

ANDREA JACKSON

All He Wanted

All he wanted was his lunch. Bologna sandwich, black coffee really hot. And maybe a nice chicken fried steak – mashed potatoes, gravy, a biscuit or two – and a slice of peach pie à la mode. Served by a smiling waitress, young but not too young, with curly orange hair and penciled eyebrows. As she places the pie on the counter before him, her lightning-red fingernail grazes his hand, and when he doesn't look away from her face she leans forward across the counter, her left breast toppling the saltshaker, and kisses him with thin lips that smell of supermarket lipstick. The other waitresses jostle and form a line behind her. He kisses one after another; plump one, bony one, tall Eurasian girl, they giggle and shriek awaiting their turns until the manager of the lunch counter taps him on the shoulder. She is pink and curvy and her black hair bounces loose about her face. The counter girls pout as she takes his hand and guides him off the stool, around the end of the counter, into a little back office, and through a hidden door to a secret room, an expanse filled with sudden light and the soft breeze from an open French window. The walls are creamy white accented with gold-framed paintings of goddesses and nobles. Animal hides cover most of the carpet: tiger, leopard, bear. She leads him, his boots on the ivory carpet, to a great claw-foot divan heavy with purple and red pillows. As they make love among the soft pillows he hears cheering, the roar of a crowd, applause. He finishes, pulls on his pants and passes through the window onto a balcony flecked with gold that glitters in the sunlight. On the cobblestones below, thousands of happy Italians greet him with ear-splitting “Bravos!” The din strengthens into a foot-stamping chant that continues until he descends a stone staircase and enters a sleek limousine. The crowd presses against the windows. Beside him a young blond woman in military uniform smiles submissively and inches close. The car speeds between hills and sea to an army camp where he glances at a map and issues orders so brilliant that thousands of troops spontaneously applaud. He proceeds to similar triumphs, eager women and giddy crowds, in France, Ukraine, India, everywhere across the map of Europe and Asia until he stands at last atop the Great Wall of China and surveys his final conquest with its bustling cities, fields of cabbage and chrysanthemum, and splendid mountains that merge into blue wrinkles and fade, ultimately, into the pale rim of the world.