

*Dorothy Allison*

## Her thighs

I was thinking about Bobby, remembering her sitting, smoking, squint-eyed, and me looking down at the way her thighs shaped in her jeans. I have always loved women in blue jeans, worn jeans, worn particularly in that way that makes the inseam fray, and Bobby's seams had that fine white sheen that only comes after long restless evenings spent juggling one's thighs one against the other, the other against the bar stool.

After a year as my sometimes lover, Bobby's nerves were wearing as thin as her seams. She always seemed to be looking to the other women in the bar, checking out their eyes to see if in fact they thought her as pussy-whipped as she thought herself, for the way she could not seem to finally settle me down to playing the wife I was supposed to be. Bobby was a wild-eyed woman, proud of her fame for running women ragged — all the women who had fallen in love with her and followed her around long after she had lost all interest in them. Hanging out at softball games on lazy spring afternoons, Bobby would look over at me tossing my head and talking to some other woman and grind her thighs together in impatience. The woman was as profoundly uncomfortable with my sexual desire as with my determined independence. But nothing so disturbed her as the idea other people could see both my lust and my independence in

as the idea other people could see both my lust and my independence in the way I tossed my hair, swung my hips, and would not always come when she called. Bobby believed lust was a trashy lower-class impulse, and she wanted so to be nothing like that. It meant the one tool she could have used to control me was the very one she could not let herself use.

Oh, Bobby loved to fuck me. Bobby loved to beat my ass, but it bothered her that we both enjoyed it so much. Early on in our relationship, she established a pattern of having me over for the evening and strictly enforcing a rule against sex outside the bedroom. Bobby wanted dinner — preferably Greek or Chinese takeout — and at least two hours of television. Then there had to be a bath, bath powder, and toothbrushing, though she knew I preferred her unbathed and gritty, tasting the tequila she sipped through dinner. I was not supposed to touch her until we

entered the sanctuary of her bedroom, that bedroom lit only by the arc lamp in the alley outside. Only in that darkness could I bite and scratch and call her name. Only in that darkness would Bobby let herself open to passion.

Let me set the scene for you, me in my hunger for her great strong hands and perfect thighs, and her in her deliberate disregard. When feeling particularly cruel, Bobby would even insist on doing her full twenty-minute workout while I lay on the bed tearing at the sheets with my nails. I was young, unsure of myself, and so I put up with it, sometimes even enjoyed it, though what I truly wanted was her in a rage, under spotlights in a stadium, fucking to the cadence of a lesbian rock-and-roll band.

But it was two years ago, and if I were too aggressive she wouldn't let me touch her. So I waited, and watched her, and calculated. I'd start my efforts on the couch, finding excuses to play with her thighs. Rolling joints and reaching over to drop a few shreds on her lap, I scrambled for every leaf on her jeans.

"Don't want to waste any," I told her and licked my fingers to catch the fine grains that caught in her seams. I progressed to stroking her crotch. "For the grass," I said, going on to her inseam, her knees, the backs of her thighs.

"Perhaps some slipped under here, honey. Let me see."

I got her used to the feel of my hands legitimately wandering, while her eyes never left the TV screen. I got her used to the heat of my palms,

the slight scent of the sweat on my upper lip, the firm pressure of my wrists sliding past her hips. I was as calculated as any woman who knows what she wants, but I cannot tell you what magic I used to finally get her to sit still for me going down on my knees and licking that denim.

It wasn't through begging. Bobby recognized begging as a sexual practice, therefore to be discouraged outside the darkened bedroom. I didn't wrestle her for it. That, too, was allowed only in the bedroom. Bobby was the perfect withholding butch, I tell you, so I played the perfect compromising femme. I think what finally got to her was the tears.

Keeping my hands on her, I stared at her thighs intently until she started that sawing motion — crossing and recrossing her legs. My impudence made her want to grab and shake me, but that, too, might have been sex, so she couldn't. Bobby shifted and cleared her throat and watched me while I kept my mouth open slightly and stared intently at the exact spot where I wanted to put my tongue. My eyes were full of moisture. I imagined touching the denim above her labia with my lips. I saw it so clearly, her taste and texture were full in my mouth. I got wet and wetter. Bobby kept shifting on the couch. I felt my cheeks dampen and heard myself making soft moaning noises — like a child in great hunger. That strong, dark musk odor rose between us, the smell that comes up from my cunt when I am swollen and wet from my clit to my asshole.

Bobby smelled it. She looked at my face, and her cheeks turned the brightest pink. I felt momentarily like a snake who has finally trapped a rabbit. Caught like that, on the living room couch, all her rules were momentarily suspended. Bobby held herself perfectly still, except for one moment when she put her blunt fingers on my left cheek. I leaned over and licked delicately at the seam on first the left and then the right inner thigh. Her couch was one of those swollen chintz monsters, and my nose would bump the fabric each time I moved from right to left. I kept bumping it, moving steadily, persistently, not touching her with any other part of my body except my tongue. Under her jeans, her muscles rippled and strained as if she were holding off a great response or reaching for one. I

strained as if she were holding off a great response or reaching for one. I felt an extraordinary power. I had her. I knew absolutely that I was in control.

Oh, but it was control at a cost, of course, or I would be there still. I could hold her only by calculation, indirection, distraction. It was dear, that cost, and too dangerous. I had to keep a distance in my head, an icy control on my desire to lose control. I wanted to lay the whole length of my tongue on her, to dribble over my chin, to flatten my cheeks to that fabric and shake my head on her seams like a dog on a fine white bone. But that would have been too real, too raw. Bobby would never have sat still for that. I held her by the unreality of my hunger, my slow nibbling civilized tongue.

Oh, Bobby loved that part of it, like she loved her chintz sofa, the antique armoire with the fold-down shelf she used for a desk, the carefully

balanced display of appropriate liquors she never touched — unlike the bottles on the kitchen shelves she emptied and replaced weekly. Bobby loved the aura of acceptability, the possibility of finally being bourgeois, civilized, and respectable.

I was the uncivilized thing in Bobby's life, reminding her of the taste of hunger, the remembered stink of her mother's sweat, her own desire. I became sex for her. I held it in me, in the pulse of my thighs against hers when she finally grabbed me and dragged me off into the citadel of her bedroom. I held myself up, back and off her. I did what I had to do to get her, to get myself what we both wanted. But what a price we paid for what I did.

What I did.

What I was.

What I do.

What I am.

I paid a high price to become who I am. Her contempt, her terror, was the least of it. My contempt, my terror, took over my life, became the first thing I felt when I looked at myself, until I became unable to see my true self at all. "You're an animal," she used to say to me, in the dark with her teeth against my thigh, and I believed her, growled back at her, and swallowed all the poison she could pour into my soul.

Now I sit and think about Bobby's thighs, her legs opening in the dark where no one could see, certainly not herself. My own legs opening. That was so long ago and far away, but not so far as she finally ran when she could not stand it anymore, when the lust I made her feel got too wild, too uncivilized, too dangerous. Now I think about what I did.

What I did.

What I was.

What I do.

What I am.

"Sex," I told her. "I will be sex for you."

Never asked, "You. What will you be for me?"

Now I make sure to ask. I keep Bobby in mind when I stare at women's thighs. I finger my seams, flash my teeth, and put it right out there.

"You. What will you let yourself be for me?"