slipped, red-lacquered fingernails scrabbling for purchase as she struggled to maintain her balance. She pressed her face against the wall and moaned quietly, grinding her hips against me. Even a tank commander couldn't sustain this much excitement for long. The city was encircled. Her buttocks locked like the gates of El Alamein. “*Deutschland über Alles!*” I shouted as I pulled out and sprayed the plaster, careful not to soil that elegant suit. We stood for a moment, defused, trembling, then she twisted her body away from me, pulled her skirt down with a modest little motion and pushed past me.

“Now go, please. *Allez, allez!*”

Without looking back she began to climb to the next floor. The entire invasion had taken less than five minutes. I stood there, dumb as a bag of Lugers, admiring once again the exquisite chic of her outfit as she ascended. I wanted to ask her name or get her phone number, confirm the fact that it was a real Chanel suit, but any words would have broken the queer spell of this brief encounter. I adjusted my clothing and walked out into the twilight. There was no number on the door, and like a lot of the old factory buildings in this district, it was hard to tell if it was inhabited or derelict, even though a cluster of ancient doorbells was nailed haphazardly to the doorframe. Which one was hers? There was a feeble glow on each floor of the building where the shaftway ran up, but the windows were dark. Perhaps she lived in the back, or maybe she didn't want to turn the lights on just yet. I hurried back home to feed the kid.

A week later, she walked into the place I worked with a young, good-looking guy. They were laughing and talking in French, which immediately made me furious. Once again I was on the wrong side of the bar. They sat down on two empty stools. She wore the same chic jacket, but her hair was down tonight, framing a beautiful face. She looked at me and smiled absently, with no trace of recognition, then ordered a martini, dirty, with olives. Just the way she said “dirty” reminded me of the way she had pronounced “Quick!”, but was it a false memory, a fake tale about a real stranger? I wanted to lean over and say, “Don't you remember fucking me in that hallway on Lispenard Street?” but it might have led to trouble, and I was already on probation for numerous violations of bar protocol. I served the couple their drinks and briefly relived that bareback ride as her long hand closed around the bulb of the glass, wondering how many other strangers had followed her home.

Wasn't that a little spot on the corner of her mouth? In this time of plague anyone could be a carrier. I looked closer as I swooped in to scoop up ice, hoping she would give me some sign of recognition. Nothing. My pin-sized head was reflected in the gold buttons of her jacket, gormless, bedazzled. The mark by her mouth was a rather beautiful mole. Armistice. 1918 words. ◀