

Show Me Yours by Robert Reed

Our latest offering from the prolific Mr. Reed is one of his darkest, a vision of the future with a sharp edge to it. So perhaps it's wise to take a bit of the edge off with Mr. Reed's latest biographical note: he says, "I am doing a great deal of art work lately ... I am being called upon to draw clown faces and cats and dogs for a four-year-old whose own artistic talents are beginning to outstrip her father's. Which isn't saying much at all, the truth be known."

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She wears a black felt robe long enough to cover her bare knees and pale pink socks pulled over her ankles; her calves are white and freshly shaved and her shins are even whiter and nicked in two places by razor blades. A red belt is cinched tight, making her waist appear narrow and her hips broad. She isn't a tall woman. By most measures, she is slender, though the body has a roundness that marks five stubborn pounds--pounds sure to grow over time. She isn't lovely in the traditional ways, but youth and a good complexion help. Her fine black hair is long enough to kiss her shoulders; her eyes appear dark and exceptionally large. On stocking feet, she stands in the middle of a long hallway, her head tilted forward while her mouth opens and closes and again opens. The door to her left--the door she came out of--is slightly ajar. She pulls it shut now, applying pressure until the old latch catches with a sudden sharp click. Then she stares at the opposite door, drifting closer to it, listening. The loudest sound in the world is her soft, slow breathing. But then some little noise catches her attention, and on tiptoes, she glides down to the end of the hallway, into the only room in the apartment where a light still burns.

Metal moves, and the second door pops open. At that moment, the young woman is sitting on a hard chair, her back to the kitchen table. She watches a young man step out into the hallway. He wears jeans and nothing else, and judging by his manner, he wants something. He examines the door she just closed, then drifts a few steps to his left, finding nothing but the darkened living room. That most definitely is not what he needs. So he finally turns in her direction and notices her sitting alone in the kitchen, sitting with her legs crossed, illuminated from behind by the weak bulb above the sink.

"The john?" he whispers.

She nods and tilts her head.

The bathroom is beside the kitchen. He starts to fumble for the switch, closing the door all but the last little bit before clicking the light on.

The girl doesn't move, except to scratch the back of an ear and then drop the same finger down the front of her neck, tugging at the warmth of the old black felt. That slight pressure pulls open the robe enough to expose the tops of her breasts. While she waits, a seemingly endless stream of urine echoes inside the toilet bowl. Then comes the hard flush and the light goes off, and the man steps back into the hallway. He already wears a big smile, as if he spent his time in the bathroom rehearsing this moment. "So you're the roommate," he says.

She says, "Hi."

He steps into the kitchen, stops. "Did we wake you?"

"No."

"Good," he says.

She leans against the hard back of the chair, her chest lifting. "No, you didn't wake me." Her voice is deep for a woman and pleasantly rough. Then she shows him a half-wink, asking, "What do you think?"

He almost laughs. "Think about what?"

She doesn't answer.

He takes another little step forward.

"About my roommate," she says. "What do you think?"

The man scratches his bare navel and then his sternum, smiling as he phrases his response. "Sweet."

"My roommate is?"

Again, he says, "Sweet."

Which makes her laugh, and she stands up now and runs one hand through her black hair and flips her head twice and says, "You aren't."

"I'm not what?"

"You know what I mean," she says.

He is barefoot and shirtless and maybe in his middle twenties--a fit, strong young man with pale hair and abdominal muscles and jeans that could be tighter but not much so. "I'm not what?" he asks again.

"Fooling me," she says.

"No?"

"Not at all."

He shakes his head. "I didn't know I was trying to."

She says nothing.

He gestures over his shoulder. "She's sleeping."

"Is she?"

He doesn't answer.

"Sleep is good," she allows.

He watches her face, her body.

Again she uses her index finger, touching herself beneath her pale neck before pulling down, slowly dividing the robe until the inner faces of her breasts show in that gloomy yellow light. She is well-built and naked under the robe and her smile is girlish and warm and her deep rough voice says, "Show me yours, and I'll show you mine."

The young man takes a deep breath and holds it.

"No?" she asks.

"Maybe," he says.

"Maybe is the same as no," she says. "If you think about it."

"How's that?"

"Because every 'no' is just a maybe. It's attached to something you haven't gotten around to doing yet."

"Okay," he says.

She waits.

He puts a hand to his mouth, for an instant.

"Are you going to show me?" she asks.

"Why not?"

"Okay then."

With both hands, he unbuttons his jeans and unzips them and opens them until he is thoroughly exposed.

She studies nothing but his face.

"Now you," he mutters.

Very quickly, she pulls open the robe and then closes it again, in a blur, her face not quite smiling while she does it.

The young man blinks for a moment, as if trying to decide what he saw. Then he yanks up his pants and zips them.

"Do you hear her?" she asks.

He doesn't look back. He doesn't even blink now, watching her. With his face changing--smiling but with a grim, determined quality about the mouth and eyes--he says, "No, I don't hear anything. Nothing at all."

Just the same, he puts a finger to his mouth and turns abruptly, slipping back into the roommate's bedroom.

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She waits now, counting to five. Then on tiptoes, she moves back down the hallway, balancing speed with stealth. The house is old and a floorboard groans, but not too loudly. The door has been closed but not quite latched. She hears someone moving; a light shows beneath the door. Somebody says a few soft words--the young man asks a question, judging by the tone. But no answer comes. Standing with her head tilted forward, the girl breathes through her nose, big eyes dancing and her mouth pressed tiny as her right hand turns the old glass knob, lifting the workings until she can push at the door without making much noise.

The young man stands beside a narrow bed--a woman's bed with a headboard made of iron and a flowery bedspread pulled against the wall and embroidered pillows stacked haphazardly on the floor. With considerable care, he holds a long bare foot in the crook of one arm. With a fingertip, he brushes at the foot's sole, working to elicit a reflexive flinch. Nothing happens. The woman on the bed is naked, lying on her stomach, her face turned toward the watching girl. Like the door, her eyes are just a little open. But nothing seems to register in her mind. When the man drops the foot, the bare leg collapses. When he slides his hand over her rump and between her legs, she doesn't react. And when he fishes a lighter out of a back pocket and makes a tall flame and holds it close to the dreamy, drugged eyes, she does nothing to show that she sees anything at all.

Satisfied, he straightens and reaches for the lamp.

The girl in the black robe backs away from the door as the light goes out. Then she moves to the opposite end of the brief hallway, into the darkened living room, sitting on an old upholstered chair. She breathes hard now, even when she only sits. Nearly a minute passes. Her dimly lit face is a little wet with perspiration and her mouth is open, gulping at the air. When the man appears, she says nothing. She watches him return to the kitchen, watches him look around for a moment before glancing into the open bathroom. Has she slipped out of the apartment? He must be asking himself that question. Then he decides to investigate the other bedroom, giving the wooden door a little rap before putting his hand on the knob.

"Here," she calls out.

He jumps, just slightly. Then he steps into the living room, his face obscured by shadow but something in his posture implying a large, consuming smile. Quietly, he says, "Hey."

"What are you thinking?" she asks.

He shakes his head, laughing softly. "Guess."

"What's funny?"

"You."

She says nothing.

"Your roommate ... she told me you don't like men that much...."

"She said that?"

"Just now," he lies.

"Some men are nice," she says. "On the right occasion, I might."

"Really?"

She crosses her pink socks.

"Hey," he says. "Want a drink?"

"Maybe."

"What do you have?"

"Whatever you find," she says.

He acts satisfied, even smug. With a quick walk, he returns to the kitchen. A new light comes on when he opens the refrigerator, and there is the musical clink of bottles and the woosh of seals being broken. Then comes a pause, and he returns with the two beers held in one hand. One bottle is foaming slightly, while his free hand pushes into the front pocket of his jeans.

She breathes deeply and says, "Thanks," as she takes the foamy beer.

"No problem."

She sets the beer on the old carpet between her pink socks. "If you want," she says, "turn on a light."

He fumbles with a floor lamp until the switch clicks once, the bulb glowing at its weakest setting. Then he looks at her for a long moment before saying, "Let's do that game again."

"Show me yours?"

"Yeah."

She nods but then says, "I don't know." She picks up her beer and takes a long drink. "Maybe later."

"Maybe is the same thing as no. Is that right?"

"Good job," she replies.

"Got any other lessons for me?"

"If you want to hear them."

He settles on the nearest chair, on its edge, staring at her robe and the pale, razor-nicked legs. "Yeah, sure."

"Well, first of all, there's no such word as 'sure.'" Grinning at the floor between them, she says, "Nothing is ever sure, or certain, or guaranteed."

"Never?"

"Not in my experience," she reports, taking another long sip of the beer. "You can never know the full consequences of anything you do. Not before you do it. And most of the time, not even afterwards."

The young man leans back in his chair, smiling at everything.

"Suppose it's fifty years from tonight," she says.

"Oh, yeah?"

"Imagine you're an old man looking back. What do you see? Fifty years later, and if you had to describe the consequences of your actions ... if you had to explain your life to others ... how would you do it?"

"Know what?" he says. "You're just a little bit weird."

She doesn't respond.

"Not that weird is a bad thing." He drinks part of his beer. "I don't know. I guess I'd say, 'In my life, everybody had some fun.'"

"Fun?" She takes a last long drink and sets the bottle out of the way. "Is that what you call it?"

He shrugs. Laughs.

"Fifty years," she repeats. "It's going to be a different world. Full of changes, rich with possibilities. I think you'd agree to that, right?"

"I suppose."

"And you'll have led this long life where you said, 'Yeah, sure,' to every whim and desire that came into your head. Which is how a sociopath exists. But I bet that doesn't bother you, does it? Hearing yourself referred to as a sociopath. And you've probably never noticed the worst consequences of your actions."

The misery, the waste. The plain ugliness that you leave in your wake."

The young man closes his mouth and stares. After a moment, he asks, "Aren't you getting sleepy?"

"Should I be?"

He glances at her half-finished beer.

"Half a century," she says. "If you think about it, you can appreciate that there's going to be a wealth of new pills available. More powerful than any barbiturate, and infinitely more imaginative in their effects."

He squirms in his chair.

"Believe me, there are some amazing pharmaceutical products in that world. Pills that will make a person believe anything. Feel anything. Do anything, practically." She sits back, smiling with keen pleasure. "If a person were sufficiently clever, she could feed an old man a series of potent medications, and he would suddenly believe that he was young again, sitting inside an apartment that he hasn't visited for years. A young stallion enjoying an evening with two trusting, unfortunate women."

A tight, fearful voice asks, "Who are you?"

"The roommate," she replies. "I had been drinking that night, and when you came out of her room, we played our little game of 'Show Me.' Then you slipped a Mickey in my beer, and I fell asleep in this chair, and I woke up the next day, in my bed, with a miserable headache."

The man kicks with his legs, flails with his arms. But he doesn't possess the simple coordination to lift up off the chair.

"My friend, the first girl you drugged ... she eventually killed herself, you know. Three years later, with an entire bottle of pills." In an instant, the woman has become a seventy-year-old, a little heavy and shamelessly gray, staring down the hallway as if waiting for a door to open. "Maybe you weren't directly responsible for her death. I'll give you that much. Maybe she would have killed herself anyway. But I'll tell you this: I find it hard to believe that you made the life she had left any better."

He isn't young anymore. Speckled hands hang in front of his eyes, then he covers a still-handsome face. "So you slipped me something," he mutters. "So what're you going to do? Have your fun with me, is that it?"

"But I already have," she says.

Then she stands and with a calm slow voice explains, "Your body will carry you to one of two places now. You can return to her bedroom, if you want. You'll find her dead body waiting there. She'll look exactly as she did when I found her. And if you go there, you'll never wake up. You'll live out your days in a deep coma, and the only thing inside your head will be that room and a cold pale corpse.

"Or you can step into my room, which would be much, much worse."

He drops his hands. "How?"

"All of your victims ... the ones I could find who are still alive ... they're waiting behind my door. Silver-haired ladies, and young girls. Faces you'll know very well, and faces you probably won't even remember."

He glares at her.

"It's your choice," she tells him, walking slowly toward the hallway.

"What'll they do to me?" he squeaks.

She pauses. For a long moment, she stands on her tiptoes, letting a wide rich smile spread across her face. Then she pulls her red belt snug, and with genuine delight, she says, "What will they do? I don't think they know. Really, this will be the first time they've ever played the game."