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**This entire story appears in *The Whirligig*, AND it is also the opening chapter of Ann's terrific novel, *Girl Detectives*, which can (and should) be purchased, P.O.D., here:**

[http://www.amazon.com/Girl-Detectives-Amateurs-Ann-Sterzinger/dp/143825184X/ref=sr\\_1\\_1?ie=UTF8&s=books&qid=1298318338&sr=8-1](http://www.amazon.com/Girl-Detectives-Amateurs-Ann-Sterzinger/dp/143825184X/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&s=books&qid=1298318338&sr=8-1)

**Maurinette Meede, or the Joy of the Oppressor  
by Ann Sterzinger**

After 20 years as a restaurant critic, Maurinette Meede planned her days to keep her appetite sharp: only amateurs judged things they didn't desire. One clammy November Saturday, Maurinette planned to test an authentic-looking new trattoria with a late lunch. She stayed between her mint-colored sheets till noon, then took to the couch with a cup of cafe au lait, two cigarettes, and a catalog of Erte prints.

At three she dressed, polished her black cat's-eye glasses, and forced herself out of the warm high-rise; she bought the new issue of *Chiculture Monthly* from her favorite little Pakistani fellow as she slithered down the street, hoping the magazine had run some less-than-revolting photos with her December contribution.

When she got to the restaurant the door was locked. It was five minutes past the posted opening hour, but the too-handsome man pushing a broom around the window tables matched her glare. "Idiots," Maurinette growled.

As she stood on the empty patio, frozen and smoking, her equilibrium already on the run, she paged through the magazine to find her article: *Outrage!* What they'd done to it was madness. Nothing like fighting on an empty stomach.

Wishing she'd had espresso for breakfast, Maurinette made her way to the magazine's offices, ground out her *Gitane* on the wall in the foyer, walked to the desk, threw her head back, and sang: "RAAAAAAAPE!"

"Er, no thank you," said the receptionist. "I just had some."

"Where's the editor, dear?" said Maurinette. Thank God for e-mail—she'd never set foot in the place.

"Which one?"

"The one in charge of tearing sentences into little pieces, I suppose. I'm Maurinette Meede, the critic. Don't you know who edits me?"

"Don't you?"

"*Sacre coeur!*" said Maurinette, and slammed her copy of *Chiculture* on the counter.

"Look, they all work on the second floor. Why don't you go up and see if anything looks familiar."

"Well, thank you for your kind and attentive help, Miss Sphinx." Maurinette hopped in the elevator, revived by her own wit.

As the door opened on the second floor, Maurinette got winged in the head with a rubber football.

“Sorry,” said a whiskey-scented girl who ran into the elevator after her missile, then shot out again and around the corner. Footfalls, a crash, a young man’s voice: “That was in! That was—fuck you, Dombrowski, I’m going home!”—followed by the brief appearance of the young man, also whiskey-scented, as he darted around Maurinette into the elevator. After an eerie silence, an unnervingly tall man around Maurinette’s age, in trim black pants, a brown shirt buttoned to the collar, and red socks (no shoes), went gliding down a row of shallow, scum green cubicles to Maurinette’s right. He released the tiniest wheeze. Then he too disappeared, and the only signs of habitation were the clank of ventilation ducts and a faint nose of day-old Chinese.

“Never be timid, it’s merely annoying!” Maurinette’s mother had always told her. She stamped among the smelly hutches, then spied the red-sock creature through the glass door of an office. His back was to the door and he was wearing headphones, viewing and reviewing the same ten seconds of the forest-fire scene from Bambi on a small black-and-white screen. His legs, which rather resembled Bambi’s, were propped up on a stack of unopened UPS packages. He smoothed his combover with one hand and worried the buttons of the VCR remote with the other. Maurinette raised her fist to knock but then heard a clink behind her—as of scotch bottle on snifter.

She followed the sound to a cubicle carpeted with takeout bags and crumpled pornography. Ugh. The football-tossing female sat inside swearing at a computer game. A roll of flesh flopped stentatiously between her jeans and a cutoff Doctor Who T-shirt.

There were children even public television couldn’t save.

The girl pointed at a bourbon-filled jelly jar. “I’m not on the clock.”

“Are you an editor?”

“No, I’m a copy editor—the editors are probably in bed. Are you from advertising?”

“In bed? It’s four!”

“You obviously don’t work here. Who are you and who let you in?”

“I am Maurinette Meede.”

“Oh.” The girl finished her drink and poured another. “I’m Pill Dombrowski.”

“I’m here about what you did to my fondue retrospective. I am fed up with you people! That is the last word I will ever write for this—“

“That’s what you said the last five times. I thought we did all right by that thing, considering...”

“Look, right here. My original sentence had sense, had structure, had...”

“Lessee...yeah, right there we had to take out ‘ineffable.’ We were pretty sure you meant to say ‘ineffaceable,’ but you weren’t answering your phone. So we axed it to be on the safe side.”

“I said exactly what I meant to say! Listen to the rhythm: “Retro Palace makes an ineffable statement of privilege and grace’!”

Pill snorted. “Yes, and you had just described it for several hundred words, so we were pretty sure it could be done.” Maurinette strove to express towering rage by popping out her eyes. Pill sprawled back into a pile of comic books.

“Lady. Look.” She flipped through the dictionary, then pushed the mustard-stained tome at Maurinette’s face.

“Just tell that literal-minded subnormal she can keep abreast of the restaurant scene herself!”

“You’d better not be lying this time.”

“Give me a piece of stationery!” Maurinette commanded. Pill gave her a Wendy’s napkin. “With all due respect”—Maurinette’s brow furrowed slightly as she worked the Bic through the grease—“I resign, you MANIAC!” She signed the document and dropped it on the desk. “Get this to the appropriate party.”

Pill taped the napkin to the nearest office door and returned to her computer game....



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