

All the Beautiful Things

by Barbara Stanley

Jesus, it was cold. Her nipples felt like two frozen raisins stuck on snowball tits. She hugged herself tight, felt the icy band of her wedding ring cut into her arm. Moonlight bounced off the big diamond, making it glow like a wayward star. Her skin was all goosebumpy from trying to keep warm. Wasn't working. There was at least 50 degrees difference between the temperature out here and the core temperature of her naked body.

"Al, let me in." She banged on the back door.

"C'mon Al, enough already, I'm frigid."

Yeah. Frigid and freaking.

She looked up at the night sky. High above, a jet crossed over in slow motion, faint drone trailing behind. It disappeared into clouds that drifted towards the full moon. A wild night tonight--dark sky, bright clouds, round shining moon lighting up her whole back yard. Lucky for her she was hidden by the latticework fence that surrounded her patio. Lucky for her it was 11:30 p.m. She could prance naked in a moon dance and nobody would see her. She could chant ancient love songs and nobody would hear her. Neighbors on both sides were asleep, hearing aids and bifocals resting on bedstands. They'd all watched Al grow up in this house. They all loved him.

She could see Al through the kitchen window, mixing a drink. He was grinning at her, a perfect-white-teeth grin. A lot of money had paid for that smile, had paid for her smile too. All worth it. With that smile and that tan and the white hair at his temples Al looked very distinguished, and when Jen smiled she looked like a model. People always noticed them when they were out in public.

She didn't know if Al would open the door or turn around and walk back to the family room to watch some more TV. If he did that, she'd have to stay out here freezing her ass off until he got good and ready to come back. Shit. The family room was way the hell past the big kitchen and the TV was miles away in the cabinet. Al knew she wouldn't make a huge fuss banging on the door and yelling, ancient neighbors or no.

Jen, you're a dumb ass, she scolded herself. They should have set a time limit before he shut the door. Damn, why hadn't she thought of that?

Al clicked off the light and unbuttoned his shirt. He grinned at her again, then turned around and headed out the kitchen. But he didn't go into the family room.

Shivers rippled through her body. She looked down at the corresponding goosebumps. Her white skin was one of the things that Al loved most about her. He absolutely refused to let her sunbathe, even though they had a huge pool in the backyard and a sunbooth in the exercise room. That sunbooth was for Al only. It was weird, living in Southern California and slathering on a ton of sunblock to keep your skin the color of a ghost. Al touched her skin constantly, and if sometimes he was a little rough or pinched too hard--- well, no big deal. She'd always bruised easily--only now she had tons of gorgeous clothes to cover up a few stupid marks. Al spent massive bucks on her. He loved her.

Her nose was running. Damn, she'd have to fix that when she got into the house. Al wouldn't like that, the sniffing and all. It would spoil it for him. She wiped her nose with the back of her hand.

She hopped from one foot to the other on the chill terra cotta tiles. Warm sunny days degenerated into cold nights pretty quick this time of year. Like a lot of Midwesterners, she'd assumed California nights were always warm so it had been quite a shock to have to bundle up with sweaters and coats. She'd always got cold easily, even as a kid. Even here.

Al thought that was funny. He liked that.

He'll love this, she thought. Her hands were too cold to tuck under her armpits for warmth. That would make her shiver harder, and that was a no-no. Her little toe was going numb. That was good.

She banged on the door again. "Al, please, I'm really cold."

She was starting to shake. In another few moments her teeth would be chattering but good, and that would not be good.

Where the hell was he?

"One last time --I'm starting to shake out here. Am I coming in or what?"

The magic words.

Out of nowhere Al appeared at the window, drink in hand. In another few seconds the lock clicked, the back door swung open, and warm air rushed out to embrace Jen.

Al stood in the darkened kitchen, shirt off, smiling at her. His face shone with a light scrim of sweat. Still watching her, he took a swallow from his glass, then put a finger to his lips.

"Shhhhhh..." was all he said.

Without another word he turned and walked out of the kitchen. Jen followed close behind, past the granite countertops, through the dining room archway, down the tiled corridor and towards the master suite. She grabbed a tissue from a box in the hallway and wiped her nose up quick. The tiles underfoot were warm--from radiant heat, was what Al called it. Whatever it was, they felt good. But she musn't stand on them too long. She moved on towards the bedroom and stepped through the doorway.

And stopped. Skipped a breath.

The bedroom was a shambles. No, worse than a shambles, it was *wrecked*--chaise overturned, bedspread pulled off, lamp on the floor, still on. The antique sho-danso chest, the one Jen loved, was askew against the wall, her alarm clock and all her pictures scattered on the floor. One of the curtains was actually torn.

Goddamn.

The bedroom was never like *this* before. She turned to Al with a question in her face. but their rule was: no questions. So she kept quiet. Al was sweating a lot, she noticed.

She walked over to the king-size bed and looked down at it. She loved that big comfy bed. Even with the bedspread yanked off and the sheets pulled out and thrown across the top. Even with all the nice things, furniture and everything, scattered around and turned over like trash. Jen was suddenly really tired. What she wanted more than anything was to lay down on that bed, close her eyes, go to sleep. It was warm and quiet in here, the curtains closed against nothing but the sound of the Pacific ocean beyond.

Lie down, she told herself. Lie down and close your eyes. It's no big deal, lie down, you can do it.

No big deal.

She lay face down across the bed and closed her eyes. She resisted the urge to stretch. She was still shivering a little, but not so bad now.

Al walked over to her side of the bed. Ice tinked in his glass when he took another swallow. He'd only have one drink, a small one. The glass made a thunk as he set it on the Japanese chest. That would leave a water ring, she thought.

She took a deep breath, blew it out slow. That would calm her breathing and get the shivering under control. When she knew she could lie there without moving, she turned her head to one side, eyes still closed.

"Okay." She whispered.

Al began working on her body. He kept her head turned to the side, but tilted it up and pressed it into her pillow. She could breathe through a crease in the pillow, but her face was hidden. The warm breaths felt good on her cold nose. Quiet breaths, she told herself. Quiet, quiet.

Next Al positioned her left arm so it was bent at the elbow, wrist and hand palm down. Her right arm he stretched across the bed, also palm down, curling her fingers into a clawing motion. She kept her arms frozen in place.

Al grabbed the sheets, her fancy Egyptian cotton sheets, and bunched them against her sides. That hid her breathing pretty good. He moved her legs apart so that her left foot hung over the bed. He draped the edge of the sheet over her right ankle, careful to cover up the pulsing vein below.

Almost finished. Jen heard the dresser drawer whoosh open. That meant tonight was the pantyhose. Other nights might be the necktie or the rope. Al slipped the pantyhose under her throat and tied it into a knot behind her neck, not too tight. He let the pantyhose legs trail off into her hair.

She heard a familiar sound behind her--a sticky ripping sound. Crap. Why did he have to use tape? He was pressing duct tape into his palm, pulling it off, pressing it on, pulling it off, over and over. It was Al's one concession to her. The tape would leave pink marks on her face otherwise.

She caught a whiff of whiskey as Al bent down and pressed the tape over her mouth. The mattress bumped gently when he stood up. In another moment the lamp snapped off, leaving darkness beyond her closed lids. Then Al's footsteps receded from the bedroom.

She had told him she was adventurous. Up for anything, she had said.

And wasn't it great, most of the time? Al had taught Jen to ski in Aspen. She'd parasailed off the shores of Maui. A lowly receptionist from White Trashville, Illinois, she had snagged the CEO of the company before his early retirement. Now she lunched, traveled, and shopped, light years away from sagging trailers, junked cars, and boyfriends on parole. She was Mrs. Alan Lewis now. She even had new tits, a C cup.

The age difference between them - that was no big deal. The sex was usually good. As for this other--well---

Al was back in the bedroom. He had slipped in quietly, but she heard his breathing. Beyond her lids she saw a wavering light--glowing, like the full moon outside. She could almost feel the flashlight as it pierced the darkness, passing over her body, her

white cold body, silent and stiff on the bed. Silent but for the sharp breaths of one person, the man holding the flashlight.

The flashlight dropped on the bed. Hands fondled her icy feet. They moved up her body to touch her stiff cold hands. And when she felt Al's weight on top of her she thought of jewelry and clothes and bright happy smiles. All the beautiful things, purchased with love. Because that's what it was all about---love, and the things we do for love.

Barbara Stanley likes her suspense on the creepy side. Her fiction has appeared or is forthcoming in SHOTS, A Cruel World, the annual SubNatural, and the Thou Shalt Not anthology, among others.