

light reading series

featherproof



Timothy Schaffert

THE LOVERS
OF
VERTIGO

Up the steep slope of Eddy Street, Joe felt his ankles buckle and crack. He'd got off the bus too soon and was having to walk too far. He held sunflowers, bought along the way from a corner grocer, head-down at his side, and the flowers slapped against his knees, knocking off petals.

Henley Hornbrook was not his date's real name. She'd taken it from a sign on an Interstate exit ramp at the top of California. It was an old joke, an old family joke, she'd explained to Joe over martinis at the revolving Top of the Mark. "Henley Hornbrook," her old great-uncle had said in the back of the station wagon as they'd passed the ramp for the two small towns of Henley and Hornbrook, California. "I used to love her. She made all those great movies in the 1940s. She was the first actress to utter the word 'brassiere' on screen."

That drive had been years before, and her great-uncle had been old even then. Now Henley was staying in his house while he was away in Trinidad, Colorado, having a sex change operation. Henley had only been invited to San Francisco to watch the house a few weeks, but her uncle had been leaving brief phone messages over the last month or two, whispering vaguely of complications.

When Henley told Joe about the great-uncle, about the new vagina between his old legs, Joe pictured him as Velma Van Steen, Joe's elderly student of dance at the Leonard Wilkins School. Velma decorated her home with silver and candles and she wore spun-silk scarves and robes imported from dress shops in Milan. She had French-manicure press-on nails that yellowed from her unfiltered cigarettes. She was a terrible car-

featherproof
BOOKS



www.featherproof.com

Hey, Thanks for reading this featherproof LIGHT READING mini-book. For more swell stuff, pay us a visit at:

1



Timothy Schaffert is the author of three novels, most recently *Devils in the Sugar Shop*. He is currently at work on a compendium of stories titled, for the moment, *Tales From Under the Top: The True Erotic Lives of "Freak" Show Entertainers*, by Mrs. Emiline Winterknot.



But Joe loved the horrid Velma Van Steen because she loved no one else but him. He was 35 years old to her 72, and she'd been a rich widow for years. She had dolled herself up for Joe trust they'd courted for months.

insults, their personal attacks on these women whose love and weekends trips, the dance instructors were to begin with their sometimes tens of thousands to extra lessons, special parties, to contribute any more after having contributed thousands, rant fees for the private dance lessons, when they would refuse in bold letters. When the students would not pay the exorbitant fees for the private dance lessons, when they would refuse to contribute any more after having contributed thousands, sometimes tens of thousands to extra lessons, special parties, weekends trips, the dance instructors were to begin with their insults, their personal attacks on these women whose love and trust they'd courted for months.

Joe ducked down beneath the window so that Henley could not see him seeing her cry. He sat a moment on the front steps, attempting to repair his rattered sunflowers, straightening their remaining petals and their stalks. He was a few minutes early; he'd give her some time to compose herself. He decided to walk back down the hill to a phone booth in order to try yet again to make a threatening call to Velma Van Steen. Darla, the manager of the Leonard Wilkins School, had scolded Joe for not being more vigilant about the character stripping. "It's all spelled out in the handbook," Darla said, pointing to page 18, tapping her long curly red fingernail on "Character Stripping"

along with a box of dead black roses.

Joe found the house and walked up the steps. Before ringing the bell, he looked in through the leaded glass of the front door and saw Henley weeping on the stairs. She was still in her Kim Novak costume, her platinum wig off her head and resting atop her knee. She cried and twisted her fingers through the swirls of the wig's bun.

three times a week, arriving at the Leonard Wilkins School on the second floor above the Japanese Restaurant Supply, wearing chiffon of sea-mist green, or silk of angel-food pink, even pleather, once, of violet magnolia, her hair freshly bent by a hundred-dollar hairdresser. When he first saw her, he'd thought her the worst he'd ever seen, but she'd walked right up to him, choosing him, handing him the coupon she'd received in the mail for a free sweep across the floor. She chose Joe over the two other dancers standing there at the punch bowl, one of them being the unbearably beautiful Rib Winsom, a professional model whose flat stomach and bulging crotch appeared on the boxes of a particular brand of athletic supporter. Joe was not as broad in the shoulders or as square in the jaw as the other dance instructors at Leonard Wilkins, but was rather much softer in appearance, with wet, icy blue eyes and perpetually pink cheeks. He was skinny and 6 feet 4 inches tall.

Darla had hired him because he bore a slight resemblance to Jimmy Stewart, which was also how he met Henley Hornbrook. During the day, Joe played Stewart to Henley's Novak in an unlicensed "Vertigo" tour of San Francisco. Joe drove the minivan of tourists to places featured in the movie, such as the Palace of Fine Arts and the art gallery of the Palace of the Legion of Honor, and he and Henley would perform brief scenes, peppering the actual movie dialogue with improvisations.

Joe had never much cared for Stewart in Vertigo, finding him too self-consciously affable, too certain of the affect of his flirtations on the hapless Barbara Bel Geddes.

But Velma Van Steen had not chosen Joe because of his resemblance to Stewart. "I hate the goddamn movies," Velma had said that first time he allowed her to bathe him, he in the

touching at the edges of the autograph there, attempting to provoke the crushing guilt he longed to feel. But all he'd done, he'd done for Velma. He wanted to go home and to call Velma, to tell her that he'd nearly struck the pretty Henley Hornbrook because of the terrible things she'd said. He was a decent man, after all. He was good and knew right from wrong.

Sitting in the accordion fold of the long bus, Joe leaned his head back. The accordion fold that connected the two parts of the bus, and its squeaking and bouncing, was one of the things that mesmerized him about the city. It was one of the things he could lose himself in, just like the stacks of pink cake boxes in the window of a bakery near his apartment, or the rush of foreign words of the family who owned the laundry and sat every day in the back with tea and bread.

A young woman sat across from Joe on the bus, a woman of late college age, reading a red paperback. On the front of her T-shirt was an ad for a Russian vodka, and her pants were of blue suede despite the heat. Joe decided to give the woman the Grace Kelly autograph, but he'd be giving her much more than that. Joe would give the woman one of those rare moments of utter serendipity, an almost unbelievable story that she would tell over and over throughout her life. Part of him wanted to get to know this girl who would own the Grace Kelly autograph, but he knew it would be better just to hand it to her as she stepped off the bus and disappeared from her life entirely. Only then, with his complete absence and strangeness, would she have a good story to tell.

Joe ducked down beneath the window so that Henley could not see him seeing her cry. He sat a moment on the front steps, attempting to repair his rattered sunflowers, straightening their remaining petals and their stalks. He was a few minutes early; he'd give her some time to compose herself. He decided to walk back down the hill to a phone booth in order to try yet again to make a threatening call to Velma Van Steen. Darla, the manager of the Leonard Wilkins School, had scolded Joe for not being more vigilant about the character stripping. "It's all spelled out in the handbook," Darla said, pointing to page 18, tapping her long curly red fingernail on "Character Stripping"

along with a box of dead black roses.

Joe found the house and walked up the steps. Before ringing the bell, he looked in through the leaded glass of the front door and saw Henley weeping on the stairs. She was still in her Kim Novak costume, her platinum wig off her head and resting atop her knee. She cried and twisted her fingers through the swirls of the wig's bun.

three times a week, arriving at the Leonard Wilkins School on the second floor above the Japanese Restaurant Supply, wearing chiffon of sea-mist green, or silk of angel-food pink, even pleather, once, of violet magnolia, her hair freshly bent by a hundred-dollar hairdresser. When he first saw her, he'd thought her the worst he'd ever seen, but she'd walked right up to him, choosing him, handing him the coupon she'd received in the mail for a free sweep across the floor. She chose Joe over the two other dancers standing there at the punch bowl, one of them being the unbearably beautiful Rib Winsom, a professional model whose flat stomach and bulging crotch appeared on the boxes of a particular brand of athletic supporter. Joe was not as broad in the shoulders or as square in the jaw as the other dance instructors at Leonard Wilkins, but was rather much softer in appearance, with wet, icy blue eyes and perpetually pink cheeks. He was skinny and 6 feet 4 inches tall.

Darla had hired him because he bore a slight resemblance to Jimmy Stewart, which was also how he met Henley Hornbrook. During the day, Joe played Stewart to Henley's Novak in an unlicensed "Vertigo" tour of San Francisco. Joe drove the minivan of tourists to places featured in the movie, such as the Palace of Fine Arts and the art gallery of the Palace of the Legion of Honor, and he and Henley would perform brief scenes, peppering the actual movie dialogue with improvisations.

Joe had never much cared for Stewart in Vertigo, finding him too self-consciously affable, too certain of the affect of his flirtations on the hapless Barbara Bel Geddes.

But Velma Van Steen had not chosen Joe because of his resemblance to Stewart. "I hate the goddamn movies," Velma had said that first time he allowed her to bathe him, he in the

dance instructor? Yeah, you know him pretty well, don't you? But you don't think you should have to pay the money you owe, is that right? You think my boyfriend should just give a fuck about you, and should just forget about the fact that he's put up with your rotting carcass for the last several weeks? Forget that he's had to smell the stink of your ... you know... of your stench."

"Henley," Joe said. "Henley, please stop."

"Well, Velma, honey, if you don't pay the money you owe Joe, then I'm just going to have to come over there and cut your fucking tongue out of your head. I'm going to have to chop off your fucking tits, and...you know...jab a dagger up your skanky asshole. I'm going to have to...you know...rip out your fucking bowels and make you fucking eat them."

Only barely realizing he was doing it, Joe shoved Henley, knocking her against the wall. The phone's handset fell to her side. She dabbed at her bloody lip, then looked at her finger.

Joe tried to touch Henley's arm, but she slapped his hands away. She walked quickly down the hall and into her bedroom, slamming the door behind her.

"But you should have heard yourself, Henley," Joe said, though he knew he wasn't speaking loudly enough for her to hear him. "I didn't hit you," he said. "I just..."

Joe went to the living room for his jacket, then saw the Grace Kelly autograph in its frame. "To Morty," it read, the cursive round, plump, "All the best. Grace Kelly." Joe took the paper from the frame and stuck it into the inside pocket of his jacket.

On the bus, Joe worried that his sense of decency was irretrievable. He pressed his fingers against his jacket pocket,

hung up without a word ten, twenty times all that week. Velma.” He said nothing, though, and hung up, just as he’d sketched.” all Joe wanted to say was “I love you and I’m sorry, tub all those times. It made me sick to touch your fucked-up she said, “I was just being kind by not laughing at you in my you freaky weakling?” in a harsh voice wet with disgust, when she answered, when she said, after a silence, “Joe, is that you, call Velma, to perform the obligations of his work. But when the end of Henley’s block, he slipped into a phone booth to After tossing away the broken sunflowers in a trash can at by any means, but too noticeably awkward in his nakedness. his knobby elbows and other distortions. He was not grotesque heavy winter clothes growing up, even in the summer, to hide their bones, and he wondered if he shared it. He’d always worn a particular kind of disease that made a person long and bent always unexplained. He’d once heard that Abe Lincoln had had bone. His skeleton was somewhat all out of whack, for reasons spine, and a chest bone that protruded, and a crooked hip-He liked to walk around in front of her, or to be washed by her basking in her appreciation of his body. He’d always been naked for her as they sipped mixed drinks in her sunroom. Joe had never had sex with Velma, but had often stripped to do that.”

young and stupid I didn’t even know you could tell a boy not way through The Best Years of Our Lives. I was so goddam Waxy stuck his hand up my skirt and he fingered me all the with a geezy pug-ugly named Waxy. In the dark of the theater, ing him orange slices. “I’ve hated them ever since my first date tub, Velma sitting in a robe on the floor of the bathroom feed-

It wasn’t that Joe couldn’t stomach the character stripping, he’d done it before, and he’d done it to women sweet and gentle and desperate. When Mrs. Wendell Lyle, a stooped and elfin woman with dots of rouge at the points of her cheeks, who smelled always of sugar and fresh strawberries, had stopped payment on a check of \$8,000 for a special holiday dance party tossed by the Leonard Wilkins School, Joe had not hesitated to call her up and call her a stinking bag of smelly dead flesh with a cunt as ripe as a shithole. He’d had no problem at all telling Lily McTag, a grandmotherly cancer survivor who’d cancelled her dance club membership after payments of \$23,000, that she had an ancient snatch of cracked leather and that he didn’t know how she stomachached looking in the mirror at those sagging, knee-knocking tits. He’d sent these women bouquets of dead flowers, baskets of rotten fruit, tiny wicker birdcages containing decaying swallows.

On his way back up the steps to Henley’s door, Joe tore the flowering heads off a neighbor’s hydrangeas. They would be an appropriate flower for Henley, Joe thought, remembering how you could alter how a hydrangea would bloom simply by changing its soil. With one kind of soil, you got blue flowers, with another you got white. Joe’s gift of the hydrangeas would be symbolic, would say something about roots, and about disguise, about alteration.

Henley had put back on her blond wig when she answered the door, but she was still clearly upset. She invited him in and pointed out the tear in the hundred-year-old silk wallpaper (pre-earthquake, original to the house, blue with tiny pale-blue fleur de lis). “I did this just now,” she said. “The house survives a devastating earthquake, but I’m tearing it up left and right.”

Already feeling tipsy, Joe found himself concentrating on Henley’s every physical flaw. He noticed the bloody hangnails of her fingers and a tiny pink scratch on her neck. There was a scar hidden in the hairs of her eyebrow. Then he saw her dead in the street, the pedestrian of the week, her body crumpled and ruined, bent and broken, her skirt tossed up past her panties, her wig in a gutter, her eyes open in a dead man’s gaze, her lipstick smeared across her open mouth.

“The autograph,” Joe said, his stomach clenching from the sake. “There’s an autograph, you said.” He suddenly longed to be besotted and sleepy in the overstuffed sofa cushions of Velma Van Steen’s softly lit living room. He’d be wearing a smoking gown of linen, listening to the pop and skip of a highly collectible Art Tatum album, and Velma would bring him whiskey-laced tea with milk, and she’d pepper his forehead with cracked kisses from her dry lips.

“Oh,” Henley said, “the Grace Kelly. It’s right there in the frame on the end table. Is something wrong?”

Joe, swallowing back acid, loosened his tie from his throat. He leaned forward, his forehead dripping sweat. “It’s unforgivable,” he said. “I’m unforgivable.”

“Joe,” Henley said, standing and stepping around the coffee table to sit at his side. “Something’s wrong. What’s wrong?” She put both her hands on his leg and squeezed.

Joe told Henley everything then about the Leonard Wilkins School and the character stripping. He told her about all the old ladies he’d romanced and punished, the things he told them to disturb them the most, the thousands of dollars he’d made for the school. He told Henley some of the horrible things he’d said to kindly old women, some of the women having been

“This is Velma?” Henley said. “Velma? My name is Henley, and I believe you know my boyfriend, Joe? Your so-called him.”

No woman had ever before fought any of his battles for asked. He began punching in Velma Van Steen’s phone number, looking at him, looking so certain that he’d do anything she “Oh, no, no, Henley, that wouldn’t be...” he said, but she get your commission. I want to call her.”

“The woman. The one who has to pay her \$6,500 for you to “Whose?”

woman’s number,” she said. “Dial the phone in the hall. She picked up the receiver. “Dial the might be bringing him to her bedroom, but she stopped at “Come on,” Henley said, taking Joe’s hand. He thought she his entire body.

anxiety burned away with the blush of heat he felt throughout Henley lay atop him, and they kissed for several minutes. Joe’s leaned her whole body into him. Joe lay back on the sofa and She kissed his neck and his chin, then she kissed his lips and Henley moved her hand up Joe’s leg, stopping just at his crotch. You did nothing wrong; you made them happy for awhile.” of what they wanted. They wanted the attention of young men. women went to your school, paid for those lessons, fully aware ear, then to his cheek. “You’re certainly not unforgivable. Those “Oh, Joe,” Henley said, pressing a warm, slow kiss to his easily, but didn’t make him feel at all better.

citely for his commission. The confession came quickly and how Darla expected him to humiliate her completely and mer- and the \$6,500 she owed the Leonard Wilkins School, and only recently widowed. He told her about Velma Van Steen

back and forth for hearty swigs. The patio was thick with bees out onto the back patio, where they sat and passed the bottle for a half-a-bottle of wine, its cork struck back in. She led Joe to show him.

“I need some air,” Henley said, stopping at the refrigerator to show him. Uncle had an autograph from Grace Kelly that Henley wanted to show him. Henley said, tossing back the sake, then pouring more for herself. Because of the number of people getting struck by cars, the Chronicle had taken to running a section called “Pedestrian of the Week,” spotlighting a recent victim. “I dream that I open up the paper and see myself there, my picture there, as the Pedestrian of the Week,” Joe said, stopping at the refrigerator to show him. “I keep having a dream about the Pedestrian of the Week,” Henley said, tossing back the sake, then pouring more for herself. Because of the number of people getting struck by cars, the Chronicle had taken to running a section called “Pedestrian of the Week,” spotlighting a recent victim. “I dream that I open up the paper and see myself there, my picture there, as the Pedestrian of the Week,” Joe said, stopping at the refrigerator to show him.

As Joe carried the cart up the stairs, following Henley, Henley began unzipping the back of her skirt. At the top of the stairs, she stepped out of the skirt, then took off her blouse and walked only in her slip and bra to the kitchen. Joe had run his hands over those slim hips before, had kissed her and felt her breasts rubbing against his chest, had pressed his erection into her groin during an embrace, but it had all been part of the show. They’d kissed as Stewart and Novak, spicing things up for the tourists. Henley had never been modest, not even the first time they kissed, when she ran her tongue over his lips, but at the end of every tour she had always seemed to vanish into indifference. Finally, after kissing her for seven weeks, Joe had gained the courage to ask her over to the Top of the Mark where she drank a lot and giggled and flirted and ended up telling him to stop by her uncle’s house later in the week. Her uncle had an autograph from Grace Kelly that Henley wanted to show him.

Joe picked up the handcart that sat broken at the bottom of the stairs, it presumably having fallen and torn the wallpaper. Inside the cart was a sewing machine and a pair of black platters. Joe picked up the handcart that sat broken at the bottom of the stairs, it presumably having fallen and torn the wallpaper. Inside the cart was a sewing machine and a pair of black platters. Joe picked up the handcart that sat broken at the bottom of the stairs, it presumably having fallen and torn the wallpaper. Inside the cart was a sewing machine and a pair of black platters.

Joe picked up the handcart that sat broken at the bottom of the stairs, it presumably having fallen and torn the wallpaper. Inside the cart was a sewing machine and a pair of black platters. Joe picked up the handcart that sat broken at the bottom of the stairs, it presumably having fallen and torn the wallpaper. Inside the cart was a sewing machine and a pair of black platters.

Joe picked up the handcart that sat broken at the bottom of the stairs, it presumably having fallen and torn the wallpaper. Inside the cart was a sewing machine and a pair of black platters. Joe picked up the handcart that sat broken at the bottom of the stairs, it presumably having fallen and torn the wallpaper. Inside the cart was a sewing machine and a pair of black platters.

Joe picked up the handcart that sat broken at the bottom of the stairs, it presumably having fallen and torn the wallpaper. Inside the cart was a sewing machine and a pair of black platters. Joe picked up the handcart that sat broken at the bottom of the stairs, it presumably having fallen and torn the wallpaper. Inside the cart was a sewing machine and a pair of black platters.

Joe picked up the handcart that sat broken at the bottom of the stairs, it presumably having fallen and torn the wallpaper. Inside the cart was a sewing machine and a pair of black platters. Joe picked up the handcart that sat broken at the bottom of the stairs, it presumably having fallen and torn the wallpaper. Inside the cart was a sewing machine and a pair of black platters.

Joe picked up the handcart that sat broken at the bottom of the stairs, it presumably having fallen and torn the wallpaper. Inside the cart was a sewing machine and a pair of black platters. Joe picked up the handcart that sat broken at the bottom of the stairs, it presumably having fallen and torn the wallpaper. Inside the cart was a sewing machine and a pair of black platters.

Joe picked up the handcart that sat broken at the bottom of the stairs, it presumably having fallen and torn the wallpaper. Inside the cart was a sewing machine and a pair of black platters. Joe picked up the handcart that sat broken at the bottom of the stairs, it presumably having fallen and torn the wallpaper. Inside the cart was a sewing machine and a pair of black platters.

Joe picked up the handcart that sat broken at the bottom of the stairs, it presumably having fallen and torn the wallpaper. Inside the cart was a sewing machine and a pair of black platters. Joe picked up the handcart that sat broken at the bottom of the stairs, it presumably having fallen and torn the wallpaper. Inside the cart was a sewing machine and a pair of black platters.

Joe picked up the handcart that sat broken at the bottom of the stairs, it presumably having fallen and torn the wallpaper. Inside the cart was a sewing machine and a pair of black platters. Joe picked up the handcart that sat broken at the bottom of the stairs, it presumably having fallen and torn the wallpaper. Inside the cart was a sewing machine and a pair of black platters.

Joe picked up the handcart that sat broken at the bottom of the stairs, it presumably having fallen and torn the wallpaper. Inside the cart was a sewing machine and a pair of black platters. Joe picked up the handcart that sat broken at the bottom of the stairs, it presumably having fallen and torn the wallpaper. Inside the cart was a sewing machine and a pair of black platters.

Joe picked up the handcart that sat broken at the bottom of the stairs, it presumably having fallen and torn the wallpaper. Inside the cart was a sewing machine and a pair of black platters. Joe picked up the handcart that sat broken at the bottom of the stairs, it presumably having fallen and torn the wallpaper. Inside the cart was a sewing machine and a pair of black platters.

Joe picked up the handcart that sat broken at the bottom of the stairs, it presumably having fallen and torn the wallpaper. Inside the cart was a sewing machine and a pair of black platters. Joe picked up the handcart that sat broken at the bottom of the stairs, it presumably having fallen and torn the wallpaper. Inside the cart was a sewing machine and a pair of black platters.

Joe picked up the handcart that sat broken at the bottom of the stairs, it presumably having fallen and torn the wallpaper. Inside the cart was a sewing machine and a pair of black platters. Joe picked up the handcart that sat broken at the bottom of the stairs, it presumably having fallen and torn the wallpaper. Inside the cart was a sewing machine and a pair of black platters.

Joe picked up the handcart that sat broken at the bottom of the stairs, it presumably having fallen and torn the wallpaper. Inside the cart was a sewing machine and a pair of black platters. Joe picked up the handcart that sat broken at the bottom of the stairs, it presumably having fallen and torn the wallpaper. Inside the cart was a sewing machine and a pair of black platters.

Joe picked up the handcart that sat broken at the bottom of the stairs, it presumably having fallen and torn the wallpaper. Inside the cart was a sewing machine and a pair of black platters. Joe picked up the handcart that sat broken at the bottom of the stairs, it presumably having fallen and torn the wallpaper. Inside the cart was a sewing machine and a pair of black platters.

Joe picked up the handcart that sat broken at the bottom of the stairs, it presumably having fallen and torn the wallpaper. Inside the cart was a sewing machine and a pair of black platters. Joe picked up the handcart that sat broken at the bottom of the stairs, it presumably having fallen and torn the wallpaper. Inside the cart was a sewing machine and a pair of black platters.

Joe picked up the handcart that sat broken at the bottom of the stairs, it presumably having fallen and torn the wallpaper. Inside the cart was a sewing machine and a pair of black platters. Joe picked up the handcart that sat broken at the bottom of the stairs, it presumably having fallen and torn the wallpaper. Inside the cart was a sewing machine and a pair of black platters.

Joe picked up the handcart that sat broken at the bottom of the stairs, it presumably having fallen and torn the wallpaper. Inside the cart was a sewing machine and a pair of black platters. Joe picked up the handcart that sat broken at the bottom of the stairs, it presumably having fallen and torn the wallpaper. Inside the cart was a sewing machine and a pair of black platters.

Joe picked up the handcart that sat broken at the bottom of the stairs, it presumably having fallen and torn the wallpaper. Inside the cart was a sewing machine and a pair of black platters. Joe picked up the handcart that sat broken at the bottom of the stairs, it presumably having fallen and torn the wallpaper. Inside the cart was a sewing machine and a pair of black platters.

Joe picked up the handcart that sat broken at the bottom of the stairs, it presumably having fallen and torn the wallpaper. Inside the cart was a sewing machine and a pair of black platters. Joe picked up the handcart that sat broken at the bottom of the stairs, it presumably having fallen and torn the wallpaper. Inside the cart was a sewing machine and a pair of black platters.