

**Dave Copeland**

## Sparkle Plenty

Ron Gonen wanted to swing.

Long before he arrived in New York City in December of 1981, Gonen had heard all about the swingers clubs which dominated the city's seedier side in the pre-HIV days of the late 1970's and early 1980's. They were all-night, couples-only orgies for the uninhibited. The most famous clubs were on the Upper East Side and weren't really clubs at all, but apartments that had been designed for carefree sex: endless reels of pornographic movies playing in one room, every inch of available floor space covered with mattresses in another room and every inch of ceiling space covered with mirrors in a third room.

Doormen charged a modest fee – no more than \$100 per couple– but only the seediest clubs would admit single men. And that was Gonen's dilemma: he was suddenly single, but he didn't dare ask any of the more refined women he had met through his growing cocaine trade to accompany him to a swingers' club.

He called Alexander Algor.

“You need to give me the number of a woman who will go to a swingers' club with me,” Gonen said. “She doesn't have to fuck me. I don't care if she walks out as soon as they let us in. I just need to get in the door.”

It was no surprise to Algor that Gonen wanted to go to a swingers club. Since he had formalized his separation from his wife back in Israel, Gonen had been out of control in his lustful pursuits. On more than one occasion, Algor had called a woman he was dating only to hear Gonen's voice in the background. It seemed as soon as Algor introduced a woman to Gonen – even if he made it clear that he was romantically interested in the woman – Gonen would sleep with her.

Algor, thinking he would get a little bit of payback on his friend, flipped through his address book and stopped at a number he hadn't called in months.

“I know just the person,” Algor said and then gave Gonen the phone number for Honey Tessman.

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“He probably figured we’d drive each other crazy and kill each other,” Tessman said when she recalled their first meeting. “Alex was mad at me for breaking his heart and he was mad at Ron for stealing all of his girlfriends.”

Tessman had dated Algor. Tessman had dated a lot of men.

By the time Gonen called in June of 1982, she was 32, divorced and engaged to three other men. Her long list of previous boyfriends contained powerful and, in many cases, ruined New York men. She had had a long term relationship with Tony Sirico, the mobster who would go on to star as a caricature of his real life persona in *The Sopranos* and Mafia movies. She dated vice presidents of Columbia Records and Guess? Jeans, hit men, lounge singers, professional athletes and – her favorite type of boyfriend – cocaine dealers. Her boyfriend at the time, a high profile head of an advertising agency, was old and boring and rich. He had given Tessman a job, which was more to say he had given her a paycheck and an office she could show up to in her pajamas to wait out the effects of the previous night’s party. In return, she had given him a freebase cocaine addiction.

Tessman had been thrown out of more high schools and dropped out of more colleges than she could remember. She had a daughter from her first marriage, but, because of her explosive personality, the 10-year-old girl lived with Tessman’s more stable family members on Long Island. She had shot an ex-boyfriend in the leg over an imagined dispute. Another time, when one of her gangster boyfriends got involved with the Lufthansa heist made famous in the movie *Goodfellas*, Tessman’s car had been fire bombed.

“Your daughter might want to rethink the people she spends her time with,” the police officer who was sent to file the report on the burned out car told her mother.

When she was a teenager, a doctor had diagnosed her with “arrested development,” telling Tessman’s mother “She’s stuck at two years old. She likes being two-years-old. She doesn’t *want* to grow up and she *isn’t* going to grow up.”

Life hadn’t always been so chaotic. Honey Tessman was the youngest of three daughters, each born seven years apart, in a tight-knit Jewish family. Her mother tended to the girls’ schooling, even vowing to work cleaning toilets if she needed to help pay for their college educations. She wouldn’t need to; her husband owned a successful dry-cleaning plant that serviced most of the cleaners on Long Island and the outer Burroughs.

Roberta, the oldest, would become a teacher and marry a psychiatrist. Paula would marry the eventual owner of a successful chain of locksmith stores. Honey would be the first student expelled from her high school for smoking pot.

But it didn’t matter – Tessman would always have a special place in her father’s heart. On the day she was born with a full head of black curls, her father – a diehard Dick Tracy fan – bounded into the Long Beach house and told Paula and Roberta “Your

mother just gave birth to Sparkle Plenty,” a reference to the comic strip character’s beautiful girlfriend.

The infant was given the biggest bedroom in the house, and displaced Paula grew jealous. Tessman said she was often sick as a child. She would later deduce that all the friends that Paula had brought over to play with the baby were actually sick with a whole host of childhood maladies. Paula was getting even by making Honey ill. The doctor that lived on their block prescribed penicillin so often that Tessman became immune to the effects.

Tessman’s bedroom was at the front of the house on the quiet, tree-line residential street. When she was seven, she began staying up at night to protect her family from “the visitor.” She never saw the visitor – only the long shadow the ominous man cast on the ceiling of her bedroom.

“I was going to stay up all night and protect my family until he went away,” Tessman said. “But he never went away.”

Tessman never told her parents or her sisters about the visitor. It would be years later – and long after the same doctor prescribed Seconal to help Honey the insomniac sleep – that she and her mother determined that the shadow didn’t come from an unwanted visitor but from an old suit of her father’s that hung near a window of an adjoining room.

Seconal is a barbiturate used as a sedative and hypnotic. It is now used sparingly, but in the 1950’s doctors would regularly prescribe it to children who had trouble sleeping. The problem was that it didn’t help Tessman sleep.

“It got me high and I liked it,” Tessman said. “I wasn’t going to go to sleep and lose that feeling.”

When Honey told Gonen that she had been high since she was seven years old, she wasn’t really exaggerating.

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At first they hated each other.

Gonen was the brash cocaine dealer, new on the Manhattan scene, and had been calling her for the past six weeks. Sometimes she would call him back, but she often missed him as Gonen was still making frequent trips to Tel Aviv in early 1982. When he finally showed up at the office where Tessman was working for her ad exec boyfriend, she made Gonen wait in the lavish reception area outside of her office. When she did work, Honey could be a very good saleswoman. She’d bypass the low-level ad buyers in charge of purchasing print campaigns and call the secretary of the Chief Executive directly.

“Tell him his Honey is calling,” she would coo into the phone.

Often, the flustered secretary would forward the call straight through to her boss to avoid the red-faced exchange of a telephone message from a perceived mistress. Once she had the confused CEO on the line, Honey would drip sex appeal through the line, and more than one Fortune 500 company bought an expensive ad campaign that the company didn't *really* need.

Gonen didn't know any of this. All he knew was that he was killing more than an hour thumbing through magazines. For months he had tried to meet Honey, and now she would only meet him in her office and only after he had grown thoroughly aggravated in the waiting room.

But when she emerged from her office, Gonen's anger melted. She still had the head of black curls and penetrating eyes. Her body was tight and Gonen sensed that if there was any woman in New York who could keep up with his frantic pace, Honey was it. He didn't hesitate to join her and another man for dinner that evening.

What Gonen didn't know was that the man, who picked them up in Honey's office in a brand new Mercedes, thought that *he* was Honey's boyfriend.

Later that evening, when the soon-to-be ex-boyfriend grew drunk and tired of the flirting between Gonen and Honey, he rammed the Mercedes into an embankment on Lexington Avenue in Manhattan. He later said he was hoping to kill – or at least seriously injure – all three of them.

On their second date, Honey took Gonen to a restaurant in Little Italy. The owner came to their table and kissed Honey on the cheek, then smiled warmly as he shook Gonen's hand.

“That's Vinny, my ex-boyfriend,” Honey said after the man had walked away. “He's going to poison your food. He's very jealous.”

She had said it so matter-of-factly that Gonen thought she was joking. The next morning he called to tell her he had been up all night with a severe case of diarrhea.

But if Honey didn't destroy him and if one of her ex-boyfriends didn't kill him, then Gonen saw potential in their relationship, at least in a business sense. In between car wrecks and tainted dinners, she led him through a string of hip, New York City nightclubs. She seemed to know everybody in the clubs, from the wealthy, pretentious patrons to the jazz musicians who sweated on stage into the Manhattan dawn. They all greeted her with a hug and a kiss and many would whisper into her ear.

“Got anything?”

Gonen had been giving Honey cocaine since the first day they met and, like he did for all his new clients, he never asked for money up front. Tessman's appetite for the drug, however, exceeded all of his other clients. She routinely kept an ounce loose in her purse and, whenever the need arose, would use a solid silver straw a friend had purchased at Tiffany's to take a quick hit.

So when Tessman offered excuses as to why she didn't have money, Gonen wasn't surprised.

"We were taking the boat to Fire Island," Tessman would say. "We were sitting on the deck and when I opened the bag, it all blew away."

Gonen knew she was lying, but it didn't matter. While she was tearing through a half kilo a month on her own, she was introducing him to dozens of clients who would purchase that much product in a week. Honey was quickly becoming a cost of doing business for Gonen, but in return he got introduced to clients he never would have met otherwise. And it was the *right* clientele, the upper middle class types, the people who suddenly had six-figure salaries or trust funds and not much else to do in their free time outside of self destruction.

Beyond the business benefits, Gonen had always had a soft spot for whores, hustlers and scam artists. It had started when he was just 19 and visiting different European and Middle Eastern ports with the Israeli Navy. After being initiated into the world of prostitutes by older sailors, Gonen went on a binge that involved 30 hookers who spoke 17 different languages over a six-week period in the winter of 1966. It would have been more, had they not arrived in a French port at the same time as an American ship and found that all the prostitutes had upped their prices five-fold.

As he got older, he learned to like his women with an edge. Even Doris, his first wife, was a hustler. They had met in a Munich nightclub in the early 1970s. Doris earned as much as \$500 per night luring out-of-town businessmen into certain bars and getting them to purchase the most expensive bottles of champagne. By day, she was a frightfully skilled shop lifter.

If anyone could handle Honey Tessman, it was Ron Gonen. Or so he thought.

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As he continued to court Honey, Gonen grew obsessed with the quality of his cocaine.

"The last thing I need," he said, "is some model standing on a runway with a bloody nose because of my product."

But that was an extreme case. Even cocaine of average quality would not suffice for people who demanded top quality in everything they purchased, be it the wristwatches

they wore or the narcotics they ingested. What Gonen really wanted was a steady supply of the best cocaine at the best price, and the more he learned about the Gotham market, the more he realized the transcontinental trips to see Ran Ephraim, his Israeli supplier who was dealing kilos from a drab motel room in Los Angeles, weren't helping him meet any of those goals.

"It's good, but it's not great," Honey would inevitably say after she had sampled the latest batch Gonen had flown back from Los Angeles. Honey would know. "You really need to try Spencer's blow."

Gonen had met Spencer a few times and, more infrequently, had sampled his cocaine when Honey was in the mood to share. Spencer was a fixture in Honey's favorite jazz clubs, a soundman who had made live recordings of everyone from the Gil Evans Orchestra to Chaka Kahn.

"You mean Black Kojak?" Gonen said, referring to Spencer's dark skin and shaved head. "Why don't you take me over to his place so I can talk with him?"

"I can't do that," Honey said. "I owe him money. Something like \$3,000."

Spencer was a Vietnam vet in his mid-fifties and cast an intimidating presence from behind the soundboard of the nightclubs he frequented. He was rumored to be importing five kilos of cocaine straight from Peru each month and had a reputation for not tolerating the presence of people who owed him money. He was a likable guy, but Gonen could see why Honey would be worried about bumping into him with such a large debt.

"Call him up," Gonen said. "I'll take care of whatever you owe him."

It wasn't just that Ran Ephraim's cocaine was of slightly-above average quality and not all that special. And it wasn't solely because Gonen was starting to dread the cross-country flights – on the contrary, Gonen sometimes enjoyed getting away from Honey's frantic pace. It had more to do with how Gonen had been trained as a criminal.

Dating back to his time in Germany, Gonen had prided himself on being an independent gangster. In Munich, Sammy Merckel -- his criminal mentor -- had shown him how to break into buildings, crack safes and deal with fences, but he had also stressed that Gonen break out on his own and not get too close to anyone.

Sometimes, particularly when he was young and inexperienced, being independent had had disastrous consequences. There was the time he had jumped out of a second story window of a theater he was robbing and shattered his ankle because his equally inexperienced lookout man had panicked and run away. The injury was permanent and would lead to his recapture when he broke out of a German prison a few years later. But not relying on others had usually served him well; if one fence had wanted to short him on the price for a rare painting or a gaudy set of jewels, Gonen could

go on to the next fence. And if an underworld accomplice got pinched, chances are he wouldn't know Gonen and his habits well enough to trade information and testimony for freedom or a reduced sentence.

Of course, Sammy had also warned him to stay away from the drug trade, saying it was reserved for a lower-class of criminal, but Gonen had conveniently ignored that bit of wisdom since arriving in the United States.

Gonen needed Ran Ephraim, but he also needed half a dozen other suppliers who were capable of delivering quality product on a consistent basis. If Ephraim hit a dry patch or, even worse, if Ephraim got busted, Gonen's business could be shut down in a matter of hours.

Spencer lived in an East Village loft that took up an entire floor of a converted warehouse. The industrial elevator took Honey and Gonen to a dimly-lit alcove and, when the elevator gate pulled back, all that was before them was a thick steel door, the kind one was more apt to find on a loading dock than in the threshold of a luxurious loft apartment. Honey rapped on the door.

A set of eyes peeked through a slot in the door, and then Gonen heard a series of locks, chains and deadbolts being undone on the inside. The door slid up and there stood Spencer, hands on his hips with his immaculate loft spread out behind him. There were tens of thousands of dollars of sound recording equipment neatly arranged on one side of the apartment, and stylish furniture spread out on the other.

"Do you have my money?" Spencer said to Honey without acknowledging Gonen.

"He does," Honey said. "Do you have any blow?"

As a question, it was an understatement. In a kitchen area that had obviously never been used for cooking were all the makings of a cocaine department store. Five kilos, each one individually packaged into plastic sausage casings like the ones found in any New York City deli, were stacked neatly on the counter. A sixth was opened, its contents partially spilled out onto a table, next to a massive stainless steel machine that looked as if it had been pillaged from a bakery, down to the thin layer of white powder that covered its stainless steel surface.

Before Spencer could complete the lengthy process of affixing the pad locks, deadbolts and chains to the garage door that served as the entrance to his apartment, there was another rap on the door. "Fucking hell," Spencer said as he did the process in reverse for a second time. The well-dressed man, who Gonen guessed was in his twenties, would be the first of three visitors Spencer would service in the short time he and Honey were in his loft.

Gonen settled Honey's tab, which was closer to \$4,000 than the "something like \$3,000" she had said. Spencer served another client, once again going through the lengthy process of opening up his fortified loft, and then gave Gonen a quick tour. The machine on the kitchen table, he explained, was used for cutting cocaine with inert agents. "Everyone thinks cocaine makes you have to take a shit," Spencer said. "It's not the cocaine – it's the laxatives people use to cut it." The cocaine that went in one end was as pure as it had been on the day it was processed in Peru; when the cocaine came out on the other end it was packaged in the neat, kilo bricks that Gonen was more accustomed to seeing. It had also been cut and was less pure – but still more potent than anything Ran Ephraim could deliver. As an added bonus, Spencer didn't use laxatives to cut his coke, instead opting for a more expensive chemical compound that was sold in head shops.

"So are you going to sell me the cocaine on that end of the machine or *that* end of the machine?" Gonen joked, pointing to pure product.

"From what I hear, I should sell you anything you want," Spencer said. "Honey says you have a talent for moving product."

Gonen told Spencer he would pay him in cash, upfront, and that he would never ask for or accept credit. In return, Spencer would make sure their transactions would be done in private; there would be no low-level dealers stopping by like the three who had already been in the loft that evening to catch a glimpse of Gonen.

"They say you're bringing in five keys a month," Gonen said.

"That sounds about right," Spencer said.

"You better order more," Gonen said, "or you won't have any left to sell to anyone else."

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By February of 1983 Gonen had made good on his promise to purchase five kilos of cocaine from Spencer each month. But it wasn't enough. He had a second connection in Miami and was networking with drug smugglers and Dominican gangsters that were working out of Spanish Harlem.

At the same time, his list of retail customers was growing. Gonen was developing a niche: the affluent New Yorkers who were picking up on the new and deadly trend. And that niche was being carved in large part because of Honey. She introduced him to hairdressers on Long Island who dealt small quantities to bored housewives. New Jersey mobsters, after decades of resisting the drug trade, were happy to meet Gonen. In turn, the Mafiosos introduced Gonen to construction workers on the mob-controlled jobs, and they too seemed to be more than willing dump half a paycheck in Gonen's pocket. Doormen at nightclubs, from the punk rock bastion CBGB to the more refined Upper East Side jazz clubs, all knew Gonen by name.

Gonen never presented himself as a dealer. Instead, he liked to be portrayed as a well connected guy who could always get quality cocaine at a relatively decent price. To ease the paranoia of potential clients, he would occasionally do a line, and he always sampled any product he planned to purchase. But he didn't do it enough to even be classified as a social user, and addiction never entered his mind.

Until one night.

"Try this," Honey said, offering Gonen her well-used freebase pipe. The pipe was made of glass and warm to the touch from Honey's constant use.

Gonen had been drinking. He had been hounding Honey for months to slow down on her cocaine use, which now amounted to several ounces every week. There are a little bit more than 28 grams in an ounce, and a social user might use a gram or two over the course of a Saturday night. Honey used a gram or two for breakfast.

But it was the freebasing, the act of cooking the cocaine into a rock that could then be smoked in a glass pipe like Honey's, that bothered him the most. The high, he had been told, was even more intense and more instantaneous than snorting, and freebasers were the basest of all addicts.

"Are you fucking kidding me?" Gonen said, eyeing the pipe.

"You're such a fucking hypocrite," Honey said angrily. "It's *fun*, Ron. You're making all this money and working all the time. Just have fun for once."

He glared at her, but was distracted by the ringing telephone. It was Ran Ephraim.

Ephraim had been calling daily for the past week, and until that night Gonen had been able to duck his calls. Everyone – from his retail clients to his suppliers in New York and Miami – was happy with Gonen's growing empire. That is, everyone but Ran Ephraim was happy. Ran Ephraim was miserable. Every connection made in New York, every purchase that could be done at the 10<sup>th</sup> Street Baths, the Bowery or in his own apartment at the Chelsea Hotel, was money coming out of Ephraim's pocket.

"What? Is business bad?" Ephraim said without saying "Hello."

"No," Gonen slipped. "Business is fine."

"Either business is bad, or you're cutting me out," Ephraim hissed "Either business is bad or you're fucking me."

Gonen explained the risk involved and the quality of the product he was purchasing in New York. He explained that it was Ephraim's supplier, Mango, and not

Gonen who was pulling a fast one because by the time Mango brought the cocaine to Los Angeles it was not nearly as pure as the cocaine Gonen bought in Miami or from Spencer for the same price or less. He described his growing retail trade, and how every time he spent two days flying to and from Los Angeles, it was two lost selling days.

“I’m taking over. I sell it as quick as I buy it, and flying to Los Angeles isn’t quick enough,” Gonen said. “Besides, it’s too risky. Ending up in jail because I get caught on a plane with half a kilo taped to my chest isn’t going to help me.”

Ephraim was silent for a moment.

“Fine,” he finally said. “If New York is as good as you say it is I’m moving there.”

Gonen stammered, trying to find a way to keep Ephraim in Los Angeles without resuming the grueling schedule of flying there several times a month. But Ephraim cut him off.

“I’ll see you in a week.”

Gonen was visibly tense as he set the telephone receiver into its cradle. Honey looked up from the kitchen table in her apartment where she was cooking another batch of cocaine.

“What?” she said. “What is it?”

“We may have a problem.”

After Gonen had explained Ephraim’s impending arrival, after he had explained the hand-holding Ephraim would need and his attitude of always taking care of himself first, Honey once again offered the pipe to Gonen.

“*Try* this.”

And for the first time in the eight months they had been dating, Gonen did not resist. He did not fight her, just took the pipe with a blank expression on his face and inhaled deeply as Honey held the propane lighter to the pipe’s opening. The rocks in the bowl crackled, and a chemical-flavored smoke shot into Gonen’s lungs.

Gonen eased back into the sofa they were sitting on. His Ran Ephraim problem went away, if only for an evening.

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Gonen had always had an addictive personality. He was a lifelong hashish user and smoked cigarettes constantly. He was addicted to stealing, robbing and getting one

over on the system. He loved to gamble, and he loved having sex. Cocaine and, later, freebase cocaine, was just another vice that Gonen suspected would eventually beat him. Gonen didn't mind – from the moment he first inhaled a thick cloud of cocaine smoke, Gonen loved freebasing.

He also loved Honey – so much by that point that he never did take her to the swingers club. The thought of sharing her sickened Gonen.

“I was in love with her,” Gonen said. “I couldn't bring her there and watch her fuck other guys.”

Instead, Gonen hired a prostitute to accompany him.