

The Singer

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BROWN SKIN
BOOKS



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THERE ARE THREE THINGS you have to accept if you're going to read this book about Erica Jones. *This* book, not the one that's due to come out in the autumn by Easy Carson, which is supposed to be an 'insider's view', or the quickie bio that's out on the stands now by that journalist for *Vibe*. Mine. All I ask of my reader is that you accept these three things going in. First, Erica Jones loves music. Second, Erica Jones likes sex. A *lot*. And third, perhaps most important of all, she told me everything. She confided in me, Michelle. Her personal assistant, gopher, occasional scapegoat and scratching post, in rare instances her ego booster but at the end of it all, I think—I hope—still her friend. Despite what I did.

I got to see Erica blow people's minds in stadiums, turning an audience into an army when she sang her smash hit 'And You Think That Makes it All Right?' She saved the debut of that one for the Apollo theatre, for the place where Billie Holiday, Ella Fitzgerald, James Brown and so many great acts played. 'If we're going to try it out, it *has* to be there,' she insisted. A hit from the first night, so much so that I thought they were going to tear the place apart. And it only got bigger when she went from the Apollo to Madison Square Gardens. I'll tell you about the songs.

And for all the great political consciousness the media gave her credit for, I saw her play the mega-bitch sometimes in the dressing room. But she was full of contradictions—just like the rest of us. The press would call her bullshit names like 'R&B's Angry Young Woman' and compare her to Lauryn Hill, and there was Erica on her couch, vegging out and watching *Frasier* re-runs. *Spin* called her 'black music's answer to Sinead O'Connor' yet she could be one of the most level-headed gals I ever knew, asking if a piece of real estate was going to appreciate in a certain neighbourhood. She wanted to build a day care on the site. She was never the diva in my mind. Never.

Then there was Luther. I'll tell you about him, too.

And I have to tell you about myself. Well... for the obvious reasons. You must have read about it in the newspapers, everyone has, but at least I can set a few things straight. For those same obvious reasons, this book has been hard to finish, and it finishes with me, not Erica. I can't help that. I don't know what's going to happen now.

Funny thing is, I started this book and did my first interviews with a little tape recorder long before all the ugly business (I can't even remember when,

but certainly after the jump to the new label and before work on the *Drum* album). And according to America's gloriously ironic and bizarre system, I still have legal rights to all that material. I thought I could write the thing just from what I knew, what I kept in my heart and my head, but when I finally woke up from my naivety and realised I should do research, I should interview people, I discovered everyone had an opinion about her.

'Erica Jones can suck my dick!' Easy Carson barked at me over the phone. I'd known then he was a long shot but I had wondered if enough water had floated under the bridge to wash away the resentments on both sides. Apparently not. 'She can suck my dick,' he repeated. Then, thinking he was really clever, he added, 'Course she already has, and it wasn't that fucking good a job anyhow! *I'm* gonna set the record straight in my own book, Michelle. You wait. Shit, I made her! I founded this company!'

'But she put it on the map,' I argued.

'Erica cares about nobody else but Erica,' he shot back, just before he slammed down the phone in my ear.

'Erica Jones is a success not because of Easy Carson or Steven Swann or any of those other guys,' Morgan told me.

He said this in that amazing deep voice of his, tugging as usual on his beard that made him look like a jazz sage. Morgan was a 'beautiful ugly man' as they say, the kind whose gaunt features made you think he hadn't gone out to see the world, the world had come and steamrolled over him.

'Erica Jones is a success because for someone like her, there couldn't be anything else. She ain't ruthless, she's *driven*. How can folks bitch about her pushing them out of her way when they're supposed to be record producers, promoters, musicians and so on? Can't they do their jobs? What are they there for if not to help her along?'

Morgan, poor gentle Morgan.

(I am so sorry now.)

'Erica Jones let full-figured women have permission to be elegant again,' said Phylicia Saunders, the designer. 'You take an artist like Lil' Kim who just puts it out there with her big tits and her big batty. I think she plays up to guys' immature idyll of a perfect woman when she's in her bikini outfits or lingerie. Erica's got the same type of body, ample breasts and a generous backside, but she doesn't dress slutty. She's sexy.'

And I think this is true, even though Phylicia is indirectly promoting herself. For the *Drum* album tour, Erica signed an exclusive deal to wear her costume designs on stage.

'Erica Jones?' laughed a concert dancer who doesn't want me to use his name. 'Erica Jones is a succubus. You know, the mythological woman who—'

'I know what it is,' I interjected. I didn't need the pedantry.

'Well, Erica Jones likes her raunch,' he went on.

And he reminded me of his own special perspective on the show in Minneapolis.

I was, as usual, in the wings, gaping in wonder at how a song, a personality, an image, could bring thirty thousand people (*thirty thousand*, and that's the size of some small towns!) into this bowl of steel and concrete, all for cheering, applauding worship. For her. For my friend. The spotlights swept the sea of faces, the burly security guys pushing back the too-eager types in the front rows, and the imitation Nile Rogers guitar funk for the first song's arrangement blared from the towering black monolith speakers. I watched Erica step out in the Saunders dress that showed off her lovely brown legs, and that sound—that incredible sound of excited worship, the mass voice going *hhhhhaaaaaa* like when you breathe against a mirror—floated back to the stage.

Erica's smiling face, her large eyes and small wide nose, her white teeth flashing, all of her joy at this response was up there on the jumbo screen behind the band. And she launched into the vocals for her updated rendition of 'Buffalo Stance' by Neneh Cherry, a performer she immensely respected. *No money man can win my love, it's sweetestness that I'm dreaming of...* Her new label had argued with her about releasing it as the first single, thinking a cover might not be well received. They wanted the title track, 'Pariah', instead. Erica put her foot down. In the end, the cover song hit number five on Billboard and 'Pariah' hit the top slot a month later.

I watched her sing seven tunes. Then there was the long instrumental arrangement that allowed for a costume change, the female dancers shaking it while Erica had her break, drank some water to cool her tired throat, towelled herself off and changed outfits. Fifteen minutes. And the male dancer, the one who confided in me and called her a succubus, says Erica pulled him into her dressing room. I can confirm this, because Erica finished song number seven and stepped into the wings, her chocolate brown forehead polished with sweat, a white bar glowing on her skin in the centre of her plunging neckline. Still smiling, still on her thousand-feet-in-the-air high from performing and being adored. 'They're so kind tonight, man!' she said, beaming. She squealed with delight, and I saw her eyes flitting around the back of the wings, more energy in her than she could possibly burn off in one night. She saw the dancer. *Contact*.

Despite what you may have heard, I didn't think a lot got past me in my time with Erica, because I was always with her, and I did so many odd jobs, one of which included making sure she hit her cues on the tour, checking that

she rested and didn't drop from exhaustion, generally making sure Erica Jones Is Happy. I'd noticed her and the dancer trading looks of interest all that week. Now I passed her dressing room to give a message to one of the production assistants, and the door was open a crack.

'She just yanked me in there,' the dancer recalled in the phone interview. 'And we're kissing and roaming our hands all over each other, and I didn't think we could do very much. I mean, shit, she had to go on in a few minutes! So did I. People would wait for Erica Jones, they don't give a fuck about me. But if I miss my cue, what the hell am I going to tell people, huh? Who's going to believe me?'

Erica managed to get the zipper down on the back of her dress in one deft move and let it puddle around her ankles, her large breasts tumbling out, everything visible for her man of the moment, from her curvy waist right down to the neatly trimmed wedge of pubic hair. Here was R&B star Erica Jones in her birthday suit right in front of him, and to be fair, what could anyone expect him to do? Resist? He was as hard as a rock in an instant. His costume pants were a tan silk—a deliberately light shimmering material to allow maximum gymnastic movement for the routines on stage, and he was tenting through them. Erica grabbed his sheathed cock in one firm squeeze.

He claims she practically slammed him down on a long table, the kind they put in stars' rooms for decorative assortments of canapés, congratulatory flowers, snacks. He was already topless, as all the rest of the male dancers were, each one a tall proud black man with muscle definition like you wouldn't believe, perfectly formed six-packs and broad chests and arms like superheroes. 'Mish, why do half of them have to be gay?' Erica complained to me one night. This one wasn't. She tugged down his trousers to thigh level. The head of his cock was pushing out of his Jockey shorts, the sack of his balls stretching the hem near his leg. Erica snatched up a pair of fabric shears—the kind the costume assistants kept handy to remove any threads, to keep the outfits impeccable. In one brief chop, she cut away his underwear, and her fingers lightly caressed his long engorged penis, veins and blood vessels standing out with his want.

She was wet and ready for him. Erica confessed to me that doing live performances—especially in major venues—gave her not only a high but it made her so sexually charged she had to find an outlet. So I knew the dancer was telling the truth when he said she supplied the condom.

I also knew because when I passed her dressing room with the slightly open door, I saw her mounted on top of him, impaling herself on that glistening spear of his. I saw his cock disappearing into her as she rocked and rocked,

her breasts swaying, her eyes shut tight and her mouth wide open, crying out ‘Yeaaahhh, yeaaaahh, yeah, yeah!’ Her nails dug into his chest, and she looked down at him with a kind of angry hunger. Jesus, I thought, frozen with the sight of them for a moment, unable to tear my eyes away, Erica’s buttocks quivering slightly with the momentum. And for all his pose of betrayal when I interviewed the dancer, I saw his expression in that dressing room. He loved it. I saw him pinch her nipples, his wide hand feeling her ass, as if somehow she wasn’t real and it wasn’t happening to him.

Erica could be larger than life even in sex, her breasts looking even fuller with her wide brown areolae puckered, her nipples hard, a bead of perspiration running down her short flat midriff. I’m just saying as one woman about another, she was beautiful. Without any makeup or today’s mandatory photo retouching for CD covers, Erica could be amazingly beautiful.

How many times had I caught glimpses of her in intimate moments like this? Me, Michelle Brown, her PA. PG, more like it. Private Ghost. And as she said, her appetite was all consuming. It’s not like she was so bold as to do things right in front of me, but she was often negligent of the fact that I might be in the house or near the hotel suite of any given week. I have seen Erica Jones intimate in whatever degree of importance or depth she brought to the man or to the occasion—Erica making love when it *was* love, Erica having sex, Erica fooling around, foreplaying, afterplaying, fucking because that’s what it was when it was her raw need. And I have to say she was beautiful every time. But then I always thought she was.

I heard the floor director coming up the hall. ‘Cutting it kind of fine tonight, aren’t we, Michelle?’

I stood right in the middle of the hallway, discreetly blocking the way to her room.

‘You know who you’re dealing with,’ I said a bit too curtly. Meaning Erica was a professional. Meaning she’d be out there. I could be dismissed anonymously by a few of the press as one of Erica’s entourage, a hanger-on, a leech, but I did have the job and the title, and that gave me power.

Fate was kind. The floor director walked away just before he would have heard the loud wail of our star’s orgasm down the hall. By the time I stepped back to the door, wondering what the hell I was going to say to move her along, I glimpsed Erica Jones feeling the last reverberations of coming, and then she was scrambling down from the table, muttering shit, I got to get out there. She barely noticed that the sticky condom was still half inside her vagina, and she was literally tugging it off his—

‘*She gets off and then just leaves!*’ the dancer reminded me on the phone.

As Erica had climbed off, the dancer still lay there, his pants around his thighs, his underwear in shreds, and he couldn't stop himself. On top of him or not, she had brought him to a boil. His cock stiffened and pointed at a new higher angle, and a geyser of cum exploded onto his legs and on his pants. Unconsciously, he grabbed his penis and jerked himself a little, needing to hold on to the feeling for another precious second. Then he saw the mess.

'Son of a bitch!' he barked. 'I can't go on stage like this!'

Erica wasn't listening. She had already ducked into the shower and was using the hand-held nozzle to wash between her legs. At this point, I thought, screw it, and I stormed into the dressing room. I had two full seconds of a glimpse at the dancer's now limp cock, still dribbling cum onto his legs and pants, and he looked wide-eyed at me and covered himself with his hand as he sat there like a fool on the table.

'Not interested,' I said. And I wasn't. I was intent on doing my job. Protect the Star.

I slid open the glass panel of the shower, not caring about the flying specks of water drenching my T-shirt, and Erica was on her toes as she plunged her face into the spray of water overhead. 'I know,' she said. She was aware she was running out of time.

'You've got maybe three minutes tops,' I scolded and took her gently but firmly by the arm.

'Mish!' she squealed, covering her breasts as she stepped out of the shower, her eyes flicking towards the naked man on the table. As if there truly was anything left for her to be modest about. But her indignant noise made a peculiar kind of Erica-sense. The moment was over. They'd had their fun, and she didn't want him seeing her like that any more.

'What the hell do we do about your makeup?' I asked.

'Forget makeup,' said Erica. 'I sweat it off anyway under those lights. I need to get dressed.' And she gave me the eye while her hand made a coded gesture: *shoo*. I had to get rid of the dancer on the table.

'Oh, man,' he was groaning.

I turned around and stood between him and Erica. One word should give the hint. 'Please.'

In this business, I tried to be the last ambassador of good manners, and sometimes people were astonishingly grateful for it, sometimes the effort was wasted.

'What the fuck am I supposed to do?' the dancer was whining at me, though I was glad he was finally getting off the table and shuffling to the door. His right hand had grabbed a fistful of the waistband to tug up his pants. 'I can't go out there like this! What the hell am I supposed to do?'

‘Have more control,’ muttered Erica, sitting at her mirror.

‘Hey!’ he yelled angrily.

‘Hey, yourself,’ I told him. ‘Aren’t you on in a minute?’

They were barking his name up the hall, losing their patience, and the floor director was saying, ‘*You are thirty seconds from getting your ass fired!*’

The dancer uttered the ‘c’ word under his breath and ran out the door.



‘Look,’ I told him when he had finished his rant over the phone, ‘I was just going to ask some general questions about the tour, about how the crew and the dancers were, confirm a couple of things. I wasn’t going to get into all this sh—’

‘Well, if you don’t include shit like this, then you ain’t telling the whole story now, are you, Michelle?’ he fired back.

Which is why it’s included. I still can’t summon much sympathy for him. If he had come first and taken his pleasure inside her, I doubt he would have given any thought that he was making Erica Jones late without getting her off. She had just done a wham-bam to him the way men had been doing it to women since Creation, and I told him so.

‘That just explains why you’re the way *you* are, Michelle, that doesn’t explain her,’ he said.

He must have heard my sharp intake of breath over the receiver, because he added in a quiet, reflective voice, ‘But I thank you for saving my job.’

‘Erica spoke to the director.’

‘The hell she did.’

He was right. I had spoken to him, using her name. Erica was oblivious to the guy’s fate.

She still missed a cue during that concert, but not because of her tryst in the dressing room. Thirty thousand fans cheering and calling for her return forty-five minutes later, and Erica was behind the roadies’ trailer with her mobile in a serious long-distance conversation.

She was helping her nephew Jake back in Scarborough, Ontario with his homework, doing her best to remember the original provinces of Canada’s Confederation in 1867. ‘Nova Scotia was definitely one, so was Prince Edward Island, ummm, Quebec, Ontario—oh, shit. *Maybe* New Brunswick? Doesn’t your Mom have an encyclopaedia in the house? Vi?’ Calling now. ‘Vi! Violet, I will *buy* you an encyclopaedia, girl, okay?’

She saw the production assistant with his pleading open arms. *Just a minute*, she mouthed. This was Family, capital *F*. She would take as much time as Jake needed.



‘We lost Erica Jones,’ opined *Maclean’s*, Canada’s own home grown version of *Time* and *Newsweek*. ‘We lost her because of the blinkered incompetence of a complacent music industry.’ Harsh but true.

It had started for her up in Canada. She was the fifth child of a reasonably well-off dentist who had a practice in the West End of the country’s biggest city, Toronto. We laughed our heads off when we read the publicity bios Easy Carson released for her second album. Then we were appalled. ‘Erica Jones grew up on the mean streets of Toronto’s Jane and Finch district, Canada’s own version of Compton.’ Yes, Jane and Finch used to be known as a poor and rough part of town, but it sure as hell was no Compton.

‘Easy, what is this shit?’ Erica demanded. ‘I grew up five blocks from High Park, man!’

High Park. It was one of the most solidly middle-class neighbourhoods in the city, and it’s nowhere near Jane and Finch. I knew this because I was one of six black students who went to Sir John A. MacDonald High School, and Erica was one of the others. High school wasn’t where Erica first discovered music—no, she got that at home, her gift nurtured by the family piano, her parents and the choir of her local church. But school was where she *knew* beyond doubt she’d become a star. School was also where I discovered what I was, and Erica played a part in that discovery, too.

Easy, however, didn’t want to settle for the dewy image of star-struck talented girl flees secure middle-class background. Like his would-be rap stars, Erica was supposed to bloom through the cracks of cement and deprivation.

Easy Carson himself can be a stereotype: the shady black music executive with the grim past. That is sadly part of him. His big joke—his one joke—was that he wasn’t a record producer back then, he was a ‘motivator’. To be near him in real life as he said this, you took his meaning, because Easy is six foot one and over two hundred pounds. A black man who gets what he wants by intimidating with his size—or so you might believe. His face is that of a big ebony baby, and I suspect he keeps his hair cropped short just to make you think that. His face reminds me of the actor Forrest Whitaker. The rest of him is a wall of muscle. Some of what you hear about Easy Carson and Easy Roller Records is true, and some of it, well...

He tells people today that he got his nickname because his Mom liked Walter Mosley books, and the ‘Easy’ handle came from borrowing the nickname of Mosley’s Easy Rawlins. But Carson was born LaMarque Daniel Carson, and when he started weightlifting in his teens a smartass buddy called him ‘Easter Island’, suggesting he looked like one of those dark monolithic

statues. Easter got shortened to ‘Easy’. He did have a long juvenile record, mostly for petty break-ins and threatening assaults. And while he calls himself a producer, I know for a fact that Easy cannot read or play one note of music. He wanted—still wants—to make money.

‘Easy went into music because he was smart enough to realise he was heading for a prison cell,’ recalls one old friend. ‘He says, “This is the quick way, and it’s legal.” Everybody thinks he just glares at you and folks give in, but he’s also a sweet talker. *He spots talent*. He gets the creative folks together. People winced at the beginning because he put his name down in credits as a producer, but he worked his ass off to get them the right equipment, to hustle the money for studio time, to promote the shit out of a tune. If he didn’t do the mixing, so fucking what? He did practically everything else.’

Carson got his start by chasing squatters out of an abandoned paint warehouse on Lexington and then corralling friends into helping him fix it up into a nightclub. ‘It was typical of him that he ran the joint for three months without giving a goddamn thought to any liquor licenses or building codes or whatever.’ But this, too, was eventually all taken care of. He found talented DJs to play and used the place to test drive new artists and groups. A former bouncer told me that Carson’s policy was very clear over any trouble at the club, whether gang related or petty squabbles over a jostled arm or talking to the wrong fellow’s girl. ‘Your job is protect the furniture,’ he instructed. ‘People can duck and shit. People can get the hell out of the way. There ain’t no Blue Cross for our glasses and chairs.’

His music label was born in a back room of the club. As late as my coming onboard with Erica, all the equipment for those modest early sessions was still in there—a Zoom MRS-1044CD hard disk recorder that allowed you to record instruments on 100 virtual tracks (you even had reverb and equalization on that puppy), a Yamaha S80 keyboard and two Rode NT2 microphones. That was their whole kit, and it had cost Easy less than \$3,000. Of course, Erica didn’t record with that stuff. Easy’s business had grown by then, and he wanted the best for his artists.

He also wanted to keep those artists around. When contract disputes dragged on, he would sic lawyers on a guy for taking freelance producing gigs to keep groceries on the table. I personally saw him fire people when he learned they were scouting for a job at another label. But no one has ever offered me a tale of him physically harming anyone.

People actually ask me today why *I* didn’t do anything about Easy Carson. As if I hadn’t thought of starting what I did earlier. I always have to laugh.

I tell them the truth. Erica took care of Carson in her own way. She didn’t need me that time. And if I had known, oh, if I had known...

When I met him, Easy was boyishly shy, his eyes nervously checking the ground as he asked how I liked New York and where I hoped my own career would take me. 'He's clumsy when he flirts,' I was told by a woman bartender from the club. 'He's got no confidence at all, and if he gets with women, it's because his friends hook him up. When I went out with him, he put his big meaty paw on my thigh and confessed how he really liked me. It was kinda sad.'

He met Erica, in fact, because one of his hangers-on pointed her out to him at a party up on 127th Street—not because she was a promising vocalist but in the hopes that Easy could get her into bed. Like Lurch from the *Addams Family*, Carson lumbered over to her, interrupting the conversation she was having with one of the guys from the group Blue. 'I hear you sing. Maybe you heard I produce records.'

Erica smiled at his bluster, sizing him up in one look and said, 'I haven't heard of you at all.'

'Well, we should fix that,' said Easy, and he gave her a toothy grin.

Erica told me later that she wasn't taking the conversation too seriously. She wasn't so naïve as to think a guy wouldn't try to get her into bed by claiming he had his own record label. 'But Michelle, he kept putting his weight on one foot then the other, looking around, biting his lip, I thought: he's either really what he says or the boy's completely deluded!'

Easy talked about how he wanted the label to expand beyond hardcore rap and take on a couple of promising R&B artists. Erica listened carefully. She hadn't heard of his performers, and Carson sheepishly mentioned that he wouldn't expect her to—he 'hoped' they would be big. He didn't brag. He didn't name drop. He didn't even have a business card. He held up one of his huge hands palm forward and begged her to stay put. Then he went and begged the host of the party to go dig out a magazine that mentioned him and his label. She began to think he was sincere. When he actually came back with a little sidebar article with his name in bold, she agreed to meet him for lunch at Sylvia's Soul Food restaurant and talk business. And that was how Erica Jones joined Easy Roller Records.

I don't know what you'd call their relationship. If you stood in the company office's foyer and watched their conversation in those days, there were times when Erica would still be nodding her head like a little girl, saying, 'Kay, 'kay...' She used to defer to Easy on matters of promotion, on when to bring her album out and why it was better to wait, on how she shouldn't take this or that gig because it made her look small-time. And yet Easy didn't interfere with her sound. I recall one instance when he poked his head in the studio, and Erica put down her Coke and asked, 'What can we do for you, Easy?'

‘Oh, nothin’

‘Well, it’s a pretty small room, and you take up the space of three people,’ Erica shot back.

And with that, he turned and left. He was her manager, and this is the way she would talk to him. She hadn’t yet turned twenty-one.

‘Do you tell people about us?’ she asked him once as we all piled into his four-wheel and headed out to a gig at a club in Brooklyn.

‘Shit, no!’ he declared, his baby face scrunched up in disgust at the question.

‘You don’t?’ said Erica, which was her way of saying, *Why not?*

Easy Carson doesn’t have an MBA or even a lot of common sense, but he does have cunning, and his explanation gave me one of the best displays of it. ‘Because, Erica, if I go around town with you on my arm, bragging how we do it, how much fucking credit they gonna give you, huh? That gonna make you look good? Or me? They’ll think I front every pussy who comes along and smiles my way, and they’ll think you get to open your mouth on stage after sucking my cock out back.’

‘Can you *please* rein in the gutter mouth?’ I asked from the back seat.

I could never stand him talking like this. The fact that he did was a reminder of his emotional immaturity, how he had never learned to talk like an adult male who discarded the crude vocabulary back at the playground.

Easy grumbled that ‘Hey, Erica asked’—as if he couldn’t have put it a nicer way—then made a poor joke about how Canadian black girls were so uptight. We were the only ones he knew. Neither of us was in the mood to challenge this assertion.

I never asked Erica why she was briefly with him because the reason was obvious. She used him. They used each other. Erica claimed that she had genuine sexual curiosity about him in the beginning, and that he was almost sweet in how passive he was.

She says they stopped by the nightclub one evening, and under the flashing red and blue lights, surreal with no music on and an empty dance floor, she undressed him until he stood before her completely naked.

Tree trunk legs, a chest like a menacing storm cloud, wide and dark. *He towers over me*, she thought. She went to embrace him, and his massively thick arms completely enveloped her, his dark brown cock hot against her short belly and so long that its red bulb brushed the under curve of her left breast. When she lay down and opened her legs for him the very first time on the blanket of their coats, the size of him simultaneously scared her and thrilled her. She gasped as more and more of him pushed into her vagina, but she couldn’t take him all the way in. She says that making love to Easy was like

swimming underneath docks, her shoulders gated by the thick posts of his arms, lying in the shadow of that chest, and he rammed like a bull inside her until a hot stream of his spunk poured into her like a flood. She says she came the first time they slept together, but she never did again.

'You hurt me when we try,' she told him.

Easy had dropped his eyes to the floor. Erica didn't go into how he had no concept of foreplay, of seduction, that after a few kisses and a couple of hugs, he was ready for his jackhammer performance. She claimed he was simply too long and thick for her, which may well have been true, and though he lost out on sex, it was an explanation that consoled his childish ego.

They didn't sleep with each other any more, but it didn't put an end to their sexual involvement. They needed each other for business. By now, there was a buzz in the clubs about Erica, and she had a use for her manager. Carson also knew he had a good thing, too good to get ruined by spats and atmosphere. I suspect what happened between them was Erica's idea, and it was this: Easy had installed a two-way mirror that looked out on the dance floor. 'Check this out!' he'd giggle, a kid with a new toy, showing how no one could see into the side office unless he switched a specific set of lights on the glass. Several of us warned him it would be pointless to have it if he didn't shut up about it.

Erica knew about the glass. And it was perfect for her to give Easy a very different kind of performance. She would give him an informal message earlier in the day, 'Video night tonight', or ask me to pass it on to him with a word or a phone call, thinking they were both cute. He'd know to be in the club ahead of her that evening.

She brought casual lovers there after hours, never anyone serious. She put something on the stereo system, and as her man of the evening pulled her into a clinch, she always suggested, 'No, no, over here... It's sexy over here.' Here on the black leather couch, where she could urge her man to sit down, and then fall backwards into his lap, pushing herself against his groin. A tug of the zipper, and her dress was a satin halo around her hips, her breasts practically spilling out of her bra cups. Fingers checked her erect dark nipples, pinching them, rubbing them urgently, and as Erica's mouth opened in a gasp, she half rose to ease down her soaked panties, the hand of her lover slipping down from her midriff to her inner thigh.

She opened her legs much wider than she needed to, hooking them behind his ankles as his fingers strummed her clitoris and felt the shining wet lips of her pussy. Craning her head back to kiss her man, the lift of her ribs like the spread of dove's wings with the arch of her back, and there was the sweet flex of her thigh muscles as she opened her legs still wider, and his fingers disappeared into her vagina.

Kissing him, tasting him, one eye open and staring ahead, her man always thinking it was a turn-on to see the two of them in the mirror. And behind the glass was Easy. I've caught the fingerprint smudges of that wide hand on the glass, evidence that he must have leaned against it, his hungry concentration so intense, his want so close to its object of desire but separated from her, his other fist kneading that huge cock she said he had, brown flesh reddening, veins like tree roots into the black bush of his pubic hair, his testicles contracting into a tight round ball of skin.

And now the couple had progressed to the patch of carpeted floor in front of the couch. Erica's mouth was open in a kind of plea as her face appeared to him upside down, eyes shut as her orgasm made an exquisite warning deep in her core, gathering strength, her fingers clawing into her date's chest as she struggled to raise her knees higher, and her lover's swollen penis sunk into her again and again, Erica's breasts quivering with the momentum.

'See me! See me! Ahhhh—ahhh—ahhh!' she chanted. Her date assumed she was speaking to him, taking it as prompt to be even more aroused by her coming. 'I see you, babe,' he groaned back. And with a final groan, the dam inside him would burst. Or a guy would pull out of her and shoot streams of his sticky warm sauce onto her breasts and stomach. Or one night, her man reared up out of her, calling for her to please take him into her mouth, and Erica gripped him in one confident motion and sucked him in, digging her fingers into the base of his cock, making it swell even more as he cried out with his release. Behind the glass, stifling a tortured whimper, Easy unravelled. I could never find Easy Carson attractive, but I think if I saw him that way, the great muscled tower of him naked like that and stroking himself in worship of Erica, I believe I would have found him at least briefly... noble. It sounds peculiar to use that word for it, but to me it's right. Or maybe it's because I thought for the longest time we could all be better because of Erica.

I knew what she did in that club for him, or if you want to be harsh in your judgement, *to* him. I knew her little suggestive smiles when her date wasn't looking, her eyes searching for contact behind the glass, how she actually enjoyed him watching her like this and how it reinforced her upper hand in their relationship. Because one night I didn't pass on the message to Easy, and the spectator in the office behind the two-way mirror was me.



The loft space. I am back in the loft space often when I dream. It's peculiar, but I don't castigate myself over and over for the studio. No, it's the loft that plays a loop in my head. Nights when I can see the framed posters of Blue Note album covers for Miles Davis and Thelonius Monk, when I have to

involuntarily smile again at the black lacquer bust of Beethoven. What am I doing here? I'm making mistakes. I know enough not to touch the dead body at my feet, but I still make fatal errors.

It is someone else who did this, not you. That's what you have to tell yourself. Emotional detachment. You're going to find what you came for and go, because that's what you do. You're Michelle, and you clean up the messes. You're loyal.

I go through a mental checklist of what I've touched without gloves, still dithering whether to leave them be since I'm a regular visitor here, or to wipe them clean. I opt for wiping them, erasing my presence here tonight. I will be careful, I will be so careful.

And as I rifle anxiously through the drawers wearing my latex surgical gloves, a one-time friend cold at my feet behind the couch, I curse under my breath and chant that I did it for you, Erica, I did it all for you...