

## VALLEY OF THE DOLLS

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Another hot Oklahoma day, dry clouds streaking faded sky and dervishes of swirling dust burnishing Joe Polecat's exposed elbow. As Polecat toiled down deserted blacktop, heat devils cavorted across the dusty hood of his speeding pickup. Two crows, examining a road kill, moved reluctantly out of his path. Joe didn't notice. He had other things on his mind.

Polecat passed a slow-moving pumping unit, siphoning the last oily sips from a dying reservoir. Other units, along with many scattered remnants of a once proud industry, littered both sides of the road, cluttering dry earth stained with oily water. Overhead, a lone hawk floated in a thermal updraft.

When Polecat reached the outskirts of town, a place no more than a wide spot in the road, he pulled into a pea-gravel parking lot surrounding a free-standing cinder block building. Broken neon lighting, mounted on two pilfered stands of drill pipe, proclaimed the place 'Valley of the Dolls'.

Shading his eyes from noon sun, Joe Polecat steered the pickup between a red Chevy and dented fatbob Harley. Waves of damp heat flooded the cab when he opened the door, but despite the stiffness in his back he didn't bother stretching, heading instead for the front door, side-stepping a drunk leaning against the wall.

Polecat squinted into murky darkness, his eyes accosted by smoke, ears by loud music. But the air conditioning felt like instant heaven, chilling his sweaty neck as he waited for his eyes to adjust to darkness. As they did a half-nude waitress encircled his waist with slender arms, pressing her breasts into the small of his back, causing him to stiffen reflexively.

"What'cha having, Geronimo?"

"Pitcher," he said.

"Smile, Chief. Can't be all that bad."

Polecat's expression remained dark, despite the young woman's friendly prodding. Maintaining his frown, he nodded toward the bar circling center stage. The mousy-haired waitress held Polecat's stare a moment, then puckered her lips and made lewd kissing sounds. When Polecat refused to respond to her sexual antics, she wriggled her nipples between thumb and forefinger, and then kissed him on the cheek.

"You need something, just whistle. I'm Anita."

Polecat's features remained impassive as Anita winked and backed away through the crowd. When his eyes finally dilated enough to see, he glanced over his shoulder at the dozens of other patrons - Bikers in leather and chains, soldiers with shaved heads and roughnecks in oily overalls. They filled the large room to frantic capacity and Joe Polecat had to elbow his way to an empty chair at center stage.

Polecat's dollar tip earned him a wet kiss. When Anita returned with his pitcher of beer. Ignoring her, he wiped lipstick away with the back of his hand. Anita simply shrugged and eased away through the crowd. After draining the first glass, he quickly poured another, then let himself fade into cool darkness as his eyes gradually adjusted to darkness, and pulsating neon flooding center stage.

Then jukebox music halted abruptly, replaced by the restless rumble of several

dozen prairie voyeurs rattling their beer bottles. A new dancer was preparing to come on stage and shrill whistles began piercing the darkness. Polecat cocked his head for a better view of the wood stage.

Staggering up the short ramp a pretty blue-eyed blonde girl, scantily clad in only a bra and gold sequined g-string, licked her lips, smiling wantonly at the whistling, cat-calling audience staring back at her. When the jukebox began again, she gyrated across the stage in a drunken simulation of sensuality, moving her arms and twisting her body. Above blaring rock and roll, a high-pitched voice shrilled.

"Hey baby, show us your snatch."

When someone put two soft hands on Polecat's shoulders, he knew who it was without turning to look.

"What are you doing here, Joe?"

Polecat pivoted slowly in his chair, gazing up into a dancer's dark eyes. "Pete Thompson said I'd find you here."

The young woman's long hair draped in raven waves over bronze shoulders, and reflections in her dark eyes rippled momentarily like black paint in a blender. Joe's neck grew warm as he sensed the gaze of everyone around them, admiring the attractive dancer, a woman with smooth skin brown as his own.

"Pete's right. I am a dancer."

Glancing over his shoulder at the girl on stage, Polecat said, "Like her?"

When Victoria shut her eyes, Polecat could almost feel the hot flush spreading from her neck to her face. Opening them slowly, she stared at the floor.

"Mom send you?"

In a voice barely audible above loud music and grating background voices, Polecat said, "Mom doesn't know you work here. Maybe you can tell me why you are working here?"

Victoria remained silent and Polecat leaned forward, touching her hand, causing her to wrench away and back into a drunk at the table behind her. The drunk groped her leg before she could move away, and after an apologetic smile to show he hadn't offended her, she backed away, returning Polecat's derisive smile with a glaring frown.

"I don't have an answer. Least one you'd understand."

"Try me."

"Vicky, you're up next," someone called from behind the bar. "Have to go," she said. "Finish your beer and get out of here before you embarrass us both."

"Will it embarrass you to have your big brother watch you strip and do squat thrusts while these monkeys masturbate in the dark?"

Vicky slowly shook her dark mane. "I don't do that. These men come to watch me dance. That's all."

Glancing at the girl weaving drunken circles on stage, Polecat said, "You call that dancing?"

"What about yourself?" she shot back. "You've been here before."

"Different," he said.

Victoria tried to smile, but her quivering lower lip betrayed her true feelings. Bending forward, she leaned against the table so no one else could hear her reply.

"Why is it different?"

"Because people are laughing behind your back," he said, continuing his condemning stare.

"And who are they laughing at? You or me?"

"I don't dance in a titty bar."

"Yeah, and I suppose all your friends have great respect for the way you earn a living? Damn garbage truck driver!"

"Honest work."

"So is dancing."

"This isn't dancing, Vicky. This is obscene. I feel sorrow for you and shame for our family."

"Only thing you feel is your throbbing head and queasy gut when you wake up Sunday morning with puke on your pillow."

"Doesn't change things," Polecat said, his accusing gaze unwavering.

Victoria gently touched his hand and said in a whisper, "I'm sorry, Joe. I can't expect you to ever understand. I've wanted to dance since I was a little girl."

"But why here?"

"Because we all have decisions to make and we don't always have many choices."

Polecat folded his arms and shook his head violently. "These scumbags don't care if you dance or parade around on all fours. In fact I'm sure that's what they would prefer."

"I do it for myself, Joe. Not them, and not you." When Polecat didn't reply, she said, "Just get out of here. Please."

Joe Polecat remained in his chair, noticing as he did glints of sadness flicker and fade in the darkest portion of Victoria's eyes. Her lower lip continued to quiver and she drew a breath, almost losing the tiny halter covering her breasts when she forcefully exhaled. Clutching the halter, she hurried away through the crowded tables, never speaking another word.

Polecat remained outwardly impassive but his own shoulders began shaking in an almost imperceptible tremble. Sitting straight up in the rickety bar chair, he locked his folded arms against his chest and turned toward center stage.

Everyone's stare was locked on the blue-eyed dancer and no one seemed to have noticed the confrontation. Enveloped in her third song, she had already discarded the sequined halter covering her breasts. As he watched, she yanked on her golden g-string.

With eyes like a stalking wolf, she promenaded across stage on hands and knees, flicking blonde hair and protruding her tongue like a lascivious lizard. When she spotted Polecat, she stared at him like a hound on point. Her eyes narrowed even further at Polecat's frown.

Pulling the snap of her g-string, the blonde dancer twirled it once around her head, sniffed it, and then tossed it around Polecat's neck. With a satisfied smirk she flipped over, wrapping long legs around her own neck. Contorted this way, she rolled around stage, displaying her shaved privates in a vulgar sexual parody that brought whoops and whistles from the drunken crowd.

Polecat turned away but some perverse curiosity caused him to return his gaze to the stage, locking on to the young woman's sweating body, dirty from the dust-tracked floor. She writhed like an injured reptile, gyrating in rapidly widening circles, not

forgetting Polecat until the music ceased.

When the song ended, the blonde dancer collected the dozen or so dollar bills scattered across stage, and then retrieved her minuscule outfit in a near modest, slight bend of the knees. Polecat folded his arms and turned away, trying to lose himself in the remaining slug of beer, until a hand touched his shoulder.

"Another pitcher, Chief?"

Polecat nodded. After returning from the bar, Anita filled his glass, sipping from it before handing it to him. Confused by noise, lights and his own rampant emotions, and tipsy after drinking the first pitcher of beer, Polecat studied the rose tattoo on her breast and the strange gold fleck in her left eye. She licked foam from her lips with an overt flick of her tongue, and Polecat's dollar tip earned him another wet kiss, quickly followed by solitude as she departed to wait on someone else.

Attracted by the booming jukebox, Polecat's gaze returned to center stage. As beautiful Victoria appeared through neon-lighted darkness, he held his breath.

Except for Vicky's near-nudity, she seemed a beautiful princess, ascending dirty steps to a royal throne. Behind Polecat the anonymous audience whooped and whistled their approval. Sipping his beer, he found he couldn't look her in the eye and his face and neck grew hot and progressively redder. Enduring the first song, he found Victoria's costume, albeit skimpy, little more revealing than a bathing suit. Still, her actions during the second number made his throat constrict and his dark eyes bulge with accelerating embarrassment.

The antithesis of the previous dancer, Victoria was tall and dark, moving across stage effortlessly as a dandelion wafting in the breeze. Like a ballerina, she stood on her toes, pirouetting in slow measured circles, her long raven hair billowing in synchronous waves. Dark liquid eyes mesmerized and quieted the audience, possessing them with fluid movement and measured grace. Then, halfway through her second song, Victoria whisked off the tiny halter covering her breasts. This she did during a slow, controlled turn. As a single entity, the crowd gasped.

Joe Polecat watched, along with bikers, soldiers and roughnecks, considering the supple beauty of his sister's practiced movement, his skin flushing with rising anger. Unable to forget the leering, salivating creatures gaping at his beautiful sister, he turned away and his head began to shake with a subtle flutter that crept slowly into his shoulders and down the base of his spine.

Victoria's last number soon began, sheathing its patrons in a tight knot of rapt concentration as the rock ballad's bass notes resonated through murky darkness, entwining them in a rhythmic, symbiotic merger, her movements melding with lilting strains. Nothing disturbed her as she revolved slowly like a holographic vision in a giant music box. Finally, revealing her ultimate vulnerability to a hypnotized audience, she whisked off the last remaining garment.

Screaming shouts and wild applause punctuated Victoria's curtsied finale, smiling at the ovation like a prima ballerina acknowledging queen's praise. After daintily retrieving her outfit, she prepared to exit center stage, but Joe Polecat could take no more. His stoic demeanor dissolved like the dying strobe, his face flushing bright red and neck muscles quivering in the full throes of a sudden quaking fit. Out of control, he hoisted the half-filled pitcher of beer and hurled it at his sister.

Victoria dodged the tumbling missile, watching it crash into the wall-length mirror behind stage. An explosion of flying shards liberated the audience from its spellbound lethargy, and angry patrons quickly closed around Polecat. A fat security guard bullied his way through the crowd. When he reached for Polecat, the tall Native American took a round-house swing and knocked him on his ass. With fists raised, he pivoted in a semi-circle, daring anyone to touch him. Someone did.

Willowy arms encircled Polecat's and the gentle pressure of soft breasts in the small of his back calmed him like water on a lighted fuse. With fury bleeding from his soul, he allowed the woman to back him slowly through the crowd to the front door.

"Get the hell outa here an don't ever come back," the fat security guard blurted out.

Someone started another song on the jukebox and another dancer quickly took center stage, deftly avoiding broken shards littering her path. Bar patrons grumbled, but returned to their tables to consume more beer and watch the next performance. Mousy-haired Anita pushed Joe Polecat out the door into bright August sunlight and followed him outside to the graveled parking lot. He halted when she shouted at him.

"What right have you got pulling a stunt like that?"

Naked, except for a yellow strip of tawdry cloth barely covering her dark pubic hair, she waited for Polecat's answer. It never came. Instead his apathetic stare caused her to shield her bare breasts with a perfunctory arm.

A pickup passed on the highway, honking its horn at Anita, momentarily raising a dust devil that raced across the blacktop before disappearing in the ditch. Heat from late afternoon sun felt like a blast furnace, causing perspiration to form on Polecat's forehead and trickle down his neck. Wiping it away, he continued staring at Anita in silence.

For a long moment they stood, like two gunfighters preparing to draw their weapons, facing each other. Brilliant sunlight revealing all Anita's physical flaws, began sapping her self-confidence and even the rose tattoo on her breast seemed to fade. Polecat stared at stretch marks on her breasts and belly, blinking as he studied her slightly bowed legs. After gazing at angry scars of adolescent acne on her almost pretty face, he finally turned away.

Sensing Polecat's frowning, transparent derision, and pity expressed by his silence, Anita's shoulders sagged. Taking a single step backward, she tripped on a rock in the uneven parking lot and almost fell. Quivering with emotion, she said, "Victoria is beautiful. Everyone loves to watch her dance. You should be ashamed for doing what you did. If you didn't want to see, you shouldn't have come in here."

Polecat didn't answer, unsure of what he had seen, or how he felt. Bowing his head he returned to the waiting pickup, lowering the windows to expel humid super-heated air trapped inside the cab before cranking the engine. It felt like the last agonizing breath of a bursting lung.

As he pulled out of the parking lot, Joe Polecat glanced again at sad Anita, her arms now tightly folded across her bare breasts. Numbed by emotion and too much beer, he raced the pickup's engine, spun its tires in loose gravel and drove away, back down the lonely blacktop road from where he had come.

**END**