The Meateaters

CHUCK REDMAN

(continued from previous issue)

CHAPTER 8

The restroom was small, considering the size and workforce of the plant. Gail was glad no one else was there. Moving quickly to the sink, the first thing she checked was whether the drain had a lid or stopper that could be lowered. This one didn't; so, she pulled a paper towel from the dispenser and covered the drain with it. She then bent over, head tilted down, sore eye centered over the sink, and left palm held up beneath her eye as a safety net, to take out the offending right contact. It was much more difficult than under normal circumstances; first of all because the eye was by then so sore and irritated from the persistent sharp pain that she couldn't open it more than half-way; secondly, the tears made her skin slippery as she pulled with her finger near the right corner of her eye. It took several attempts, each time impatiently wiping her wet index finger off on her dress and swearing softly under her breath, before she finally popped the lens out and gently plucked it from her eyelash. The instant the contact was out, the sharp pain ceased, and her right eye was left with only a dull soreness, a tired feeling, like a bloodshot battlefield hours after the battle had moved elsewhere.

Gail turned on a thin, lukewarm stream of water. The paper towel quickly became sopping wet. She held the contact under the faucet for a second or two and flung shocking fingerfulls of water up into her eye to wash away the culprit dust particle--whatever it

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was. Then, resuming the same bent-over posture she had assumed for taking it out, she carefully put the contact back in her eye. No sharp stab. The dust was gone.

She looked at her face in the mirror. She quickly scanned her hair, cheeks, lips. But her eyes were drawn rapidly, powerfully to the reflection of their own right member. She stared intently at the image of her right eye, pitying it in its redness, its weariness. Its quiet sadness and drying tearstains. She knew that her tears had been invoked as a simply physiological response to pain. But strangely enough, whenever dust sneaked under one of her contacts, the resulting tears plus the knowledge of how she looked with them rolling down always plunged her into a state of immense, inexplicable sadness. This emotional phenomenon occurred no matter what her mood immediately prior to the characteristic sharp stab. Such is the conditioning inherent in the human experience: the feeling of tears streaking down your face is invariably associated with sadness--being sad about something.

Unable to shake her conditioned sorrow, she resigned herself to it and wistfully lowered her transfixed stare from its reflected object. She again gave the rest of her face a quick scrutiny before turning toward the door. She moved to the door, pulled it open, and stepped out into the brightness of the concourse.

Gail hesitated for a moment, looking to the right and to the left, and suddenly set out to her left down the wide yellow concourse. Straight ahead of her she saw a descending staircase. She approached the stairs and went down them. From the foot of the stairs, the concourse stretched straight ahead, and Gail continued along its expanse, glancing at the wooden benches along the walls and noticing sparsely leafletted bulletin boards on both sides of her.

"Not much of a lunchroom," she said to herself.

In front of her now, at the end of the concourse, was the door--heavy metal door with push-bar. She moved toward the door, reached it, and pushed downward on the bar.

"Well, here goes," she said to herself, hoping the girls wouldn't all stare at her when she walked back out to the group. She knew her eye was still red and misty and her face tear-stained. With the push-bar depressed, she put her weight behind it, and shoved against it hard with her hands and right hip. The door strained open, and she slipped through and let the door slam behind her.

Crash.

"What the . . . Jesus Christ!"

Gail stood on the edge of the vast cutting room of the kill floor in total disbelief.

Had she, in fact, failed somewhere in reversing the oral directions given to her? And was it because she had been unable to retrace her path by sight alone due to being half-blinded by pain on the way to the restroom?

Now, huge, raw, hanging carcasses rattled by not ten feet away, moving like tramway cars along the periphery of the cutting floor. The full-color anatomy illustrations from a biology text had come to life before her. Except they bristled with blood, and once-perfect organs were cut and hacked. The hideless and bleeding complexities of whole animals' insides dangled gruesomely by their hind . . . something that used to be legs.

Flashing between those dangling carcasses

that steadily filed past Gail were fractional pieces of the background, each fractional image a visual knife stabbing her in the eyes. Stabbing her eyes with a pain much more profound than she had had fifteen minutes earlier. And, fully assembled, the macabre giant jigsaw puzzle would depict the following: an endless procession of hanging carcasses, moved by overhead conveyor, winding all through and around the cutting floor--row inside winding row of carcasses at various stages of mutilation--dangling carcasses conveyed single-file past well-positioned cutters, dozens of them, in white coats and hardhats--a bloody chronology of mass piece-work destruction.

"Oh, God . . .," she said to herself, "I don't, . . . I mean I've never even . . . I mean, Dad sells his cattle live . . . God, why do they have to do this? . . . Oh, God! I mean, Dad sells his cattle live . . ."

Each stabbing piece of the jigsaw puzzle confronting Gail caused her to avert her eyes, but there was no place safe to look, short of looking straight down at her feet. She wanted desperately to avoid looking at anything, but the corners of her eyes betrayed her. She could only, in beginning to move forward now, shift her eyes rapidly and constantly from one sordid spot to another, emitting every so often a tiny involuntary sound from the back of her throat like the suppressed whimper of a dog. Only she, no one else, heard the tiny throat-sob deep inside herself. The sounds of clinking shackles, whirring electric saws, rumbling conveyors, and hissing steam easily prevailed.

As she approached the closest row of moving carcasses, that outer row progressing along from the cutting area into the fabrication room, Gail knew that she had to control the wild shifting of her eyes, had to momentarily take a look exactly where she was going and amidst what she passed, for proceeding here required stepping between two moving carcasses, any two, and she would avoid brushing any part of a carcass at all costs--anything but that right now. Therefore, she fastened her wide eyes on the exposed shoulder of an approaching carcass and stepped with stiff and shocked revulsion between it and its predecessor. She had passed that obstacle.

Automatically, she resumed averting her

eyes from all sides by shifting them wildly, rapidly once again. The aisle closest to Gail stretched before her all the way to the far end of the cutting room. It seemed the length of a city block. The closest worker stood thirty feet down the aisle at a long wooden table. Gail tried not to see what he was doing, but her glance in his direction revealed some sort of chopping motion and pushing aside. She moved reticently down the aisle toward the worker. The aisle was painfully narrow. Hanging carcasses jerked along by overhead conveyor on either side of her. The carcasses on the left were much closer than those on the right and actually impinged upon the width of the aisle. Gail took care to stay over to the right. She also had to step over several rubber hoses strewn across the wet concrete surface of the aisle. She felt something sticking to the heel of her right shoe and, looking down at the shoe as she lifted it slightly, she was horrified to see a raw piece of fat, almost six inches long, stuck to the heel of her beige sandal. She shook the foot hard, but the fat clung to her heel. Beside herself immediately with pent-up frustration and anger touched off by the vengeful piece of fat, she began knocking her heel sharply, but without success, against a leg of the wooden table on her right. Finally, she rid herself of the adhering piece of fat by awkwardly scraping it off on the same table leg.

Gail moved on, her darting eyes catching glimpses (among all the stabbing sights surrounding her) of curious stares from many of the workers on neighboring aisles. She reached the first worker at his monotonous chopping and discarding, the details of which she struggled to ignore as she leaned near to his oblivious back.

"How do you get out of here?" she almost screamed in an effort to be heard over the factory din. Her interrogatory was a demand, pure and simple. A desperate order. Looking at the worker, she felt her nose tighten, her nostrils flare in and out in disdain and disgust.

Not startled in the least, he turned a calm countenance to her. He was near her own age, maybe a little older, dark eyes, shaggy mustache, and long hair escaping from beneath his black hardhat. The front of his white coat was spattered with crimson. He smiled knowingly.

"Right . . . Your oughta go up this aisle the way you was goin', I guess, and when you get to the steps—you see that sorta iron stairway way down at the end of this aisle there? --OK, well you just go up them steps and then you go down the only way you can go--there's only one way you can go. OK? And there's an old door. You just push it, and you can go down the steps there where the animals is . . . is fed into here. And don't get too close to them animals."

Gail brushed past him without a word and continued down the aisle in the direction she had been moving. In four or five steps, she found herself silently and suddenly enveloped in a curtain of powerfully obnoxious odor. (Although the whole kill floor was imbued with the stench of singed meat and blood, this area's smell was much more intense.) The smell was sickening to her, unbearably so. She actually felt nausea rise within her and almost resigned herself to throwing up. She fought her stomach's desire to surge and heave. At the same time, she wondered in disbelief at the ability of workers on either side of her to breathe and function in such an environment. But Gail had kept her feet moving, in spite of her stomach's sudden revolt. As a result, she left the zone of unbearable atmosphere as suddenly as she had entered it.

In the next instant, she felt herself falling helplessly, her feet slipped out from under her.

"Oh, fuck," she gasped out loud, involuntarily, in the split second of surprise that was allowed to her before hip, back, and shoulder met the concrete floor.

"Damnit, anyway!" Lying on her back, nothing hurt badly enough to arouse in Gail any suspicion of broken bones. But she had fallen hard and felt bruised around the hip. Her right elbow stung, and she strained to turn it upward, so she could view it, craning her neck. She had skinned the elbow.

"Won't look too neat up on stage in my evening gown," she complained to herself. "Probably leave a scar, too," she brooded.

She was self-conscious about having been seen slipping and falling. But her self-consciousness gave way to the return of quick temper and revulsion: swiftly amassing

around her were a half dozen anxious, worried forms--white-coated forms, but each sprinkled with blood. Hands were extended to her, a host of hands, reaching toward her, with fingers stained red almost touching her.

"Gotta watch out for them grease spots," one of the forms advised. "That ol' fat'll trip ya up every time. Specially with them slick sandals. . . . Nice legs, though."

"Are you all right, honey?" came a female voice.

"Here, we'll help you up," another female voice insisted.

Gail sat up painfully.

"Please, I just want to . . . get out of here." Tears welled up and began rolling down her cheeks as, with obvious soreness, she pulled herself to her feet, refusing the hands thrust at her. (Those tears flowed from a reservoir of emotion and not from simple physiology, this time. And this stabbing pain could not be washed away.) Through these tears, she saw down near her feet an area spattered with a myriad of what looked like solidified droplets of fat, glistening in the plant's artificial light. She stepped gingerly over the fat-laden patch. She left behind her the gaping huddle of white-coated forms, who shrugged with red-fingered hands upturned.

Gail reached the iron stairway and climbed, winding, to the top. There, at the top, a ghastly scene met Gail's eyes: it was at this higher level and in this dark, crowded alcove of the plant that the cattle kill--the slaughtering itself--was actually carried out. The sight and sounds of the kill struck Gail like a powerful fist, for her face turned away in instant recoil. Her eyes, weary from their wild darting, had been stabbed like never before.

The way out was easily apparent now: all downhill, along a narrow wooden rampway and out through a loose wooden door outlined in bright cracks of daylight. But the way out was a gauntlet, running the full length of the kill. It was a tight passage squeezed between wall and crowded cattle-ramp, separated from the latter and its occupants only by a wooden barrier.

The gauntlet, at its starting point,
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overlooked a churning sea of red mud on the floor below. The throat-cutter toiled here, unleashing at each fearless stroke a torrent of life-blood to inundate the bubbling crimson sea. The gauntlet-runner was forced to pass within a yard of the throat-cutter and his bold slicing forearms, looking down at her own reluctant feet shuffling along the narrow plankway.

The prisoner had then to pass by the four or five animals always hanging at any one time by their shackled heels between the lobotomy and throat-cutting stages of the flowing process.

The next ordeal facing the gauntlet-runner was getting by the shackling of the animals' hind feet and their immediately being hoisted into the air from their restrainers by the powerful conveyor. But the catch was to pass by without looking at the flailing forelegs and the huge, inverted bodies struggling. And without noticing the struggling growing more and more feeble, or the expressions of profound shock written on the big, angular faces. Sometimes, looking down was no escape, for it was not uncommon for an animal to slip from his shackles and fall headfirst to the floor below and then lie there for minutes at a time until they came and reshackled his hind legs and put him back in line.

But just beyond the shackle-man stood the worker who administered possibly the most psychologically difficult ordeal of all for the gauntlet-runner: he was the lobotomizer, and his duties were inconspicuous, almost clandestine. His hypodermic was not easily observable in the dim light of the kill alcove, since it was mostly concealed by his hands. The danger of this ordeal lay in the possibility that the gauntlet-runner might relax, might let down her defenses for a split-second, and might carelessly glance at the lobotomizer engrossed in his subtle task. Then, seeing and, more importantly, recognizing such an act with full knowledge of its meaning would almost certainly deal the gauntlet-runner a painful stab of tragic intensity.

Once the lobotomizer's test was passed, the prisoner had only to run the final yards of the gauntlet to reach the end and freedom. But the final yards were a foreshadowing, a reflection, of all that the gauntlet-runner had already witnessed. For in these final

yards, brown-eyed cattle with the ghost of fear on their faces filed up into the plant from outside, in a solid and endless stream. Destiny was irreversible for them. This was the point of no return, to be sure, though for them it had really been written on the wall the day they were born.

Each animal coming up the ramp was put in a restrainer. And one worker prodded each animal into its waiting restrainer by ramming it hard with a billy club in the anal/genital area. And there were yells from all corners of the dark alcove. And clanking sounds. And huge snorting animals within arm's reach, making heavy, nervous hoof-beats on the wooden planks, like unbroken broncos.

By keeping her eyes to the wall, Gail reached the gauntlet's end, having avoided many of the deepest wounds. Nevertheless, the corners of her eyes had incurred a countless number of sharp, if fleeting, stabs.

She stood, finally, at the door leading outside and hesitated. She couldn't imagine what was holding her back. She swallowed for what seemed like the first time in hours. Gail felt unable to collect her thoughts.

It was muscle spasm more than anything else that propelled her forward. And she shot through the swinging door into the sunlight like a fifth grader bursting out of the schoolhouse doors at the start of summer vacation.

CHAPTER 9

The bus drove out through the front gate of the plant and turned onto the seemingly deserted, rough-surfaced air base road, bouncing almost immediately over several sets of railroad tracks. Gail noticed in anguish that she could still smell the sickening odor of singed flesh or whatever it had been that permeated the whole plant building. Some of the microscopic particles emitted into the building's heavy atmosphere by the slaughtering--the particles which carry the smell to anyone entering the plant--must have collected as some sort of residue on the inside of Gail's nostrils, or else on her clothing. It would turn out that she would smell it still, hours later, back at the motel, and it would linger with her as a foul reminder throughout the dinner she could hardly face and through the rest of the evening.

Something else lingered, a question. It grew to fruition within her, suddenly articulating itself to her, demanding answers. Why, the question probed, why, when she had stepped through the wrong door, hadn't she tried pulling on the damn door to see whether it was locked or not, and, if not, gone back toward the restroom and out the right way, whatever way that was? It couldn't have been that she was just totally confused. Also, she argued to herself, she couldn't believe she was in there in the first place, so it didn't make sense to try to find another way out. It was just so unreal. Well, why should she want to put herself through such a . . . awful experience, if she had been bright enough at the time to realize there was another way out.

Gail dismissed the question as absurd and shifted in her seat, leaning closer to the window to watch the scattered buildings and fields as they swept by.

CHAPTER 10

A trite knock came at the door. Shave-and-a-haircut-two-bits. Gail got up and opened the door, her face expressionless.

"Hi, Lyle. Come on in. Meet Rochelle, my roommate. Rochelle is a senior in high school, and I wanted to show her what the typical male at KSC looks like. She's thinking of coming here next year. . . . What do you think, Rochelle?"

"I'm very impressed," she answered, smilingly emitting a soft laugh-breath.

"Where are you from, Rochelle?" Lyle, blush fading, stepped stiff-legged to the foot of Rochelle's bed.

"I live on a farm near Trumbull."

"Oh, yeah? Trumbull High?"

"Yes."

"Do you know Kent Lierly?"

"Yeah, I know Kent," her face lighting up. "How . . . are you from around there?"

"No, I'm from Schuyler, but Kent's my cousin. He's spent a lot of time up at our place."

"Oh, I used to know Kent real well. Used to talk to him a lot at school. He was two years ahead of me. He's at the U., isn't he?"

"Yeah . . . He wants to go to vet school."

"Yeah, smart guy."

"Yeah, he's a good guy, old Kent." Lyle plunged his hands deeper in his pockets and turned from Rochelle to Gail. "Well, Gail, what do you think? Head for the dance?"

"Yup, I'm actually ready, believe it or not. . . . Bye, Rochelle. See you in a . . . little while."

"So long," Lyle added. "You coming to the dance?"

"Yeah, if my date ever gets here."

"We'll see you there."

"OK. Bye." Rochelle smiled as they nodded and then slipped out, and the door closed behind them. She got up and went to

the bathroom mirror. She leaned forward a little, puckering her lips and pulling a white tissue from the wall dispenser. Parting her lips, Rochelle inserted the tissue and then pressed her lips carefully onto it. She opened her lips with a smacking sound and pulled out the tissue, now imprinted with pink lipstick. She felt the uncomfortable feeling of excess saliva coming to the corners of her mouth and spreading onto her painted lips. She felt stuffed-up, wanted to breathe through her nose, but couldn't, and it made a stupid whistling noise, anyway.

Gary should be here by now, Rochelle thought to herself. Gail looked so pretty, she mused. She's the prettiest one in the whole thing. And she's . . . charming and everything. Of course, she's older than most of us. I think she's gonna win. Oh well, it would be neat to have your roommate win, anyway.

"She is a little faraway at times, though," Rochelle muttered aloud, letting the tissue parachute into the wastebasket.

A knock came at the door. Shave-and-a-hair . . .

CHAPTER 11

"This song is dedicated to Gail Shreve and Lyle Loschen, my fffffar-out friends at Kearney State. . . . Big man on campus, and a real foxy chick . . . Hey, good thing they have chaperones at this dance . . . OK, we're about ready . . . coming around to it . . . OK, here we go . . . Hey, one, two, three, four, and pow! One fine morning, girl, I'll wake up . . . wipe the sleep from my . . ." (Lead singer joined perpetually rumbling guitars, now erupting, fire in his . . .) "eyes . . ."

The couple danced this one, compelled to do so, but were free to feel silent relief at the continuance of most of the other couples on the dance floor. They could enjoy the honor and yet a fair amount of anonymity at the same time.

Gail's style of dancing was not very gregarious. It was refined. A few drinks might have made a difference, but . . . Lyle stood out, if only because he danced exactly twice as slowly as everyone else; his movements were timed to every other beat of the music.

When the number ended, they agreed to sit the next one out. They went back to their table, which was deserted.

"Lyle, would you mind very much if I sort of went back to my room for a while?"

"Why, are you sick?"

"Well, I just sort of feel . . . out of it. Got kind of a headache. Nervous about tomorrow, I guess."

"Oh, well, I'll go back with you. Do you mean your room here at the motel or your dorm room?"

"No, I'll just go back to the room here. That's OK. You stay here and dance."

"No, I'll go back with you."

"No, you stay here. I'll be all right. I just want to lie down."

"You sure? Cause I'd like to come and make sure you're OK."

"No. I want you to stay and dance. The music's good."

"You sure?"

"Yeah."

"Well . . . OK. But I'll come check on you after a while."

"OK. But if I don't answer, I'm probably asleep."

"OK."

"Bye. Go dance."

"OK. Bye. Hope you feel better."

Lyle sat down at the table and rested his chin on his hands. He didn't have that much desire to dance. But he felt obligated to, just so Gail wouldn't feel guilty. He saw Rhonda and a girl he hadn't met standing on the edge of the dance floor drinking punch. He headed in their direction, skirt-ing the dance floor.

Gail went out into the lobby and walked slowly, her posture almost tragic with head downcast, toward her room's corridor. She stopped halfway across the lobby and looked at her watch. No expression.

She opened her handbag and thrust in a hand to sweep among its contents. Jangling, her car keys rose from the open mouth of the purse, in the grasp of thumb and forefinger.

Gail turned and walked out the front

entrance of the motel and into the night-canopied parking lot. She went to her car, which was parked at the side of the building, unlocked it, and got in. Before she really knew what she was doing, she had backed out, raced out the motel's exit to Second Avenue, and was driving to beat the . . . band.

CHAPTER 12

She drove toward campus. Before she even turned on 25th Street, Gail knew where she would stop, at least initially.

Now . . . how could anyone be lonely when their parents are just five minutes away, and likewise, when they have lots of friends around, and when they have a nice, steady boyfriend to go to a dance with, and a dance is even dedicated in their name? If she was depressed, she hadn't the slightest idea why. She was depressed about being depressed. And triply depressed because she hadn't a clue.

It was at such occasions as this one--the melancholy, the lonely--that she had to stop. For soft ice cream. Soft, creamy, smooth soft ice cream. Vanilla, most likely --at the Tastee Freeze. It was a tradition. But it wasn't actually Tastee Freeze anymore. It had changed hands a couple of times and was called something else. But she persisted in calling it "Tastee Freeze." Tastee Freeze was her summer resort as a kid--hers and that of all the other kids in the neighborhood. Those lime shakes they used to push. Super. Even though they just made them from syrup. Twenty-five cents for a large shake. "Neato," they used to say. Well, the lime shakes were gone, but the soft ice cream remained, like a true friend.

Gail pulled into the drive-in's small gravel parking lot and stopped her car by the evergreen hedge on the east side. She got out, not bothering to lock it. There were a few other customers in the area. She noticed her speech instructor sitting by himself at one of the picnic tables having a sundae. She hoped she wouldn't draw his attention, but she had forgotten until that moment that she was still wearing her long formal, complete with corsage. Also, it was now pretty chilly, and she was bare-shouldered, having neglected to grab her sweater from the motel room. But, thinking a hot fudge sundae might hit the spot, she moved up toward the service window, where a man was waiting for his or-

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der.

"'Scuse me, do you happen to have change for a ten?"

Gail looked quickly over her left shoulder. A student in a green army jacket had approached and was holding out a ten dollar bill.

"No. Why don't you ask the lady at the window? Go ahead, that's all right."

"Oh, well . . ."

"All right. We want everyone to stay right where they are. Narcotics and vice squad officers. Please stay where you are."

The guy in the army jacket had been interrupted by two men who, it seemed vaguely to Gail, had been simply sitting in a car parked beyond the white bench by the trash barrel. They had walked over displaying I.D. holders and pulling their jackets back to reveal guns strapped to their waists.

"All right, son, step over here. . . . Whatcha got there? What's that you got in your hand?"

The student in the army jacket took a couple of steps toward the two cops.

"Ten bucks, man . . . It's just ten bucks . . . What's the big . . ."

"That's a lot of money for ice cream," the second cop said sarcastically.

"No, I'm talking about your other hand," the first cop said.

"My other hand?" The student shook his head in bewilderment as he opened his left hand. "A spoon, man! A fuckin' ice cream spoon! Man, I think you're the one that's been smokin' something."

"Shut up!" the first cop said.

He turned to Gail.

"You, young lady, isn't it kinda cold to be dressed like that?"

Gail had backed up against the service counter, her hands clutching the counter behind her.

"Well, . . ."

"Officer, this girl had nothing to do with anything. She's a student of mine. I know her. I'm an instructor at the college."

"Oh? What's your name?"

"Randall Stanovic. I'm a teaching fellow in the speech department. . . . And this girl is one of my students. I . . . I know her very well."

The cop eyed the man standing before him, observing the full beard, the wool shirt, and corduroys.

"Listen, I saw what happened. All it was was this fellow here asked her for some change, and she said she didn't have it and that he should ask the lady inside. That's all it was. . . . Listen, I can show you my faculty I.D. . . ."

"Keep it. Seems like you just like to stick your nose in other people's business, don't it."

The instructor took a deep breath. "Not as much as you, apparently."

"Damn hippie college professor."

"Don't you guys have something better to do? Like going down to the South Side and harassing some Mexican kids."

"I oughta bust you."

No one moved for several seconds.

"Aw, screw it. I'd advise all of you to get your stupid asses out of here."

And the two cops turned and walked back to their car. They got in the plain-looking car, backed up, and drove off, sending gravel flying from the path of their wheels.

"Hey, thanks, man. Thanks for getting us out of that," the student in the army jacket said.

"Yes, thanks," a shivering Gail added, with embarrassment moderating her smile.

"Those guys are just . . . bad news." Randy Stanovic shook his head. "They get away with harassment like that all the time."

"So long and thanks again," the student said, waving and heading for the street.

Gail stepped over. It's really luck that you were here. Nothing like that's ever happened to me before."

"Well, I'm really glad I was here, too--that somebody was here--to keep those guys from their usual . . . bad deeds."

"Yes . . . Well . . . Anyway . . . " Gail felt so self-conscious. She didn't know how to end the conversation comfortably.

"Well . . . May I have this dance?" He smiled, and she responded with a small, bashful laugh.

"I know. I just came from a dance. That's why I'm dressed this way. I was such a dummy not to put on a sweater."

"How come you left the dance so early? Wait, let me guess: no ice cream!"

She smiled. "Actually, I guess I was just kind of . . . out of it. Not in the mood for dancing, I guess."

He nodded. "Where was the dance?"

"At the Holiday Inn."

"Mm. You know, I wanted to tell you that your first two speeches were good, especially the argumentative one. Your delivery was a little . . . fast, maybe. But both were very well organized, and you had good eye contact."

"Yeah, I know I talk too fast."

"But they were good speeches. They showed a lot of thought and preparation."

"I was real interested in the topics. The nursing homes one--that's a real problem."

"That's for sure. Listen, you're probably cold. Why don't we . . . Are you still interested in getting something here. Or could you go for something stronger? Because we could go down to Buffalo Chips and maybe get something to eat, or drink. Celebrate making those cops look like fools."

"Sure," she nodded at the unexpected

invitation.

"We'd have to take your car, though."

"Oh?"

"See, I live off campus a little ways from here, so I didn't drive."

"Oh. Well . . . yeah, we could take my car. I . . . I guess. It's got a lot of junk in it right now from the . . . pageant." Gail dropped the last word, hoping he hadn't caught it. As she got in the car and unlocked the passenger side for him, however, he noticed all the clothes and pageant paraphernalia stored in the back seat.

"What, uh . . . What sort of dance was this tonight?"

"Well, " she swallowed, "it's for this pageant--the Nebraska Beef Queen Pageant. Ta-Da! I'm . . . I'm a candidate for queen."

Randy Stanovic looked at her closely. "Seriously?"

Gail's head nodded, and a sad smile ruled her face as she stared into the steering wheel. A sharp sigh rose and fell.

"Yup."

(continued next issue)