



An excerpt from *The Maintenance-Free Head*.
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FADE IN

INTERIOR - DORIA'S BEAUTY EMPORIUM - NIGHT

Doria has just closed the salon. She's tidying the counters and Zelda is sweeping up. Zelda's a teenager who works after school. It's dark outside the windows, but a flash of lightning illuminates driving rain. Thunder crashes, fades, and there's a knock at the door.

DORIA: See who that is.

Zelda goes to the door and opens it.

Juan and Maria, a young Guatemalan couple in native garb, are standing on the stoop. They're rain-soaked.

JUAN: Por favor! *Ayudamos!*

ZELDA (to Doria): Hey! There're some people out here. I think they just asked for help.

Doria walks to the door. She points to Maria.

DORIA: She's pregnant. *Real* pregnant. I guess we better get them inside.

Doria motions for the couple to enter. They do. Zelda closes the door and sets her broom aside.

Juan takes off his dripping straw hat and bows formally. He says something in Spanish.

DORIA (to Zelda): You take that lingo in school, don't you? What's he saying?

ZELDA (to Juan): Qué pasto?

Juan speaks to her.

ZELDA (trying to interpret): He's saying . . . A lot of "thank yous" and . . . I think his wife just went into labor. He said her water might have broke but it was hard to tell in the rain and . . . One of them pissed himself.

Maria clutches her stomach and screams.

DORIA: She's in labor all right. We need to put her somewhere. (looks around, points to a barber's chair) There.

Zelda and Juan help Maria to the chair and boost her into it. Doria tilts the chair back, pushes Maria's legs apart and looks under her skirt. Juan says something.

ZELDA: I think he wants to know if you ever delivered a baby before.

DORIA: A litter of marmots once, but I didn't lose any. You wait here while I get some things.

Doria exits through a back door. As soon as she's gone Maria screams. Zelda lifts her skirt and looks.

ZELDA: Oh, boy. Here it comes. (keeping calm, to Maria) Don't worry. I've seen this in the movies. All you need to do is push. *Push!* (over her shoulder, to Juan) Tell her to push, uh . . . *empuja*. Yeah, that's the word. *Empuja!* (looks back to Maria) *Push! Push!*

JUAN: *Empuja! Empuja!*

Maria screams again and pushes. Zelda shouts "*Push!*" and Juan shouts "*Empuja!*"

The camera zooms in on Maria's face. Veins stand out on her temples and she grits her teeth as she pushes. She pushes, sucks air, then she strains forward in the chair and makes a *huge* effort.

ZELDA (offscreen): Here it comes!

There's a loud disgorging sound, wet and sloppy. Maria falls back in the chair. She breathes a sigh of relief.

We didn't see the actual delivery and don't see the baby as Zelda looks down at her hands.

ZELDA (amazed): Well how about that. If that's not a miracle then . . . But isn't it supposed to be breathing?

Cut to Juan. He has a look of shock on his face. The camera holds on the look and we hear a smacking sound.

ZELDA (offscreen): I'm supposed to spank it, right? To get it to breathe?

Juan's look of shock turns to one of horror. He backs away, slowly. More smacking sounds, but no sound of a wailing baby.

ZELDA (offscreen): Come on, now, breathe!

Doria reappears at the back door. She has a water bottle in one hand and a length of rubber hose in the other. She pauses in the doorway and smiles.

DORIA: Good work, Zelda. Now we can do the delivery, since she won't need an enema.

FADE OUT

Stu watched as Meyer pushed his hat back on

his head. In addition to the tan fedora, he was wearing a floral beach shirt, khaki slacks and white patent shoes. Stu thought he looked like a tourist, which he was, kind of, in Indio's Cantina. He never came into the place and he seemed uneasy.

"An enema," Meyer said.

Stu nodded and leaned back in his chair. He and Meyer were seated across from each other at a small table with four beer bottles and a cup of coffee on it. The bottles were Stu's.

"Am I hearing you right?" Meyer asked. "You made me schlep all the way down here for an *enema* story?"

"Yeah. What do you think?"

"It's *crap* is what I think. But it's also an allegory. That big turd the girl is slapping is a symbol for the story itself. A big, stillborn turd."

"Really? Colonel Chu won't think so."

That got a reaction, as Stu knew it would. Meyer fingered his coffee cup but didn't drink. The cup was still full. "What does Chu have to do with this?"

"Well, I understand Spanish," Stu lied, "and I overheard one of the teams here talking about the story. They said that Chu . . . That's why I wanted to meet you here, by the way, so you'd understand how I came across the idea."

Meyer looked around. Stu did too and he liked what he saw—the cantina dim between the big window in front and the lit game area in back. The place was full of Hispanics. They drank at the bar, talked at the tables and were tucked away in the booths. A soft Mexican song from the jukebox mingled with the low murmur of voices.

"So you understand Spanish," Meyer shrugged, looking back to Stu. "Big deal. What were you saying about Chu?"

"Well, the last time I was in here I heard one of the Spanish-language teams say they were going to pitch the turd story to Chu next week."

“Next week? Why are they waiting?”

“I don’t know, but they shouldn’t. They should hit him with it now.”

“Hit him with what? I mean, there’s nothing to what you just told me. It’s a scene, that’s all.”

“No, it’s an *opening*. A good one. And you know how Chu gets when he hears an opening he likes. He starts tacking on his own ideas, and then it’s a month or two easy work for the writing team. For *your* writing team.”

Meyer seemed unsure. “I don’t know. We could use something right now, but . . . I don’t know.”

“Chu *loves* toilet humor. You can’t deny that.”

Meyer looked around the cantina again, then back to Stu. “So, you’re *sure* you really heard this idea?” Stu nodded. “And the team you heard it from hasn’t pitched it to Chu yet?” Stu shook his head. “So why doesn’t your house use it?”

“Because I haven’t told them about it. You and I agreed that if I give you a couple of good ideas, you’ll put in a request for me the next time you have an opening at your house. After all, you *do* have the best team working in comedy today.”

Meyer smiled and tried to look modest. He was so easy to flatter.

“We’re the best because of my experience in show business, Stu. Back when you were . . . I forget, how old are you?”

“Thirty-five.”

“Thirty-five. Bah. That’s nothing. Thirty-five years ago I had them rolling on the floor in the Catskills. I remember one time I made a woman in a dinner theater laugh so hard she . . .”

“Yeah yeah,” Stu interrupted. He looked to his left and right. “I don’t want anyone from our houses to see us together, Meyer, so let’s wrap this up. And that idea . . . don’t tell anyone where you got it.”

“I won’t. My memory’s so bad that sometimes . . .” Meyer trailed off and wrinkled his

brow. "What was I saying?" Pause, and then like the other shoe dropping he said, "Badda-boom!" Stu wondered how many times he'd heard Meyer make the drum sound. He did it to punctuate what he perceived to be punch lines, like he was onstage in a cheesy nightclub and a drummer was adding some zing to the act. Stu forced a chuckle.

"Excuse me, guys."

Stu looked up and saw Miranda standing at the table. Tall, beautiful Miranda, with her long black hair, high cheekbones and deep brown eyes.

"I'm going off duty. Could you, like, settle up now?"

Stu smiled and indicated the beer bottles and the cup of coffee. "Just put this on my tab, and add fifteen, uh, twenty-five percent for your tip."

"Twenty-five percent? *Thanks.*" Stu liked the way Miranda's full lips widened into a smile. She turned and he watched her walk away. Her body was a long, dark hourglass wrapped in pink bands of tube top and shorts. She threaded her way between the tables and disappeared behind the bar.

"That," Stu said, turning back to Meyer, "is my idea of the perfect woman."

Meyer shook his head. "I don't know why you do that."

"What? The twenty-five percent? She's new here. I want her to stay. How old do you think she is? Twenty-one? Two?"

"You're meshugeh. A crazy hillbilly."

"I'm crazy in love."

"Oy. That sentence ran two words too long." Meyer scooted his chair back and got to his feet. He hitched up his khakis. "Well, thanks for bupkis, Stu."

"Bupkis? What's that?"

"It's Yiddish. Means 'nothing.'"

"Nothing? You didn't like the idea?"

"What idea?" Meyer winked. He turned, tossed a departing "Badda-boom" over his shoulder

and walked away.

Stu smiled to himself and took a drink from his beer. He had a good feeling about his little meeting with Meyer. He watched him hustle out the front door like he was making a jailbreak.

Someone shouted something at the back of the cantina and she laughed. Stu recognized the voice. He looked and saw Dominguez sitting with four other men at the poker table. Dominguez was squat and burly, with a thick black mustache. He and the other card players were betting the usual odds and ends. In the past they would have played for money, but now, since all spending was tracked as debits and credits on I.D. cards, they did their wagering with other things. Stu sat in on a game once and lost a pair of fingernail clippers, but he won a small plant in a flowerpot. The man he won it from said it was an extremely rare Patagonian mouthbreeder. At least that's what came through when someone translated from Spanish to English for Stu. But after Stu won the plant he looked closely at it and thought he might have got ripped off. He said, "I don't care if it *is* a mouthbreeder, I don't see a mouth." Translations going and coming, and the former owner said, "Why do you think it's so rare?"

"Hi again."

Miranda laid her little pink backpack on the table next to Stu's and pulled out a chair. She sat down and dropped her inline skates to the floor.

"I have to change for the trip home."

She slipped off her sandals, put them in the pack and took out a pair of pink socks. Stu watched as she leaned forward. Her hair hung down and brushed her knees. She pulled a sock on and then a skate boot and began lacing it up.

For a moment all Stu could see was her leg. It was long and slender, with smooth, dark skin stretched over slightly bulging muscles.

"There," she said, finishing with the boot.

She took a break before doing the other, and as she leaned back in her chair Stu gave her tube top a quick ogle. It hugged a nice-sized pair of breasts, perfectly shaped, but her legs were the thing. They were long and perfect and led up to hips that were perfect, then on up to the rest of it, all perfect. But the legs were the thing.

She went to work putting on the other skate. She slipped the sock on and then the boot.

Stu felt a buildup of pressure, like steam, and he let out a slow sigh. “Sssso . . . How long have you been skating?”

“Oh, a couple of years. I do it to keep in shape.”

“Well, it’s working. You’ve got *great* legs.” Miranda gave him a wary look. He stammered. “I, uh, I mean they look . . . athletic.”

“Oh, yeah, I guess they do.” She finished lacing the boot and curled her leg back and to the side. Her butt rounded out and strained against the fabric of her shorts. “Do you skate?” she asked, flexing.

Stu could feel his nostrils flare and his tongue thicken in the back of his throat.

“Duh, no, I . . . Usually when I leave here I can barely keep my feet under me, because of the beer. No way I could deal with wheels.”

“So then why do you drink? I mean, if it makes it hard to walk, why do you do it?”

“Maybe because I don’t have the love of a good woman.”

Miranda giggled. She zipped up her backpack, relaxed in her chair and looked at Stu.

“Go ahead and make your pass.”

“I’m not making a pass. But I’m not *taking* a pass either. Unless you’re married. Are you?”

“Isn’t that, like, pretty personal?”

“Could be. I’m a person.”

Miranda giggled again.

“Ah. That’s the second time I made you laugh. You must think I’m funny.”

“Well, I don’t know. I guess you’re a writer,

because that's all that comes into this place, so yeah, you can probably be pretty funny."

"How come you work here?" Stu asked. "I mean, do you speak Spanish? I've never heard you if you do."

"My grandparents spoke it but I never learned. And I work here because I just came in and asked if they'd give me a job."

"But don't you get the customers' orders wrong? Hardly anyone speaks English here."

"Yeah, I get them wrong, but no one seems to mind."

Miranda took a pink plastic clip from her pack and reached up to gather her hair into a ponytail. When she lifted her arms it looked like her breasts might pop out of her tube top. Stu held his breath. He watched while she twisted the ponytail into a rope and clipped it into a bun at the back of her head. The breasts didn't pop. She lowered her arms and fussed with a loose strand of hair hanging down by an ear.

Stu exhaled. More steam. "No, I don't guess they would mind about the orders. But we were talking about laughter. Is a sense of humor important to you? In a man, I mean. Like in a, you know, a lover."

Miranda pursed her lips reproachfully. "Now that's *too* personal." She stood up and tested her skates. "But I'd say creativity's important in a lover, and humor is a kind of creativity. I don't know. I have to go now."

"To meet . . . him? Whoever him is?"

"No," she smiled as she slung her backpack over a shoulder. "Quit being so nosy." She waved goodbye and pushed off toward the front door. She skated through it, turned and disappeared down the long window.

Stu finished his beer and was about to leave when Dominguez dropped into the chair across the table from him. He had a beer in one hand and a

bowl of pudding in the other. "Amigo!" he boomed. "You always come to see me on my day! My name is Sunday, you know, in Inglés."

"I know, Dominguez. Good to see you. What's with the pudding?"

"What's . . . what's *with* it? Oh, I show you. Look here." He slid the bowl across the table.

Stu looked at the pudding. It was chocolate, with a dollop of whipped cream on top and chocolate sprinkles on the cream.

"Yeah, I see. What about it?"

"Is, how you say . . . 'the proof is in the pudding.'"

"Yes, that's a saying. An aphorism, I think they call it. But it's not literal."

"Qué?"

"Never mind. Yeah, you got it right. The proof is in the pudding. So what are you writing? Your team, they are writing, sí?"

"Oh, sí, sí. We write *great* stories for the television."

"What are you working on now?"

Dominguez leaned forward and lowered his voice. "I should not say, but we finish tomorrow, so is not a fear. We work on story about a blind man does the reading with . . ." He groped the air in front of him, feeling with his fingertips. "He reads the pimples on the teenagers' faces, like a . . . a adivina. A diviner."

"A fortuneteller. Hmm. That sounds interesting."

"Sí, sí, is very interesting. He reads the pimples and tells the teenagers, 'You no worry about your test in biología,' and, 'Sí, Jaime *will* take you to the dance.'"

"So what happens? In the story?"

"Well, is a tragedia, so he reads the pimples on the face of a girl, and the message there gets him into much trouble."

"What message?"

"The one that say to take off his pantalones."

Stu smiled. "I like that. It's a good one."

"Sí, is great story, like I say."

Stu chuckled and reached a finger toward the bowl of pudding. He swiped up some whipped cream and a couple of sprinkles. Dominguez shook his head.

"No, amigo. I tell you, the proof is in the pudding."

Stu sucked the end of the finger.

"Yeah, I know. That's a saying."

"Sí, sí, is what I'm saying. The rats proof on *ever'thing* here."