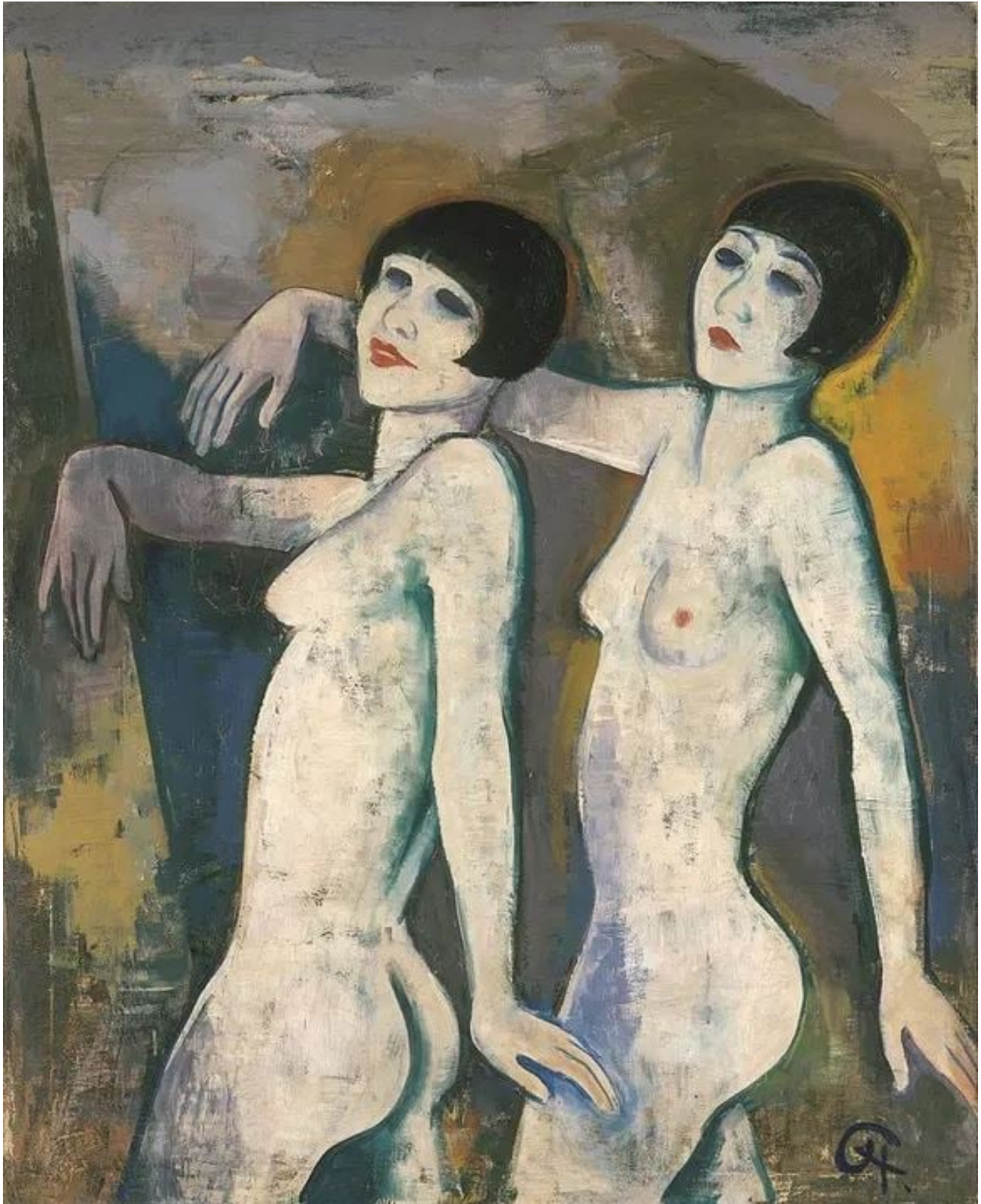


Watchman, Tell Us of the Night

by [Alexander Blackwater](#) (November 2022)



Tiller Girls, Karl Hofer, 1927

In Room 148, a lighted makeup mirror of beige plastic sat on a high-grade wooden desk. The green and white doily underneath also supported a well-thumbed best-selling paperback. Nearby were assorted lipsticks, writing implements, MAKEUP TIPS FOR FALL torn from a magazine, a miniscule teddy bear with a neutral expression and little yearning arms, and a stack of textbooks: *Humanity in Context (Sixth Edition)*, *The Social Construction of Gender*, *Structural Anthropology* (was it really written by the same guy who invented jeans?), *Essays in Critical Social Thinking*; a spiral notebook that would soon be describable as tattered, on the cover of which the name ABRAHAM MASLOW had been carefully inscribed in block imitation bas-relief characters; a ceramic dish in the shape of a fish filled with safety pins. On an adjoining wall were the room's two windows, whose southwest orientation meant afternoon sun throughout football season and into the time for Persephone's Ball, the annual midwinter festival the name of which no longer meant anything to anyone in the student body.

Now, at 5:30 on a Saturday afternoon in October, the orange light angled steeply in, flashing through the few remaining leaves. The unforgiving cinder block walls, the seams of which here and there had lost little round bits, had been softened with posters of willowy female pop singers, more articles from women's magazines (HOW TO TELL IN 5 MINUTES WHETHER HE'LL STICK AROUND; JUST HOW SENSUOUS ARE YOU?), and endless snapshots from the interiors of bars and the decks of beach houses; faces, faces, dozens of smiling young Caucasian faces.

Tiffany Dardeneau was in the midst of her preparations for the evening's activities. The neutral foundation, the reddish-brown blush, the touch of violet for the eyes. These operations were well underway when the room's other occupant arrived. Lean Megan Dumbroczyk strode into the room, as she

strode everywhere. In her one concession to “image,” she set her chestnut hair in big waves that tossed happily when she turned her head quickly, which was often. “Hey,” Tiffany cried cheerily when the door opened. “Hey,” was the response in a mock-exhausted tone as a handful of books and their porter landed on one of the chicly dressed beds, all dust ruffles and geometric-print linens. From the radio next to the desk lamp came the sound of four black males crooning in close harmony to a thudding backbeat:

*The sun comes up, the sun goes down
And my love for you is still around
Intimate notions will be revealed
The law of love, baby, can't be repealed.*

The brunette turned to watch the ash-blonde performing her delicate maneuvers. After a moment, the latter piped up: “Please tell me you’re going.”

Megan was quick with a response: “Yes, I’m going.”

“Ha, that’s the spirit.”

“I don’t know why, and I don’t know what I’m going to, like, get out of it, but I’m going.”

“What you’re going to ‘get out of it’ is, like, being around people who just want to have a good time is, like, the whole reason.”

Another pause and then Megan’s rejoinder: “Are you sure I’m sensuous enough?” accompanied by batted eyelashes, then more somberly, “Is there gonna be, like, a single guy sober enough to recognize me?”

“We go through this, like, every time.” Tiffany laid down the

tool of her trade and concentrated. “When a guy tells you how nice you look, if you can’t, like, take it as a compliment that’s your problem. You talk about it like it’s a battle and you go into it all defensive when the whole point is just to cut loose and, like, *not care*. All I’m asking is *just once* go with me and, like, don’t obsess over stuff.”

*Love me baby, in a hundred thousand ways
And I’ll love you in the only way I know
For as long as our love lasts, yeah,
For as long as we do*

Megan turned to gaze again at the ceiling and moved a large wave from in front of an eye. “And where is this slice of paradise we’re going to?”

“Lambda Delt, they’re not, like, the rowdiest or the druggiest but they are fun. I promise you, Twig, like, ‘regular’ people go there.”

Megan pondered this information while gazing distractedly at the miniscule television set, which was on at low volume. It didn’t take her two seconds to figure out what was on – Scummi and Trashi were on all the time. Of course, Scummi and Trashi wasn’t actually the show’s name; that was *Across the Street and Down the Block*, but nobody called it that. Everybody just called it by the names of the two most prominent characters, the pierced and tattooed son and daughter of the Purblind family, who had actually been minor players when the show was first on the air, but had come to take over in the viewing public’s mind, and had consequently taken over the writers’ imaginations as well. They got all the best lines. Every week, viewers across America were stunned and amused by the pair’s next shocking adventure. Incest hadn’t been a big topic on sitcoms during Megan and Tiffany’s childhoods, but nothing

stays the same forever. When Trashi would smirk that little brother Scummi “had left a bad taste” in her mouth the night before, the audience was most definitely in on the joke. Some groaned, some laughed out loud, a few religious nuts had tried complaining early on, all to no avail. The show ruled. But Megan had already seen this episode twice so it didn’t hold her interest.

The orange light was no longer filling the room. It cut across the space from the windows to the opposite wall, just above Megan’s eyes. The rest of the room was twilit but for the glow around the intently-studied makeup mirror. Megan dangled one rail-thin denim-clad leg over the side of the bed. Her non-flipping hand lay limply across the middle of her cotton sweatshirt: GREAT WESTERN UNIVERSITY with the institution’s logo (a slender chiton-clad woman, head bewreathed, offering the viewer a scroll) in dark green on a gray background.

*Ooo, ooo, baby, just give me this night
I am the man for you
Those boys can’t make you feel like I can
You know we can make it last
Ooo, ooo, I don’t move so fast.*

At last Megan piped up: “All right, as long as you guarantee I’ll get some, like, anal sex.” She began giggling uncontrollably. A sigh came from the pool of light around the mirror. “I wish I’d never told you about that.” As tears of amusement were beginning to fill Megan’s eyes, a knock came at the door. Corpulent Elizabeth Best, discreet gold cross around her neck, poked her head in.

“You girls have supper plans?” It was Elizabeth who had once said, “Anger, no matter how justifiable, detracts from the beauty of life.”

“Yes, I’m ready, but this one has to get over herself,” was Tiffany’s response. Because Megan’s giggle-fit was just subsiding, Elizabeth’s curiosity was aroused. “What mischief are you into now?” she asked ingenuously.

The blonde switched off the mirror lights decisively, looked up at the questioning Earth Mother and with a wry twist of her mouth, said, “I fascinate her. Like, as bad example, I guess.”

From her place on the bed, Megan announced, “There’s a world of degeneracy out there that you and I know nothing about, Lizzie!”

“She likes to hear about it from, like, a safe distance,” Tiffany responded on her way out the door. Elizabeth pursed her lips in mock disapproval and laughed, “What are we going to do with you?”

Megan bounded up, slung a slender arm around Elizabeth’s cushiony shoulders and as the three marched down the hall said, “We need to learn to *cut loose*, babe!”

The three companions had long since ceased to notice the stark contrast between North Dining Hall, their destination on this evening, and South Dining Hall. The latter, a classic early-20th century sample of collegiate gothic construction, all red brick and pointed concrete arches, retained its original Edwardian dark-wood-paneled interior. NDH, on the other hand, was a paean to the latest architectural hygiene, sleek and modern, plate glass windows, the softest incandescent lighting.

Inside, a keening, adenoidal female voice whined over the cleverly hidden speakers:

A little bit more than reality

A little bit less than a dream

Tiffany, Megan and Lizzie were able to choose from four wholesome piping hot entrees, numerous properly-cooked vegetables, appetizing desserts, both low- and full-calorie. The main dining area, for all its cavernousness, seemed inviting. The acoustics allowed for a friendly buzz to fill the room but never to become an unpleasant roar. Instead of creating many small rooms, the planners had built one single large room – a diner could look up, scan the room and see a dozen acquaintances at various distances, like seeing safe havens on a risky voyage. The hive was alive that Saturday night. Occasionally an arm was hoisted somewhere across the room, waving in recognition. Conversations rose and fell, greetings were shouted.

The three friends had selected their meals and worked their way to the table with Kanda “Anything-less-than-two-carats-is-just-a-friendship-ring” Guest and her sidekick, the impossibly skinny Ashlee Anderson. Kanda had clearly spent a great deal more time than Tiffany in front of the lighted mirror. Her brows formed perfectly regular arcs above the tinted contacts which turned her irises an interesting purplish hue. Reddish-brown tint swooped across her eyelids coming to something like points at her temples. Her mouth, deeply rouged, didn’t seem to ever be at rest. The attentive Ashlee listened, nodding and bouncing her thin, straight hair. Kanda was holding forth on the habitués of Lambda Delta Theta, the evening’s destination of choice, who had slept with whom, who did not *know* who had slept with whom, the reported erotic preferences of those involved, etc.

“And I was, like, my God, she’s one to talk, there is, like, no way she can go on saying, ‘Oh, I’m the one who cares about him,’ it’s, like, unh-unh, she’s all, like, looking so serious

when she says all this and I'm so totally trying not to just give her a big bitchslap and, like, rag her out to all her so-called friends." Ashlee, enthralled, had not touched what little food her plate had had on it to begin with. It mattered little since she just would have thrown it all up later.

Megan looked around. Large-screen televisions were hung above the tables in every part of the room. On one, a woman with teased-up jet black hair and a leather bustier led a man, similarly clad but with the addition of a spiked collar, around on a leash. This only lasted two seconds, however, and then was replaced with a bony addict clad only in tattered undershirt and jockey shorts vomiting in an alley. This was quickly replaced by another image. Megan turned. On another of the screens, five young black men in black suits and sunglasses were walking towards the camera and occasionally thrusting an arm ahead, accompanied by a hand gesture whose meaning was obscure to all but the initiated. Megan's eyes drifted to a third screen where a woman with huge lips and the richest auburn hair imaginable was mouthing a word to the camera; the word appeared to be "Body." At once the woman was traipsing down the front steps of an urban office building, briefcase in hand, tailored suit with short skirt clinging, hair bouncing. In midstride, she turned to look in deadly earnest at the lens and intoned "Body." Immediately the woman was in the shower, her fingers running luxuriantly through her moist chocolate tresses. She was turned so that the viewer could see her closed eyes and beatific smile. With hardly a moment to be pleased with her reverie, the scene shifted to a night club filled with frenetic people. From her perch near the dance floor, the woman broke off conversation with her exuberant companions to toss her mane and beam at the camera, "Body!" The next moment she was in a shopping mall passing the appreciative gazes of several males. All this in less time than it takes to tell. Before the woman could utter "Body" one more time, Megan (who had seen this ad several times) turned to look at the fourth TV. On it was an episode of *Those We*

Know that Megan had only seen once. Justin had worn a jacket out of the house that Kim had bought to give Jason. Now that Jason had seen it, Kim couldn't give it to him as a gift. On a fifth screen the group NeighborHood Watch was rapping about the difficulty of life in the ghetto, all the while dripping with gold chains and diamond rings, with half-dressed women of indeterminate ethnic heritage draped over them. Although the sound was turned down, Megan knew the lyrics to this one well; every white kid did.

*Jack muthafuckaz take a round in the head
Goin' face down in a puddle of red
Bitches gonna suck mah joint all day
Bust yo skull if you think Ahm gay*

Megan recognized the frontman, one Darnell Mims, because he had recently made a sensation in the media by appearing on a men's magazine cover wearing a grey business suit and a swastika armband. In response to the tidal wave of criticism he received, particularly from prominent black civil rights advocates, he had announced that he, Mims, could, in fact, wear any fuckin' thing he wanted to.

With another turn of the head, Megan found herself facing her table companions and thinking again about how much Kanda's mom cared about her. She had given her a \$7,000 gift certificate to the Self-Esteem Surgery Center for her 19th birthday. Kanda had had her nose fixed, her eyelids tightened just a little and her fanny firmed up. She had come back to school the next year beaming with pride and ready to discuss every detail of these enhancements with anyone who would listen. She reacted with astonished resentment when anyone asked why she hadn't gotten her boobs done.

Megan gazed at the table next to theirs, where sat Vonique, Shaquelle, and T'mika. Megan always marveled at them. They went everywhere together, and they were walking fashion plates. They didn't say much, though. They just sat there and ate slowly, gazing emptily past each other.

At Megan's table, the conversation coursed through the identity and technique of Tiffany's most recent bed partner, which brought grins and raised eyebrows all around, except for Elizabeth who just smiled sadly. The talk then turned to the right eye shadow for Megan and a round of compliments on Elizabeth's simple and tasteful shirt (it did not even need to be said aloud that the nicest clothes could be found these days in plus sizes).

The five arose simultaneously, said their goodbyes, and fed their trays to the conveyer that led to the clangy kitchen. On the way out they passed a bulletin board on which were affixed the usual notices about carpools to distant hometowns, foreign exchange opportunities, brand new Clinton/Gore posters, and AIDS and domestic violence awareness workshops. Among these was a splashy announcement for the appearance live on campus of Alan Andrews, high-energy youth pastor and author of the bestselling *God's Pimp*. He was in the middle of a nationwide tour for his new book, *One Crazy-Ass Jew: The Good News for a New Millennium*. Had they cared to notice, next to this poster was another, in what would have been, in an earlier time, made for a notable contrast:

EXCELLENCE IN SEX

Do you feel unfulfilled? Do you think you should be getting more out of your intimate relationships? Hear what someone who has completed our program has to say:

I've been sexually active since I was 14 but I've never really felt like I've been getting what I deserve out of it. After watching all 10 videos in the MaximumSex curriculum, I have a whole new outlook. I'm able to share my needs with my partners. I now get the pleasure from sexual intimacy that I always knew I could. Communication really is the key.

-Heather, Age 24

Order anytime. Call our toll-free number.
Only \$74.95 for the complete course.

SEXUAL FULFILLMENT IS A FUNDAMENTAL RIGHT

The walk to Fraternity Row was a long one, but Megan and Tiffany barely noticed it. Friends, acquaintances and the hardly recognized were encountered on the way. Rendezvous were arranged, hairstyles and clothes compared, dirt dished. The lower part of the road sloped gently up in a wide curve. On both sides, the houses cling to the slope amid evergreens and deciduous indifferently mixed. On some houses the Greek letters were large, on some small. On some the letters went parallel to the ground, on others they angled up to the right; some had their lambdas and thetas and sigmas out in the front

yards, low to the ground and in advanced stages of disrepair. Every house had a crowd, every one thumped to its own FM beat.

Their destination was easily found. They entered the dark house and at once the sound engulfed them like a blanket. Mommydeth was on the big screen. They were one of those screaming guitar groups that got a song on the radio now and then when they decided to leave their hardcore fans behind and do some crossover. The lead singer was a stunningly emaciated young white man with two trademarks, never performing with a shirt on and a curiously strangled vocal delivery. The song playing just then was so catchy, and so heavily in play on the radio, that people had ceased to notice it.

*Swallow the slug so gently
It can be a beautiful thing
Oblivion is a solution
No more of their pollution
Oh, oh, oh, suck the gun*

In a moment, the two women were immersed in the throng of their peers: the manic, the slackjawed, the borderline alcoholic, the occasional disappointed overachiever, the mama's boys and macho men and the desperate women who had discovered that their bodies were God-given tools for attention-getting. Heads were tossed back in open-mouthed laughter, torsos writhed, arms were draped around shoulders. Spilled beer and sweating humanity made for the perfect ambience.

A clock in the form of a naked woman adorned one wall. The hour and minute hands pivoted on the crotch. As the seconds ticked off, the breasts moved back and forth.

Tiffany and Megan were greeted heartily and provided the

golden beverage. Chubby Kyle Koerner appeared from out of nowhere and draped an arm over each of them. Drunk as he was, his cheerful voice boomed over the roar: "Hey, babes, how you guys doin', I mean, that, okay?" Turning to Tiffany, he asked earnestly, "Hey, you doorknobbin' this weekend or what?" Wanting enlightenment, Megan looked to her roommate but only saw the latter wrinkle her face at the irrepressible Kyle in the most wry expression possible. Apparently not too disappointed, he simply said, "Well, I'll see you guys later, okay?" and wandered off.

The women parted, Tiffany heading for the back of the house. Megan drifted around the dance floor looking for someone, anyone she knew. This time she was determined to fight her natural instincts and not say nerdy, scholarly things. But luck was not with her that night. On her first perambulation, she encountered that guy that had been in her soash class last year in full libertarian soap-box mode.

"Yes, I believe ever more freedom for people is a good thing, but, y'know, right now I have to live with the fact that there are no private roads, that if I, y'know, want to go on a trip, I have to do it on a damned government-owned highway, but since that's true I have the right, y'know, to drive at the speed that I feel is safe for *me*. Give people freedom and they'll do what's right for *them*. You're wrong when you say speeding causes accidents, speed *limits* cause accidents because cars get, y'know, bunched up and people don't pay attention because they think the speed limits protect them. There would actually be *less* congestion on the highway if the speed limits were removed."

Oh, now here was a conversation Megan could get involved in. Thank goodness, she didn't have to go out on the stupid dance floor, this guy was someone she could challenge. But before she could open her mouth (since the glassy-eyed people he was lecturing didn't seem in the mood to respond), another guy she remembered from freshman remedial algebra came up, draped an

arm over her shoulder, and boomed, "BAWWWWWRING." Opening missed. But this was also chance to satisfy her curiosity about an earlier incident. Taking hold of what's-his-name's hands, she twisted her head and asked, "Hey, you think I'm supposed to be doorknobbin' tonight?" The guy looked deeply skeptical and could only say, "Hey, nobody expects you to be doorknobbin', baby." It was not yet time to admit her ignorance of the terminology, so she changed the subject. He was cute, after all.

Tiffany, meanwhile, had found two guys with 24-inch necks on a sofa in a back room, completely absorbed in a video football game. A ring of five other men, all known to her, stood by, closely attending the action on the screen. One broke his attention long enough to look her up and down and remark, "I'm surprised you can even walk this week." There were some glances and derisive snickers. Tiffany, suspecting but not fully comprehending, could only roll her eyes and give a shake of the head as if to say, "Oh, those boys." But there clearly was no conversation coming out of this encounter. She slid out of the room as unobtrusively as possible.

Megan mingled successfully for an hour. She joined in commiseration over the sexual unavailability of George Michael and wistful regret for the impossibility of hanging out with the Spice Girls, and listened thoughtfully to a discourse on the relative levels of gritty verité of *NYPD Blue* and *Homicide: Life on the Street*. Libertarian Guy was going on about Reagan's tax cuts. And she did get one mystery solved: turned out doorknobbin' meant "Everybody gets a turn."

All at once she turned and there was Tiffany; she hadn't really expected to see her again that night. It was immediately apparent that all the effort her roommate had expended on cosmetics, now moistened and smudged, had come to no good end. Her eyes were bloodshot. She looked at Megan and

croaked, "What if there's no God?," then didn't wait for an answer. Which was a shame because Megan thought it was the most interesting question she'd heard all night. She watched her roommate's back move through the crowd toward the door and disappear.

After a moment Megan turned with her beer and hurried her way past the spasmodic dancers, through the French doors and onto the deck at the rear of the house. If she leaned over the side she could see down the road to where Tiffany was walking quickly back to their dorm. Alone ... absolutely unheard of.

Megan watched expressionless for several moments before going back inside. With a whipping of hair, a big toothy smile, and a shouted, "I don't want to be a burden," she hopped onto the broad back of hunky Jared Pointer, wrapping her legs and arms around his torso in the process. Jared swiveled his head to take in this new development, and replied heartily, "Hey, babe, no way you're a burden."

*Take the .38-caliber pill
Feel the darkness closing in
Sweet relief is on the other side
No longer do you have to hide
Oh, oh, oh, suck the gun*

The naked-woman clock read 11:30. In the humid houses and outside in the fall chill, the party went on.

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Alexander Blackwater is the pseudonym of a former accounting

and IT professional. A native Floridian, he currently resides in the hills of North Georgia. His other interests are explored at www.jedediahwombat.com.

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