

Jeanie Straub

Guava A

She pushed very dark sunglasses over her thin, freckled nose and pulled her knee-highs up on her bony legs.

That morning, Bullie was leaving home to look for Guava A.

She'd heard the weekend broadcast that Tuesday was for pinks, so when her Personal Identification card changed from silvery purple to a cream rose, she left her mother's apartment in a short black dress. If a girl wore a short black dress when it was her day on the pavement, vendors would know she was open to negotiation.

"You're not leaving in that short black dress," her mother said to her before she left.

"Mom, the pavement is boiling," Bullie said.

"Then wear a long white dress."

"Long white dresses are for virgins."

"You are a virgin."

"Mom, I'm better than a virgin."

Bullie dragged her feet over to her mother to give her a kiss on the cheek. Her mother turned her face.

"You'd better make it home before your color changes," her mother said with her back to Bullie.

After pulling her hair into a sloppy blond pony tail, Bullie walked to the door, pressed the appropriate sequence and left.

"I'm not kidding," her mother said to the empty concrete cell.

The difficult masses of people seemed to have doubled since the last time Bullie was on the pavement, and it took a long time to get from her mother's apartment in the Inner Urban Quarter to the section of the city near the Mother Ship's docking base,

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where all the Guava A vendors owned lounges. First she had to fight the crowds to get on a train, then she had to hail a Zone Stretch.

Although the Government Broadcast reported that Population Control Measures were to take effect, it seemed to Bullie that she spent more and more time cooped up in her mother's building, waiting to have her color called and get her day on the pavement. And each time on the pavement, there was the Terrible Crowding.

She didn't have time to spare, and she knew from experience how to get a Zone Stretch driver to take her to the Dock District without a hassle.

"Where to?" a clean-cut Zone Stretch driver said to her as she climbed into the cab

Bullie leaned into the front seat and showed him a card she'd gotten off a scout in Parcel D.

"I'm going to meet my father for lunch," she said. "He works in Parcel D."

"Your mother know about this?" the driver asked, turning around in his seat to face her.

"Call her," Bullie said.

"Do you have a Meaningful Occupation?" he asked, turning back around to type in his travel log.

Bullie took off her sunglasses, leaned over into the front seat and shot him a look in the mirror.

"Buddy," she said. "I've got the most Meaningful Occupation of all."

Their eyes met in the mirror.

"The only reason I mention it," he said, "is because I listen to the news, which is something you should be doing."

Bullie sat back in her seat and said nothing, and he drove until she saw one of the scouts for a vendor she knew. The crowds had thinned out, and there was some Elbow Room. It looked like a Good Situation.

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“Hey, let me out here,” she said to the driver.

“Here?”

“Yes,” she said.

“Your mother know about this?”

“I told you.”

“OK,” he said. “You gonna pay?”

She rolled her eyes up in her head, feigning a small seizure.

“Hey, that’s not funny,” he said

Bullie handed over her pink card, and he ran it through his slot.

“Be careful,” he said.

She pulled herself up out of the back seat, straightened out her dress and pulled up her knee-highs. The driver nodded at her through the glass. *Be careful*, he mouthed.

After sliding her card into the bottom of her black flats, Bullie walked back up the block to find the scout. He was sitting on a steel trash can, listening to the morning news from a corner outlet.

“Shh,” he said, finger to his lips.

The broadcast addressed the usual delay of the Mother Ship because of crowding. Then it droned on about Conditions, Employment and the Government Agenda.

“Security Forces will implement the Population Weeding measures effective immediately,” the voice of the broadcast woman said. “Those without Meaningful Occupations will be weeded”

“I’m looking to feel better,” Bullie said to the scout.

“Shh,” he said.

Bullie looked up the block and thought about ditching the scout.

“You gonna help me or what?” she said.

The scout looked up at her face. He stood and put his hands on her shoulders.

“Go home,” he said

“Can you find out if Eel is holding some for me?”

He looked her up and down carefully.

“You got any room left on your card?”

“Would I mess with you?” she asked.

“Wait here,” the scout said.

Bullie sat on the trash can and bit her nails, which were already short and bloody. She pulled her card out of her shoe and ran it through the corner outlet. The news woman’s voice started up again, and Bullie swung her feet out to the sides of the trash can and listened. Most of it she didn’t understand. She had quit Formal Wire Education after her father returned to the Service, and her mother was powerless to make her continue. If you didn’t partake in Formal Wire Education, the government required that you find a Meaningful Occupation. For Bullie, that amounted to factories, mining brothels, or government experiments. Guava A won by default.

Bullie turned up the sound on the corner outlet. The woman’s voice drudged on, and Bullie picked up small bits. Too Much Growth. Wild Marauding Children Roaming the Streets. A Whole Generation Lost to Guava A. The outlet was low on time when the scout returned.

“OK come,” the scout said.

“Cool.”

“You shouldn’t be saying ‘Cool,’ you should be turning around and going home,” the scout said.

“Do I look like a child?”

“Come on,” he said. “You can’t be a day over 14.”

“I’m gonna be 15 tomorrow,” Bullie said.

She followed the scout into an alley and down concrete stairs into what was known as a Guava Lounge. This lounge had peach-colored theater seats—all the lounges had a signature color. She pulled up her knee-highs, straightened her dress and sat down in one of the seats.

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The man she knew only as Eel came out. Older, balder and fleshier than she remembered, her stomach rolled over like tide when she saw him.

“You got room on your card?” Eel asked her.

“Plenty,” she said.

“What else you got?”

“I’ve got plenty of room on my card.”

“Guava A is scarce,” he said “The Mother Ship’s been delayed again. You gotta match the market price.”

The scout came in the lounge from a back room and sat down across from Bullie.

“With what?”

“How about some of that?” Eel asked, pointing to her body.

“I’m only 14,” she said. “I’m a virgin.”

“Come back when you’ve gotten rid of that,” he said, poised to stand.

“Wait,” she said. “I could show you.”

Eel shrugged his shoulders, rubbed his chin, and took a step toward her.

“You really 14?” he asked. “You look 12.”

“I’m going to be 15 tomorrow,” she said.

“OK,” he said. “Come on back.”

To a back room she followed him. The walls were concrete but painted a maroon color. In the middle of the room was a squalid bed. Eel told her to take off her dress and lie on the bed.

“You’re just going to look?” she asked.

“Shut up and do it,” he said, giving her a shove toward the bed.

She pulled the little black dress over her head and lay down on the bed in her underwear.

“Nice underwear,” he said. “Take it off.”

“You said just the dress.”

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“Look, you won’t get this stuff without some effort. I suggest you do it.”

Sitting on the edge of the bed, Bullie pulled her underwear down over her skinny legs and undid her bra. She lay back on the bed.

“You’re very skinny,” Eel said, standing over her. “You’re an addict.”

“No.”

“That’s what they all say,” he said. “Is your hair really that color?”

She reached up to touch her blond hair.

“No,” she said. “Not this blond. A little darker.”

At the foot of the bed he stood and looked at her, instructing her how to move and position herself.

“OK,” he said. “Put your clothes on.”

After he’d turned and left the room, Bullie sat up and put on her things. The scout came in as she was pulling the dress over her head.

“Here,” he said, handing her a small vile of peach-colored powder. “He said you can do it here.”

“I have a blood pack,” she said

From her dress pocket she pulled the small aluminum packet. The scout shrugged and handed her the vile, then sat on the bed while she struggled with the blood packet. After piercing it, she popped open the vile and stuck it into the pack. She broke out the pin and looked up at him with doe eyes.

“Will you do it for me?”

“OK,” he said. “You sure you’ve done A before?”

“Of course,” she said.

“Where do you want it?”

“In my thigh,” she said.

She lifted her little black dress and exposed her thigh to him, and then rubbed the skin with some vigor. He pulled up on some skin and stuck her with the pin.

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“How are you feeling?” he asked after a few minutes. She hadn’t said anything.

“I feel a little sick,” she said.

“Do you want some water?”

“Cold?”

“Sure.”

“OK.”

When he came back she was having a small seizure.

“Here,” he said. “Sit up.”

He put his hands under her arms and propped her up against pillows he positioned behind her back, then held the glass to her mouth. “I have to go out for a while before my color runs out. I’ll check you in a while.”

“Wait,” she said. “Wait for a little while.”

He paused and nodded slowly, imperceptibly, rocking slightly on his soles.

“What do you see?” he asked

“I’m being weeded, aren’t I?”

The scout stood up.

“You can tell me,” she said. “Please, my mother is waiting for me.”

“I’m sorry, but I did tell you to go home.” he said.

“You work for the government?”

He nodded with eyes focused at a spot on the floor.

“I’m being weeded?”

He continued nodding.

She stared up at the ceiling and let a small tear run from her eye.

“Some girls like to go up on the roof,” he said. “No one’s up there. And we’ll take your card and notify your mother.”

Eel walked in the room to ask what the fuss was about and why the scout wasn’t out scouting for business.

"I'm staying," the scout said.

Eel walked over to the opposite side of the bed and sat down. He reached out to Bullie's head and stroked her blond hair.

"You OK?"

She moved her head slowly in a weak nod.

"Do you understand why?"

"Yes," she said.

"You'll go somewhere with lots of Elbow Room," Eel said. "Did you try to find a Meaningful Occupation?"

"No," Bullie said. "I didn't want a Meaningful Occupation."

Into the evening Bullie lay on the bed immobilized and stared up at the ceiling. A heavy rain fell outside, sputtering itself against the basement windows, and the scout stretched out beside her on the bed, throwing an arm across her.

"Do you need anything?"

"No," she said. "I'm ready to go up to the roof."

"OK," he said.

He picked her up in his arms.

The scout wasn't a strong man himself, so it took some effort to maneuver her into the elevator and up the top stairs to the roof. Outside, the night was cool and wet. A couple of dripping lounge chairs were set up in the middle of the roof. The only other thing on the roof was a concrete storage space.

"This OK?" he asked.

"Excellent," she said.

He placed her in one of the chairs, pulled the other next to hers, sat down and held her hand.

"Are you really a virgin?" he asked.

"I've never even had a kiss."

"Never had a kiss? You want one?"

She nodded

The scout leaned forward and kissed her on the mouth.

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“Do you see angels?”

She didn't answer.

With her hand sandwiched in his, the scout looked up at the sky. A few minutes passed, and her hand grew cold.

The scout sat holding her cold hand until Eel appeared on the roof. In silence, the scout picked Bullie up in his arms and carried her over to the cement storage unit. On top of other bodies he gently placed her, crossing her arms in front of her. He kissed her forehead, then reached down and pulled her card from her shoe.

Eel said a small prayer, and the two men bowed their heads briefly before going inside.