

FALLING ROCK: STORIES

By
HEATHER S. VARNADORE
B.A., Kansas State University, 2005

A THESIS
submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree

MASTER OF ARTS

Department of English
College of Arts and Sciences

KANSAS STATE UNIVERSITY
Manhattan, Kansas
2008

Approved By:

Major Professor
Imad Rahman

Copyright

Heather Varnadore

2008

Abstract

This project is a novel-in-stories that revolves around the misadventures and exploits of Povi McDougal, head diversity consultant for G & K, responsible for the aggressive sensitivity training of new hires in the company's bid to avoid future lawsuits. She is a nervy, disenfranchised, high-functioning alcoholic. When you think Povi, think binaries: she's a big-hearted misanthrope. She is furious yet wistful, edgy yet vulnerable, knowing yet obtuse, gas yet electric, etc. The stories are all narrated by Povi and are voice, language and character-driven. As a series of connected stories, the action is not in service to one primary plotline. There is, however, a narrative drive that treats Povi's dawning realization of and efforts to come to grips with, her personal and ethnic identity, her abandonment issues and self-imposed isolation. Central to these stories is a synthetic folklore. As a child, Povi's father enrolled her in the Indian Princesses youth group at the YMCA in a misguided attempt to help her connect more fully with her Native American heritage. Figuring prominently in the girls' mythology was the tale of Falling Rock, the highly sought Indian princess who wanders into the woods to escape the fray of young braves who seek her hand in marriage. "Legend" has it Falling Rock becomes lost and is never heard from again. The group's participants are told to be on the lookout for her whenever they see a yellow road sign bearing her name. In short, Povi is my Princess Falling Rock. Given her sense of disinheritance, it seems fitting that her folklore is synthetic, invented. Basically, I've gotten her to wander off into the woods for a bit of solitude, and have kept her there for a while, as she tries to find her way back to her tribe – or some such suitable substitute for tribal affiliation, community, love, what have you.

Table of Contents

Acknowledgments.....	v
Introduction.....	vi
Falling Rock.....	1
Reconstruction	29
There's Restless and There's Deep Water	64
Twilight Western	95

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank the Creative Writing Program at Kansas State University for their continual support. I greatly appreciate those of my friends who have acted as eager – and critical – readers over the years: Lee Behlman, Nathan Parker, Rob Dunn. I am deeply grateful to Anne Longmuir and Michael Donnelly, both members of my fabulous and eclectic supervisory committee.

In particular, I must thank the inimitable Imad Rahman for his encouragement, support and keen insight.

Introduction

Povi McDougal is in a world of hurt.

This head diversity consultant for G & K, responsible for the aggressive sensitivity training of new hires in the company's bid to avoid future lawsuits, is a nervy, disenfranchised, high-functioning alcoholic. When you think Povi, think binaries: she's a big-hearted misanthrope. She is furious yet wistful, edgy yet vulnerable, knowing yet obtuse, gas yet electric, etc. She is also my attempt to play with a very distinctive voice and skewed perspective.

As a series of connected stories, the action is not in service to one primary plotline. There is, however, a narrative drive which treats Povi's dawning realization of and efforts to come to grips with, her personal and ethnic identity, her abandonment issues and self-imposed isolation. Central to these stories is a synthetic folklore. As a child, Povi's father enrolled her in the Indian Princesses youth group at the YMCA in a misguided attempt to help her connect more fully with her Native American heritage. Figuring prominently in the girls' mythology was the tale of Falling Rock, the highly sought Indian princess who wanders into the woods to escape the fray of young braves who seek her hand in marriage. "Legend" has it Falling Rock becomes lost and is never heard from again. The group's participants are told to be on the lookout for her whenever they see a yellow road sign bearing her name. In short, Povi is my Princess Falling Rock. Given her sense of disinheritance, it seems fitting that her folklore is synthetic, invented. Basically, I've gotten her to wander off into the woods for a bit of solitude, and now I

want to keep her there for a while, as she tries to find her way back to her tribe - or some such suitable substitute for tribal affiliation, community, love, what have you.

My decision to approach this project as a novel-in-stories surprised even myself. I have always struggled with the short story due to the difficulty I have reigning-in my scope. As I result, I have long felt (and been told by others) that I have the aesthetic tendencies of a novelist. However, I decided upon pursuing this project as a novel-in-stories for a number of reasons. Given that this is such a voice-driven piece, and the voice is so edgy and intense, I didn't feel I could sustain this energy over the course of a long work – or expect my readers to suffer it that long. I felt it would be better to write stand-alone yet interrelated stories, so that they could be enjoyed selectively, and might be easily picked up and put back down while still allowing the story sprawl in unexpected and surprising ways. I also wanted the “myth” of Falling Rock – girl on the move – to be reflected in the form of the work itself. Capturing this sense of movement requires somewhat shorter scenes than you would expect with a conventional novel, as well as the introduction of more characters. Aside from my own specific concerns about the integrity of my project, Barry Hannah's *The Tennis Handsome*, Denis Johnson's *Jesus' Son*, Lorrie Moore's *Anagrams*, and Imad Rahman's *I Dream of Microwaves* are works that have inspired my foray into this exciting, yet all too seldom explored, form.

I like to joke that my prose style has been influenced by the wonderfully original, often disorienting, prose stylings of Barry Hannah and the Hebrew Bible alike. This is something more than a joke, in that I did learn a lot about how to render energetic prose upon studying Robert Alter's faithful translations of ancient Hebrew. In particular, the forward momentum of parataxis in ancient Hebrew – something most contemporary

translators try to modernize and finesse – has proven a helpful stylistic tool for me with this project. More generally, I have drawn inspiration from a number of contemporary fiction writers including Barry Hannah, Mary Robison, Denis Johnson, Sam Lipsyte, George Saunders, and Lorrie Moore. I marvel at the manner in which Hannah tempers heartbreak with hilarity and the sacred with the profane. I admire the way Sam Lipsyte uses voice in his first-person narratives and how his characters manage to be heroic in spite of (or perhaps because of) their baseness and indirection. I appreciate George Saunders’ hyperrealism and the way in which he treats tragic events in such an off-hand way that you don’t realize what an emotional wallop they pack until you find yourself later haunted by them. Charlotte Brontë must also demurely elbow her way in to take her place among these guys. I found in Lucy Snowe, the narrator of her last (and, I think, finest) novel *Villette*, an extremely neurotic, highly unreliable, anti-social creature who is motivated by her need to connect. Lucy Snowe lurks somewhere in the background of these stories.

In terms of my overall aesthetic, I am always keen to use misdirected details and dialogue and have long gloried in the non-sequitur. I like to conceive oddball characters and then let them bounce off each other as they develop the plot for me. Another defining characteristic of my work would probably have to be my concern with marginalized individuals. In this regard, *Falling Rock* fits nicely into my body of work as a whole. However, I am charting new territory with this project as well. In the past I have often employed a kind of ironical, hectoring third-person narrative voice. *Falling Rock* marks a significant departure from previous work in that, with these stories, I have given myself over to a first-person narrator. I am most concerned with letting Povi’s voice

obtain. This allows for a much more claustrophobic, neurotic and skewed perspective of events. For this reason, Povi has tremendous presence for me and – I hope – for the reader.

As I mentioned, this work is also important to me on a personal level. My narrator and I share a similarly mixed heritage. We are both unobvious yet registered member of the Stockbridge-Munsee Mohican tribe. While my own perspective on the issue of cultural and ethnic identity has made the writing of this more interesting for me, Povi is certainly not intended to be in any way representative of Native Americans. I will leave those considerations to writers more qualified than me to treat them.

Falling Rock

Things were going pretty well for a while. For a while, I'd say, I was really hitting my stride.

Two sexual harassment cases and one racial discrimination lawsuit later and G & K was making a serious commitment to diversity. I was lucky enough to be in charge of one of the most aggressive and confrontational diversity workshops in the country.

The workshops took place in the Gibson Room: lots of dark paneling, enormous oil portraits of smug dead white men, glossy walnut consoles set with silver services and elaborate topiaries. The room helped lure the new hires into a false sense of complacency, and we spent the first two days of the workshop trying to reinforce this with your run-of-the-mill diversity worksheets: *Try to list all the stereotypes associated with the following groups of people.* They did a lot of group work and spent a lot of time sharing anecdotes about people they'd known – not themselves – who unfortunately held small-minded prejudiced beliefs and had to be called out. I flitted around from group-to-group checking their progress, looking a bit like a Victoria's Secret clerk in my short black skirt suit over a silky camisole. By the end of the second day they were usually comfortable enough to start saying things like, "Diversity is great, but I think it's in a company's best interests to hire and promote based solely on individual merit. Everything else will work itself out," or, "I have no problem with non-native speakers, as long as they can enunciate clearly. Because, let's face it, communication is key, and if they're going to be here..."

That's when I would start to get energized. I rolled my head around on my shoulders a couple of times, cracked my knuckles. I turned off the air in the room so that they started to perspire and pit stains began creeping through their starched and pressed button-downs.

“Just out of curiosity,” I asked my room full of prone, predominately Caucasian milquetoast in Brooks Brothers. “Where are your ancestors from?” Mostly Europe – no surprise there. Garret's great-great grandfather was from a little farming village outside Leipzig and came to America where he established a successful butchery in Milwaukee. Daniel's great-grandfather was from Dublin and came to Philadelphia to find work as a gentleman's tailor and eventually start a well-known dry-cleaning chain. I nodded and said how interesting. I listened to them all, flipping my hair over my shoulder and delicately fingering the beading on my cami. Invariably someone, usually one of the men, asked *me* where *my* family is from.

I made it a guessing game. It was a trap. I'm fair and freckled, long-limbed. They usually guessed Scandinavian or Irish. All fascinating surmises. That's when I would lower the boom. Actually, I told them, I'm 1/4 Stockbridge-Munsee Mohican. *Mohegan* technically: alive and well. *My* family came to America across a frozen land bridge several of thousands of years ago. *My* family, those that survived the GENOCIDE that is, have been watching *your* families come and go. *My* family has been watching *your* families as they stumble off the boats, rustic louse-infested rubes, babbling in some incomprehensible tongue, struggling with the culture, getting spat upon, smiling at racial slurs and insults they couldn't even understand, being forced to live in crowded filthy tenements and work in sweatshops and on railroads until they could adjust.

What about that?

They would be really sweating by this point. I owned my space, striding from first one side of the room to the other in my little kitten heel pumps. No one made eye contact. The one guy who was ballsy enough to give me his number during the company-sponsored brunch had hit the brick wall and knew it. After a few uncomfortable moments of silence I wrapped things up with a morale-boosting pep talk: “Don’t feel bad that you’re a bunch of sexist, racist assholes. We all are. Just keep it to your fucking selves.”

I can’t take total credit for this controversial and pioneering approach to in-your-face diversity. It was Ari’s idea. Ari Meier was my colleague, mentor, and best friend. Initially admin told us to be pleasant and non-threatening, to present the policies and assume a good faith effort on the part of the new-hires. “ENOUGH WITH THIS FUCKING PASSIVE-AGGRESSIVE APPROACH TO DIVERSITY!” Ari had famously bellowed, slamming down a pitcher of ice water and dousing the two nearest elderly board members. “Are you all ready to get aggressive-aggressive? Can you all even handle it?” With several hundred thousand dollars tied up in legal fees, the confused old men towed off and said perhaps they could. It was Ari’s idea to use interrogation room techniques, like switching off the air in the room. “These guys are groomed to conquer. Get them to *kvitz* a little and see what happens,” he’d say. Brilliant, I said.

He could do so much with so little. Only 5’7, he’d stand there smiling, benign, in his little wire-rims, chinos and penny loafers, like some beloved *Sesame Street* personality. When the cocky new hires would ask him where his family was from he’d

say, “Wow. Thanks for asking. I’ve actually prepared a slideshow.” Then he’d cut the lights. “This is *my* family,” he’d say as about twenty minutes worth of stills of allied footage of Auschwitz ran: piles of emaciated corpses, incinerator ash. White bread fuck-heads wept. Once he made a woman sick all over the floor.

After the training sessions, Ari and I usually went to Finnegan’s for drinks and discussed how to tweak the workshop so that it was more effective. He always carried a pool cue in a little leather case, but I never saw him play. I think it was some kind of alibi. His wife taught kick-boxing at the local gym and always went to bed early. He told her that after an honest day’s work he liked to hustle people, to remind himself of his Brighton Beach roots. Usually we just got slowly drunk, ridiculed our colleagues and occasionally tried to have meaningful conversations. There were so many conferences, nights at Marriotts hither and yon, recklessly ordering pay-per-view and decimating mini fridges. Ari in his silky blue sleep shorts. And his arms. The arms of a brachiator, tugging nervously on the edge of the suspect-looking comforters as we sat cross-legged on the floor between the twin beds, laughing over our bounty of trail mix and tiny bottles of Grape Pucker. Divvying it up between us like kids at Halloween. Trading, bartering. And he’d wanted to know, what kind of man was I looking for? What could I tell him – Emiliano Zappata? Lenin? A man of and for the people, for one thing. A dangerous visionary, for another. Some equalizing force of nature. What could I say? Vladimir Lenin.

Ari was the only friend I'd had since adulthood who knew the story about my parents' divorce, how my dad lost his job as Tulsa's most-beloved sportscaster when I misunderstood a euphemism during an educational session on sexual abuse in the first-grade and inadvertently accused him of sexual molestation. Our elementary school principal had been compulsive about emergency preparedness and trouble-shooting, and every month we practiced fire and tornado drills. We talked about stranger danger. Mr. Najedley, the P.E. teacher, told us if we ever saw a stranger at the school who looked mean and happened to be toting a gun, we should make a beeline into the boy's locker room and be very quiet while Mr. Najedley started piling benches up against the door. We knew every exit and appointed meeting place. We knew to scream NO! and run if anyone beckoned us toward an open car door while holding up Tootsie Rolls, or if we were playing at the park and someone approached to ask us to help them find their lost puppy. Running, stopping and dropping, rolling, screaming...Life was dangerous business, as we were learning at Thomas Paine Elementary School. But there were other kinds of danger, more subtle kinds. One day Mrs. Aldorman began a discussion about soft-touch hurting. Soft-touch hurting, she told us elliptically, didn't necessarily feel *physically* bad, but it would make us very sad. Soft-touch-hurting was something inappropriate adults should never do to us. If anyone ever did anything like this, we should tell our parents or someone at the school right away.

I thought of my mom and dad. My mom was a frazzled nurse who worked at an Indian clinic near Tahlequah. She took pills and dozed in front of the TV whenever she was home and, when she had to, drove me recklessly around town screaming that the other drivers were wasting her time: "The passing lane is for passing. PASSING! What

the hell are these people doing? Are they even driving or just screwing around? Green means go, Mo-fo!” She flogged me with switches. My dad was a big, simple Scotsman and I loved him. Whenever I acted up he would say things like, “I don’t think I really like the way you’re acting right now. I think that as long as you’re going to act like this I would really rather not be around you.” I would bawl my eyes out and hold on for dear life to his leg as he dragged me across the floor on his way out to the garage to work on his boat. That was a different kind of pain. I told Mrs. Aldorman my dad was a soft-touch-hurter. I spent two weeks in foster care until they figured out there had been a mistake and returned me to my home, but my mom had already filed and my dad’s career was over. My mom knew he didn’t do it, but kept going forward with the divorce anyway. My dad never blamed me. Most of the fucked-up women I know blame their dads because they’re emotional black holes, trying to fill themselves with male attention. But I had fucked my dad up. Ari told me his parents verbally abused him in Yiddish and that his father once spat on him. I told him he was lucky. Oklahoma must be a lot more dangerous than Brighton Beach.

Sometimes I had Ari take out the pool cue and we passed it back-and-forth like a talking stick.

One night he just held the stick and looked at me for a long time.

I sensed portent, profundity. My heart raced. “Well, you have the stick,” I said. “Say your piece.”

“Mariam’s personal trainer thinks we should move out to L.A. He says she could easily get work as a plus-size stunt double. It’s what she’s always wanted.” He handed me the pool cue.

I gripped it and began nervously rubbing my thumb up and down its slick side.

“Well?” he said. “Say something.”

“Shut the fuck up,” I said. “You don’t have the fucking stick. I do. I can do what I want with it.”

He rolled his eyes and extended his arms as if he were introducing me.

“What am I supposed to say?” I said and shoved the stick back at him.

“You,” he pointed the stick at me. “You, my friend, might soon be the new head diversity consultant at G & K. What do you think about that?”

I accepted the stick. “You know, I’ve never been particularly ambitious myself. I...tend to feed off the momentum of others. I think...what I think doesn’t matter. I think California is full of deviants and lunatics and shallow, plastic people with giant lips full of cadaver tissue and the whole place is going to sink into the ocean. Soon. God hates L.A.,” I said, thrusting the stick back at him. I quickly snatched it back. “When?”

“This summer.”

“Wait! Do it again. You can’t speak yet.” I handed him the stick.

“This summer.”

He handed it back. I bit my lip and tapped it on the floor. I drained my whiskey sour. After several seconds he held his hands out in a gesture of supplication. “Well, watch for Falling Rock on the way out there,” I finally said.

He reached for the stick, which I let go of too soon. It fell to the floor. Ari scrambled off his stool and reached for it. “Are you putting some kind of curse on me?” He climbed back up onto the stool and handed it to me.

I gathered myself up with what I felt was an impressive amount of dignity and held the stick delicately in my lap. I told him Falling Rock was an Indian princess who had wandered off into the woods to get away from the clamor of all the handsome young braves who were asking for her hand. She wanted to clear her head and make a decision but got lost and couldn't find her way back out of the woods.

“When you see a sign that says *Watch for Falling Rock*, you're supposed to keep your eyes open, so that you can help her find her way back to her tribe.”

He cocked his head at me and accepted the stick. “Wow,” he said. “It's like a little etiological tale to explain road signs. How interesting. Is this part of your oral tradition?”

“After my folks split up...” He held his hand to my mouth and handed me the stick. “After my folks split up,” I brandished the stick, “my dad got me involved with the local chapter of the Y-Indian Princesses. It was an ill-conceived father-daughter group. I think it was his way of trying to involve me with my heritage. Mostly we all just braided our hair and painted our faces and went camping while the dads all drank beer around the campfire and lied to us. I was the only real Indian girl in the group.”

He rubbed the back of his neck with the cue. “Well, thank you for that,” he said. “Thanks for sharing that. I will certainly watch for Falling Rock.”

“Also watch for mudslides and earthquakes. Forest Fires. Tsunamis.” I said out of turn. “California is God-cursed.”

After Ari left, things kept happening, but everything seemed sort of surreal and inconsequential. I kept getting emails from him with photos of him and the wife half-naked along the coast. He looked good-natured and awkward as usual. She looked

happier than I'd ever seen her. Less wan, almost radiant. They were living in a shitty little garage apartment and both looking for work. Their pineal glands were getting them through. They were living on love, sunshine and the Vision Card. They were thinking of adding a kid into the deal. The emails had subject headings like *Hiya!* and *Whatzup?* There were pics of luaus on the beach with new friends who looked very Hebrew and sophisticated. I kept them all in my Ari file, but never replied. *Annunciation!* one message promised. I bit my lip and opened a picture of Ari and Mariam standing in a field of wildflowers, his hand on an unmistakable baby bump. It was like an ad for fabric softener or the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

I kept going to Finnegan's and in my loneliness attracted the attention of the immaculately dressed, fiftyish German woman, Sophie Maria, who was herself a fixture at the bar. She bought me drinks, glad to have my company, and I did my best to carry my end of random conversations.

"It's *zo* hard," she said suddenly in the middle of a discussion about the flying buttress, "for the beautiful woman to make it in the world with the radical feminists, ya know? I have a feeling you do know something of what I say, viz your face. The mannish women and the hausfraus, they will always hate the women like us. They-do-not-trust-us," she said, pointing her finger at me for emphasis. "And they should not trust either, should they?"

"Nope," I said. "They better watch out."

"You should go viz me back to Europe some time? You would do well. There is something *zo* European about you."

"Really?"

“We’ll go soon, ya? We’ll go and have all these men onto their knees.”

“We’ll screw the whole fucking continent,” I said. “Anything in pants.”

She smiled dreamily up at the ceiling fan and fingered her cultured pearls. “We’ll show all those horrible man-women just why they-should-not-trust us.”

“You better believe it,” I said.

When I took over as the head diversity consultant for G & K, they hired this Venezuelan, Humberto, to fill my former position. He was serious and focused, endlessly polite when he had to directly address me. He only ever smirked at my jokes. I couldn’t get any kind of vibe from him. His skin gleamed like lager and he wore shiny suits that hurt my eyes, and loafers with no socks. He looked like a sophisticated coke dealer, but his apparel was the only untoward thing about him – at work, anyway. It was like he was some kind of made-to-order ethnic automaton. He started suggesting we tone things down during the workshops, act more like caring professionals. He just didn’t get it. He hadn’t been here during the Ari Meier Golden Age. He had no sense of the zeitgeist. People dropped their voices around me or ceased conversation when I walked by. I could never get Humberto to acknowledge me when we passed each other in the hallways or on the street. Something was going on. I began abusing Stolichnaya and the memo format, often simultaneously:

To: Fuckhole Fuckowski
From: You Know Who

Subject: That Shit You Pulled

Never have I been confronted with such unadulterated bullshit. Unreal bullshit. Unequivocal bullshit. If this kind of shit ever goes down again, you'll be using that condescending elementary school teacher voice of yours to answer phones. I don't want to hear another goddamn thing about your oppression. You don't know what oppression is. I don't care how Polish or inappropriate your grandfather was. You played fucking field hockey at Sarah Lawrence, you cunt. You, with your fat peasant's face and the superior fucking attitude of an inbred aristocrat. And don't go crying to Humberto, either. The only difference between your bullshit and his is about fifteen grand per annum.

N.B. I will eat your children.

Winter sat in. Humberto seemed to be gathering support. I started packing on weight like a bear heading into hibernation. I quit trying to style my hair and began wearing pigtails to work. I pulled out some of the enormous old flannels I'd taken from my dad's closet after he died and started wearing them. I quit bothering with bras. Something was in my attic. I assumed squirrels. At night they could be heard overhead, scampering around. I imagined them having babies. I imagined those babies having babies. Leonard Cohen's "Famous Blue Raincoat" would be on repeat for days at a time, but I kept finding new affinities for it – I had been to the station to meet every train. I came home again without Lili Marlene. Hadn't I? I would stay up at my computer till all hours with my credit card. Little packages were at my doorstep everyday when I came home from work. Things I had no recollection of: two French presses, an autographed glossy of Peter O'Toole, several vials of saffron, a customized hand-beaded pageant gown. It was like having a secret admirer.

I was a story with no center.

I had sex, without meaning to, with a dark, serious little Armenian doctoral student. He refused to turn the overhead fluorescent lights off and treated me with disdain when I inquired the next morning about all the religious icons piled on his bedside table, as if uttering their names in my presence might be sacrilegious. He may have snapped photos of my unkempt pubis with his cell phone. I never knew what he was studying. I never knew if I'd been raped. Some time around dawn he gave me a cup of thick, tepid coffee and drove me to my Suburu, which I'd left at the park behind the bleachers. As I let myself out he asked me who Ari was. My imaginary playmate when I was a kid, I said. I don't think he understood.

I broke a long-standing personal rule and began preparing myself elaborate meals with veal and lamb. I gorged on the tender flesh of baby animals. It was a fucking evil world. They were better off on my dinner plate than being trapped in a cramped stockyard, getting kicked in the head by their fetid, shit-covered peers. I went on Web MD, diagnosed myself with Restless Leg Syndrome (RLS), located an online pharmacy that promised no intermediaries and discreet packaging, and filled my own prescriptions for the anti-convulsant Neurontin, which I promptly began to abuse. Before long my extremities swelled up and I felt like I was just kind of hovering everywhere. At work I spent my days floating unsteadily down the dark paneled hallways of G & K in a kind of haze, avoiding eye-contact, and desperately refilling my sports-bottle at the water fountain in an effort to re-hydrate. I left staff meetings frequently to piss. Once, as I was passing Humberto at a crosswalk, I flashed a tit at him. It was small, as tits go, but I'm pretty sure he saw it. At night I sat on my front porch in my pageant gown, smoking and throwing black walnuts at the neighbor's fat little dachshund when it ventured too close

to the property line. I lured possums to my front porch with bowls of generic cat food and then, after catching one little fatty by the tail, held my dad's old .22 to its head.

"Confess!" I screamed. "Confess, you asshole! Pestilent, plague-bearing vermin!" All it did was hiss and bare its razor teeth. It tried to lunge upwards towards me, but gravity was against it. I dug the muzzle into the side of its head roughly a couple of times, but couldn't pull the trigger. I started grabbing them up by their skinny little pink tails and dropkicking them into my neighbor's trash bins.

I was 3 for 5. But they always came back.

And still life lay there before me, prostrate and stinking of dead fish like some inelastic and diseased whore that kept looking at her watch to remind me that I could do whatever I wanted – she was getting paid either way. I closed my eyes and mounted her distractedly, with little hope that anything much would come of it.

And so on and so forth.

There was an email from Ari with a subject heading that said *Surrender*. I opened it. There was no message.

I got to my feet rather too abruptly and moments later fell into the staff lounge to find all my duplicitous underlings sitting merrily around a ceramic tray full of sad, dry little brownies. There were tiny little handprints in primary colors all over the tray which read, *The Best Mom in the World!* in big bubble letters.

Humberto was wiping his spectacles on the sleeve of his iridescent, plum-colored button-down and holding them up to the light for inspection.

“Well, you know,” Lydia was saying. “I was like, hey, come on now. To say all retarded people are total sweethearts is really kind of a hateful, ugly stereotype, don’t you think?”

“Good point,” someone murmured.

I hefted myself up onto the counter. I considered them all in turn, nodding my head all the while.

“Brownie?” Lydia asked with her usual affected formality as she extended the tray to me. “Katie made them last night. She just got a new kid’s cookbook. She’s so proud, really over the moon.”

“I’d better not,” I said, sticking my hand in a bag full of chocolate-covered espresso beans and stuffing them all in my mouth at once. They were all cradling bright purple t-shirts in their laps. “What cohesion,” I said with a full mouth. “Just what I like to see. What’s the occasion? Berto?”

“We’ve organized a softball team,” he said, looking down at the brownies. “We just got the shirts back from the printers.”

I swallowed the mound in my mouth with some difficulty and let the thick phlegm rattle a bit as I cleared my throat loudly. “Well,” I said. “Let’s see.”

He held up one of the shirts.

I leaned forward, squinting and blinking furiously. “I can’t quite make that out. You’re the *Disulphides*? That’s what you’re calling yourselves?”

“No,” ventured Donald, a doughy little college intern who’d just joined up a few weeks ago. “We’re the *Diversophiles*.”

“Ah... You don’t say.” I held his piggy-eyed gaze as I hopped down, scooped another handful of espresso beans into my mouth and backed out of the room.

Thursday was salsa night at Rosie’s Cantina. I showed up one evening on a whim and sat underneath a mounted armadillo at the bar. If life was handing me lemons, I was stuffing them up the tailpipes of assholes. Sure enough, here came Humberto in his shiny suit. I’d begun calling him Miami Vice at work. He had unbuttoned a few more buttons on his placket. He appeared to have no chest hair to speak of. I suspected he had it waxed. I lowered my cowboy hat a bit and started jotting things down in my notebook. He seemed to know some of the Hispanics there, so I assumed he was a regular. I saw him lightly rub the back of a man in a linen suit with salt-and-pepper hair. FAGGOT? I wrote, then erased the question mark. I asked the squirrely, mustachioed bartender for some matches. He tried to light my cigarette for me and nearly set the brim of my hat on fire. It took me a minute to realize Humberto wasn’t wearing his glasses. He must have put in contacts for the occasion. I noted this. I was also surprised that he seemed to really enjoy dancing but didn’t seem to have a great deal of rhythm. His hips seemed really stiff. He didn’t discriminate with his choice of dance partners. He danced with a really big woman with a peony in her hair and with a much older woman who kept blowing kisses to everyone.

I noticed him dance a couple of times with a really wiry brunette who didn't look a day over nineteen. I realized I'd seen her at Finnegan's on open mic night a couple of weeks back belting out a cover of the Velvet Underground's "Femme Fatale." I hadn't been impressed. She had a passing voice, but aligning herself with Nico seemed an unfathomable act of grandiosity. When I saw them coming over to the bar, I pulled the hat down again, grabbed my notebook, and darted into the women's. I returned to my stool to find Humberto back on the dance floor, drinking a ridiculous frozen pussy concoction with a maraschino cherry skewered by a plastic sword.

There was a young guy with an impressively chiseled jaw-line on the seat next to me who kept flipping a coaster and trying to catch my eye. I tried to look severe and unapproachable. I held a cigarette in my mouth as I braided my hair. Without asking, he bought me a beer and, without any noticeable guile, said, "My name is Trevor. Tell me something about yourself, something no one else knows."

For a minute I thought about delivering my Last of the Mohicans speech, but I didn't. I rubbed my chin and ashed.

"I'm a high-functioning alcoholic," I said. "Less and less high-functioning all the time. In fact, I can't even drink this beer. I'm so far beyond this. Sorry. Lately I've begun experimenting with anti-convulsants too. What about you?"

He pulled his bar stool a little closer. "I only have one testicle."

I admired his approach. "Well, Trevor," I told him, "you're attractive, in a too-pretty, uninteresting, conventional sort of way. I'll bet you get a lot of mileage out of that little guy. I'll bet you've killed two birds with one stone."

He shrugged. "Not really."

“Come on,” I looked over his shoulder and spoke distractedly, trying to watch Humberto with the presumptuous little brunette who had her arm around him and was acting coy in a highly performative manner. “With my drunken belligerence and your lone ball, I’ll bet we could make the world squeal like a pig.”

“Maybe,” Trevor said, not seeming at all averse to my evil machinations. “I’ll give it a try if you will.”

“I think I’ll have to take a rain check on that. I’m a bit busy here.”

“What are you doing, by the way? Are you journaling?”

“I, Trevor, I am composing a dossier. Do you know what that is?”

Trevor shook his head.

“I’m keeping tabs on a suspicious colleague of mine.”

“You’re, like, some kind of spy?”

“I prefer to think of myself as a clever girl detective, really.”

“Cool. Do you need a goofy sidekick?” Trevor smelled good, like baby lotion or Love’s Baby Soft or something innocent and hopeful like that. I could smell it over all the smoke and sweat and booze, and I liked it.

“I don’t know. Do you want to maybe go solicit that little guy in the shiny suit for ass-sex in the men’s room?”

“I don’t know if I’m completely comfortable with that. Which guy are you talking about?” When we looked back to the dance floor, I couldn’t locate Humberto.

I turned back to Trevor. “You see a little guy in a shiny suit just walk out?”

“Was he with a young girl in a white halter top?”

“Fuck!” I slid off the barstool and ran out the back door. I just caught sight of Humberto speeding off in the passenger seat of a little black dented Camaro with *Honk! Stephanie’s 21!* written on the windows in white shoe polish. I went back in and decided to pay Trevor some real attention.

We went back to my place and I scrambled some eggs with rotting shitake mushrooms for us in my pageant gown. I got his opinion on the noises in the attic. “Do you think it might be spirit activity?”

He listened thoughtfully for a minute. “Actually, it just sounds like some kind of critter to me.”

“Good.” I smoothed the bodice of my gown, a little disappointed.

“You look really beautiful,” he said. “Are those peacock feathers?”

“Yes. I had it custom-made. These are peacock feathers. And all these rhinestones were painstakingly hand-sown by some fun-loving, gracious gay man in Plano, Texas who lives with his aging pink-haired mother and some Pomeranians. It takes him hours to do the beading, and his eyesight is so deteriorated he has to wear these crazy coke-bottle lenses like Yves Saint Laurent.”

“That’s wild. You look like some kind of royalty.”

“That I am. I’m the Queen of Pain. Welcome to my Palace of Pain. Maybe I’ll bestow some kind of knighthood upon you.”

“I’ve never really gone there,” Trevor said doubtfully. “I mean, I like to try new things, but I’m not sure how into pain I really am.”

“Just eat your eggs,” I said.

Trevor was inexplicably on a low-carb diet. When I came home I found him on my sofa eating string cheese and peanut butter and watching a Fellini film on TV. Trevor worked for the city in Parks and Recreation, mowing, weed-whacking, and blowing leaves. College girls made a point of making it out to jog around the park whenever he was at work. He was big, good-looking and not-so-smart. Like my dad. I knew the breed and trusted it.

I slid my jacket off and rubbed the stomach of my cami in what I felt might be a seductive manner, but his eyes were sliding back-and-forth over the subtitles and he wouldn't look at me. He'd proven tediously loyal since he'd picked me up three months earlier, but we were slipping into a comfortable domesticity. I finally deflated and collapsed next to him.

“*La Strada*,” I said. “I find I really identify with that character.”

“Which one?”

“That poor, simple woman.”

“She's kind of stupid and lost, isn't she?”

“Yeah. Yes she is.”

“But you're scary smart.”

“Smart, you know...” I shook my head and rubbed my aching instep. “Haven't we been over this? Smart is a relative term.”

Trevor brought this up a lot. The usual thing was for me to tell him that there were different kinds of intelligence. There was the kind that humiliated grown men in expensive suits, and then there was the kind that skewered other people's picnic trash on

the end of a little hooked stick. But that night I didn't have the energy. I poured a tumbler full of Stoli and let the question of our intellectual disparity loom ominously between us. I was tired. I hadn't been sleeping. In the past couple of days I kept thinking I was seeing my dead father everywhere: at the bus stop, on the escalator at the mall, speed walking around the city park. One night I dreamt he met Trevor and me for sushi. He kept ordering California rolls for us. He looked pretty good for a man who'd been dead for two years, but when he leaned back in his chair to rub his stomach, his Hawaiian print shirt rose up and I could see the decaying flesh underneath. In another dream it was Memorial Day and little kids in sailor suits and white caps were laying floral sprays on gravesites at the Tulsa Cemetery. I had a rusty shovel and was digging my dad up. When I finally got down to the coffin it was just an old pine box with a hole in it. I didn't want to, but was compelled to look through the hole. What was left of him was wearing fraying jean shorts and a bright orange OSU Cowboys t-shirt. I loaded him on a dolly and carted him home along the shoulder of the highway as passing cars honked and waved at me. At home I kept him in the bathtub. Lately I didn't know whether I was hallucinating or undergoing some kind of freaky spiritual shit. Both ideas scared me equally.

On a typical night we ordered Albanian and Trevor patiently listened to me explain the complex G & K conspiracy that was working to bring me down. How Humberto was holding secret meetings with my staff after hours, about the idiotic nicknames they'd had printed on the backs of their softball tees, how they'd all started calling me Willie Nelson behind my back. When we polished off the rabbit casserole, scraping the last of it from the Styrofoam container with plastic forks, we ran a bubble

bath and Trevor snuggled in behind me, more or less in an effort to try and prop me up and keep my head above water. In the mornings he liked to wake me with a full English breakfast, would tell me to eat up, food was fuel for your body. We'd shower and Trevor did some clever stuff with my pressure points to try and alleviate my headache. I told him there was such a thing as physicality intelligence and that it was really something to be proud of. One day he sent me a balloon bouquet at work with a card that said, *Just because.*

I'd never felt so alone.

"Square pegs, round holes," I told Trevor one night. "Know what I mean? Square pegs and round holes?"

He smiled, rubbed my shoulder and said, "Glug, glug," in a voice not without tenderness.

"I've been in state custody," I reasoned. "Perhaps not for the last time."

"Don't be silly. Look, the midgets are on TV."

"You...who *are* you, anyway?"

"What do you mean? I haven't really thought about it."

"Don't get me wrong. It's really hot at first. I mean, you're thirteen and stuff you just think, yeah, give me intense. Some guy who'll just crush the fucking life out of me. Something star-crossed with a real dark horse. A Heathcliff. We'll cut each other, drink the blood. Organize a suicide pact. I'll bake bread – in a *gas* oven. But then you realize that life is fucking hard and what you really want is light, low-key. Listen...I've given it a lot of thought, and I really feel you're some kind of psychic vampire or something. You're bleeding me."

“I’m not sure I follow.”

“Elbow room. I need some.”

“How much?”

“Several city blocks. Perhaps more. Let’s just say several to start. And don’t lie dormant, you know? Go find someone. A girl who digs the intensity, the drama. This here is no good. I’ve got to look out for myself.”

He put his head in his hands. “I’m sorry,” he said. “I didn’t realize what it was like for you.”

“That’s because you’re in so deep down in that hole. I mean, I’d throw you a rope, but I don’t think they make any long enough.”

“I don’t know. Whatever you think.”

I sat on the bed biting my lip and quietly watching him slowly pack a bag.

Fuck, I thought. Maybe it’s not that things are too hard for me. Maybe it’s that they’re far too easy. Maybe that’s it.

When I heard his truck pull slowly out of the drive, I was flooded with a sense of wellbeing. It came to me that once again I could pee standing up in the shower, stridently and with pride, hands on hips.

I headed to Finnegan’s and was giddy at the sight of Sophie Maria’s decadent fanny overrunning both sides of her usual barstool. With all the quiet nights at home I’d rarely seen her. Full to bursting with this newfound sense of impetus, I yelled my order to the barman and spun round to greet her. I was ready for our grand tour. Ready to mash the hearts of European males into a bloody paste beneath the heels of my Tony Lamas. From here on out I’d steel myself for a total and glorious dissipation: smoke only Nat

Sherman Fantasia Lights, start using my Gran McDougal's silver monogrammed cigarette case, get cocaine skinny and make a special point to screw the married guys.

Before I could break the good news, Wagner's "Ride of the Valkyries" blared on Sophie Maria's cell phone, and she held up a finger to me. "I really must take zis."

I nodded.

"Oh, ya?" she said, turning from me. "What did you get? A marmot? What does it look like? What colors do they come in? Ya? How Vonderful! *Absolutely*. You made the absolute best choice. No, no. I'm not doing anything at all. Tell me, have they more of these marmots?"

At the office, people were unusually pleasant. Humberto held the door for me. Lydia Pukowski offered me a homemade bran muffin. I raised the brim of my hat and accepted it warily. Humberto and I were scheduled for our quarterly meeting with the board members in the Gibson Room. I was late getting there because my legs had momentarily given out on me in the bathroom and I'd clipped my chin on the edge of the sink, nearly biting a hole through my tongue.

When I made it to the room, the ancient board members were already there. So was Humberto, faking a sense of graciousness.

So was Lydia Pukowski, my neighbors the Russells, Brenda with the beauty queen hair who sold me my Stoli at Lube Job Liquor, my cousin Levi the mechanic, who I hadn't seen in the past six months, since he changed my oil.

Everyone was talking but stopped once they saw me.

Mr. Gibson caught my hand between both of his own frail, papery hands and shook it gently with what seemed a great deal of effort. "Please take a seat, sweetheart." He indicated an empty chair at the head of the conference table. They only wheeled Mr. Gibson out for quarterly meetings. Too old to be anything other than a nice guy, he always had trouble getting his lips unstuck when he spoke, and the small black hollow of his open mouth seemed a tiny glimpse into the annihilation that awaited us all. It was an added anxiety I didn't need.

I cautiously picked my way over the plush carpet and dropped my accordion folder with a dramatic thud before seating myself.

"Where's mum?" I asked, having noted the conspicuous absence of that dead-wringer for Yoko Ono, only with smudged bifocals and Donald Duck scrubs. The aged Yoko Ono, that is: even more vacant, butch, martial.

"She was spotted at the dog races," said a man dressed in pastel golfing clothes who I hadn't noticed before.

"Who's this douche bag?" I asked no one in particular.

"My name is Doug," he said. "I'm a wellness facilitator. But please, look around. As you can see, you are surrounded by people who love and care about you." He gestured widely to indicate the latest commercial face of G & K (a jittery, gum-snapping 80s child actor in his customized Oakleys), along with the newest generation of interchangeable interns, whose existence I didn't really believe in.

"I'm very well, as you can see, Doug. Are we playing *This is Your Life*?" I snorted my contempt, but made a quick survey to be sure Mrs. Aldorman and Mr. Najedly weren't also in the room somewhere. Would they remember all those days I

spent in ISS in that solitary little room off the principal's office, reading Nancy Drew books under the desk? That slender, titian-haired girl with the blue convertible and the dog and the loving attorney father and the supportive friends and the above-average critical skills. If I were to meet that chick now, would I send a hefty saliva globule smack at her little aquiline nose.

"We've all come together in a circle of friendship and support because we are worried that you aren't well," said Doug. "We're worried that you have developed a substance abuse problem and might need some help."

"No problems here," I said. "Just trying to get this quarterly meeting out of the way. The circle of friendship can disband and make room for the circle of avarice, self-interest and sneakiness. The sneaky circle. That's what we're about here at G & K."

"Povi." I heard a voice behind me. A lilting, plaintive voice. Soulful.

I didn't need to turn around to know it was Ari.

I threw my arms up in the air and spun on my heel to face the audacious absentee. I cocked my head at him. "I'm here. *I'm* still here," I said, backing away. "Present and voting. Still standing – better than I ever did. Looking like a true survivor, feeling like a little kid."

Ari narrowed his deep-set eyes and stroked his chin. "Let's just cut to the chase, shall we, Doug," he said in a more severe tone. "Povi, you're a goddamn drunk and a junkie. Everyone knows it. You're delusional and anti-social. You're consumed with rage. Your neighbors say you abuse animals at all hours of the night. You've sent harassing communiqués to Lydia. Humberto claims you've made sexually threatening gestures toward him."

“That’s bullshit! All I did was flash a tit. One harmless tiny little mosquito bite...”

“*Why?*” Asked Ari. “*Why* would you do such a thing if you were in your right mind?”

“TO SEE IF HE WAS PAYING ATTENTION!”

“I was,” said Humberto, saluting me and looking smug.

“He *was*,” said Ari.

“I fucking heard him!”

“You’re killing your mother,” said Ari.

“My mother is a heartless bitch. We haven’t spoken in three years.”

“Well you’re a bit difficult to contact, aren’t you?” asked Ari archly. “So you’ve succumbed fully to the white man’s fire water,” he said, sitting on the edge of the table beside me. “That’s understandable. It’s the curse of your people. Why don’t you join the Native American Church and get some nice shaman to hook you up with Mescalito? You know the wily little Mescalito? He’ll set your ass down and tell you what’s up. I understand he’s saved many a red Indian from the drink. You can roll around in the desert for a few days, see the face of God...”

Brenda turned to Douche-Bag Doug. “You said this wouldn’t take long. I have an appointment with my nail technician in an hour.”

I started to feel faint. Sweat began to drizzle between what would be my cleavage, were more endowed. I turned on Ari. “Did you switch the air off?” I rose unsteadily to my feet. “Don’t you dare pull any of your evil Mossad bullshit on me!”

“Sit it down, Povi,” he said.

There had been that kiss. Right before he left. A soft, dry kiss that came just to the corner of my mouth, but no further. I was so wonderful, he'd said. Did I know how wonderful I was?

"I'm going to pass out. I just need...some air. I'm just going to open the window in my office for a minute. I'll be back."

"I'll go with you," Ari said.

I allowed him to lead me to my office and open the window for me. The smoky smells of a sidewalk barbeque vendor filled the room. The young, glassy-eyed vagrant girl was sitting on the pavement below shaking her maracas incessantly to some indiscernible rhythm. When the breeze hit me I got chills and began to shiver. We sat there opposite one another in rolling desk chairs, not speaking. He'd grown his hair out a bit. Little corkscrew curls were poking out at awkward angles. I was disappointed to see that he'd lost some weight. I gripped the arms of my chair so he wouldn't see me tremble.

"You're a strange girl, Jane Eyre." He leaned back in his seat for a minute, considering me. Then got up and went over to my bookshelf. He took down the rain stick I'd made with my dad in Indian Princesses and handed it to me. "Admit you need help."

I closed my eyes and turned it over so that all the little kernels of popping corn fell, making the sound of falling rain. When it was over, I turned it over and listened to it again.

"You're an act," he said. "You and maraca girl."

I ran my fingers over the places where I had painted lady bugs and buttercups and rainbows and stars and an enormous sunburst with sunglasses. I found the fat little bluebird with a huge smile on his beak that my dad had painted.

“Admit you’re a soft-touch-hurter,” I finally said.

He reached for the stick.

Reconstruction

Done with the soulless, speculative venture capitalism of your casual sexual relationship, I was getting metaphysical. Unplugged. I'd demoted Hayes from fuck buddy to courtly love suitor status, and it seemed to be working.

"Think lover/loved," I'd told him. "Worship from afar. Celebration. Yes, the celebrating of me. Not the musculature of my rusty hatchet wound, *per se*, but of my essence. No – my *quintessence*. Are you familiar? Like...star-stuff? Ether? That thing about me you can't necessarily drive your dick deep into and fall asleep inside. Sonnets: I'll want some. We'll discuss meter at a later time. For now just get some stuff down on paper. Fourteen lines of celebration with figurative language and metaphor: *What is your substance, whereof are you made, that millions of strange shadows on you tend...* Something in that vein." I told him to bear in mind I was complex and often and contradictory and he should therefore pepper his verse with binaries (i.e. I am fierce yet vulnerable, soft yet hard, gas yet electric).

He'd cautiously asked me if he could refer to my sex in a roundabout way.

"Let's think." I pushed the hair back from my temples. "I'm gonna say yes, employing metaphor, certainly. There's a tradition, actually. Rosebuds and pomegranates, shit like that." This seemed to revive his spirits. He took to it with remarkable vigor, considering. True enough, he wore hiking boots with his Armani

Exchange ensembles and rode a mountain bike to the office; but he was still a suit, albeit a self-hating one.

I was finishing up my six-month probationary period at work. I was told if I wanted to keep my position as head diversity consultant for G & K, I was going to have to allow myself to be guided into the fold. I mostly just walked around with an eerie pasted-on smile and lugged a box full of file folders with me whenever I left so it looked like I was taking work home with me to try and get caught up. I could feign competence for a while. I could do so because I felt my latent genius looming, a vague variety of greatness churling and cramping up painfully in me like the promise of a long overdue bowel movement. So I got a haircut and made a show of drinking this all-natural detoxification juice Mr. Gibson, the elderly board member, ordered for me after seeing it pimped on *Oprah*.

Hayes, a rising star in human resources, was assigned to keep tabs on me at work and submit weekly evaluations of his findings.

“Hey,” he said one afternoon after filling out my progress report, drawing a little star and writing *Super!* in the top, right-hand corner. “I’ve been finding these strange little animal prints in my backyard by the pool. I thought maybe you could come over some time and give me your expert opinion.”

“High school girls in cheap plastic wedges,” I responded.

“Really. How can you tell?”

“Context.”

“You know, I don’t believe you’re really dangerous, just misunderstood.” He crushed his Styrofoam coffee cup and tossed it dismissively over his shoulder into my

trash bin. “It should be said I have something of a soft spot for black sheep. *Bahhh, bahhh*, Black Sheep...Have you any wool?”

“That’s for me to know, sport.”

He backed up against the wall for support. “Christ, your face. It’s so symmetrical.”

I let him know right from the start what he was up against, that I didn’t *do* suits as a rule. I crushed their spirits and made them cry for their mummies in diversity workshops. I was not in the market for some cocky little bottom-feeder from H.R., a poor woman’s Daniel Baldwin.

He told me he’d been a marine, he’d seen action: the fiery bulk of his squadron leader screaming through dust-filled streets of Fallujah, the blown-off arm of a toddler with a gold bracelet still attached. It had made him serious, introspective, thoughtful, trustworthy. All those stock descriptions used when asshole prospective employers ask you to describe yourself in five words or less.

“Look,” Hayes finally said. “I’m not going to introduce you to whiskey, rape your daughters and give you pretty-colored glass beads for your land. I just wanna get next to you, you know?”

“Get next to me, you might get somewhat overheated.”

“My thoughts exactly.”

What was it with these baby boys that my bile, coupled as it were with my recent significant weight-gain, did not suffice to protect me from this manner of unsolicited advance? Was it some kind of fetishism? I had to wonder.

“We must not speak of these things,” I said.

“Your timing’s lousy,” I said.

“I *vant* to be alone,” I said.

“I don’t want to be touched anywhere by anyone at anytime,” I concluded, thinking the matter ended.

“You think you don’t deserve to be touched.”

“I think you don’t deserve to touch me.”

This, to be sure, had given him pause.

“It’s my understanding it grows back,” I continued, pressing my advantage.

“Given seven years or so, it will re-fuse.”

“That’s interesting, if not entirely accurate.”

Perhaps not, I admitted. My first-time had told me so in an effort to stifle my sobs, worried I would wake his dorm RA as he cradled me in the tiny bunk with the pilling Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles comforter. “Regardless,” I continued. “I’m looking into reconstruction.” I’d been in contact with a real slick guy in L.A. My credit history had improved of late. I’d scored a spot on a year-long waiting list crammed full of porno stars and obscure royals attempting to make the transition from the party circuit to holy wedded bliss.

Once, I lamented, I had been content as a quietly defiant girl with red plastic framed specs and scaly knees. Minding my own business, cultivating my National Geographic and cranberry glass collections, doing time at Presbyterian vacation bible school and just generally participating. Tickling my fancy with medieval re-enactments at the duck pond, where I learned to card wool and work a loom and “Gawain”, a dotting

reference librarian, showed me how to joust. I was tremulous, my wrists weak, my lance all over the place as the horse kicked mud and muck up onto my surcoat.

Angry and strange was I, but pure as the new-driven snow.

Hayes listened attentively. “Medical science offers so many options, though I don’t feel it’s necessarily in our best interests to go backwards. Onwards and upwards.

I was getting my agency back.

Everyone at G & K seemed to believe that, with their help, I had pulled myself up out of the engulfing darkness with some kind of new, oracular insight.

I exploited this, made a point of not speaking during most of our meetings, at least until my brain sparked and I knew I’d lit upon something brilliant or witty or provocative. Then I’d couch it as briefly as I could. I’d speak slowly yet deliberately, in a soft tone of voice. It was as if to say, everything I have to relate carries such tremendous weight, I don’t even have to speak up. Beware, lest my synaptic pyrotechnics vanish in a puff of sulfur.

Pretty soon I could say almost anything in this fashion and have the whole bunch by the balls. Case in point: our discussion of the appreciation banquet. There was everyone hemming and hawing about the venue and the presentations and a fucking slideshow.

“Herb-crusted trout,” I interjected quietly, still looking down. The overall effect was vatic, like I was in thrall. Some kind of vestal virgin giving voice to riddles of epic

import. “And pommes frites.” Everyone nodded thoughtfully at this golden shower of wisdom.

“Yeah,” someone said.

“*Nice.*”

There were murmurs of assent. I remained staring down all the while at the immaculate French manicure of the intern sitting across from me. She also had a French pedicure on her long toenails. I saw them once when she was in the stall next to me and was mesmerized, as usual, by the strange beauty rituals of other women.

“Bananas Foster,” I pronounced slowly, with the appearance of great effort. Then propped my head in one palm, as if depleted by the effort.

Basically, I’d just recommended some hopped-up fish and chips for the dinner, with a banana split for afterwards.

“I’m making a note of that!” declared Lydia Pukowski.

I was allowed to conduct my diversity workshops once again without being constantly monitored. My new colleague Humberto had been less resistant to my pioneering, aggressive sensitivity training lately. From time-to-time, Hayes would pop in and lean against the paneled wall by a large rubber tree plant, laughing at my jokes and surveying us all with his oppressive, manufactured joie de vivre. It was a kind of progress.

Still, the people expected some agon from me. So I called Douche-Bag Doug, my company-appointed wellness facilitator, every once in a while to imply some.

“I’m needing a drink today,” I’d preface it.

I told him how I'd been in my office on my Macbook all day, listening to Nick Cave, reading up on serial killers, especially the cannibals. Looking at the crime scene photos. I couldn't help it. I'd been compulsively checking the sex offender registry again. I wrote down names and addresses, tried to burn all those doughy smirking faces into my memory. Those fuckholes raped people's babies and smirked about it.

"The guy who sells me cigarettes at the tobacconists performed acts on a minor lewdly and lasciviously," I said. "He's the same age my grandpa would've been. He seemed decent." How could I ever enter the humidors again without looking over my shoulder each time the door opened?

Douche-Bag Doug told me it was good I called. He would remind me that this wasn't my pain, that I seemed to be over-identifying with the victims of these horrific acts because I felt powerless too.

Bingo, I said. I felt violated. Butchered, seasoned and consumed, with all my leftover grisly bits left lying around to taunt the authorities. I felt like some dude had been making a hearty stew out of me and feeding it to unsuspecting people he'd had round for supper.

As usual, he casually asked if I'd been remembering to take the Risperdal and then told me to go out for air. He made a reading list for me. Currently I was reading the *Meditations* of Marcus Aurelius.

It was true. I'd absorbed all manner of horrific factoids about serial murderers through the ages, and several pages of info regarding the sex offenders in the tri-county area. But overall I was coping just fine, latent genius that I was. After work I liked to

kick off my shoes, honk for peace on the drive home, then flop on the couch and tongue-fuck a stale grocery store cannoli.

One day Doug said he wanted me to scrapbook.

“Think of it as a journal in pictures, drawings and text, not just of your recovery, but of what got you to this point,” he said, nesting his large rosaceous face on his multiplicity of chins and running his sweaty palms over the knees of his lemon yellow golfing slacks. He said, think of my life as a story that had lost its narrative thread. The scrapbook might help me find it again. I would need old photos, he said, birthday cards, field day ribbons, citizenship awards, etc.

I considered, for a moment, the large Brueghel print above his head: lots of fat-faced goons cavorting like morons, riding piggy back on one another, wrapping their legs around their heads, hanging upside-down from hitching posts, taunting each other with masks and undulating over casks of booze. That was what it felt like, I thought - all those little shits making sport in my head. Drunken peasant revelry and rebellion. I knew then that guy Brueghel had what I had. Some might call it scope, but I knew it for what it really was.

“Citizenship awards...” I lit a cigarette and leaned back in my chair. “My mom has all that shit.”

“Yep,” said D.B.D. “You’ll have to get it from her.”

This I did not relish. I hadn’t spoken to my mother for three years. She divided her time between the Indian clinic in Tallaquah where she worked as a sticky-fingered nurse, and the Big Feathers Casino where she popped her patients’ Percacet while jerking off slot machines. I knew from my cousin Levi that she’d also recently started attending

the local Assembly of God church where Levi's mom and dad went. I asked if she'd had a conversion experience that didn't involve dumping tokens from a big plastic cup and trading them in for hard currency.

"Hard to tell," Levi said. "She's a mysterious lady."

She was also a compulsive hoarder. I could be looking at a monumental excavation.

Levi drove Hayes and me over to my mom's in his old Cutlass one Saturday. The two got on well. Hayes was ceaselessly superficial. Levi, tiresomely indiscriminate. My cousin was a twenty-three year-old devotee of the ganja with the physique of a standing floor lamp. He worked for his dad at Jessepe Auto Repair and had of late been trying to start up a local Native American gang. He and three or four of his associates had been wearing white scarves with black paisleys on their heads, white muscle shirts and baggy white cargo pants. They spray-painted the tag names *IWA*, *Repo* and *Caddo Dawg* in big bubble letters on the crumbling brick of an abandoned podiatrist's, but that seemed the extent of it. From a distance they might have passed for street-wise dancers in a Bollywood film or Menudo in their heyday, and I could never be sure which tag name applied to which associate because they kept changing them. I told Levi he had to be coastal to pull that shit off. The Bible belt had no real status in the cult. But he was a good kid, and I needed buoying. I had always been his babysitter of choice when our mothers traipsed off to the dog races together. He didn't seem disinclined to return the favor.

Levi had his dirty laundry piled in the front seat, so I had no choice but to sit in back with Hayes. We stuck to the seats. There was no AC so we cranked the windows down. I picked up a water-damaged TV Guide that was several months old and pretended to read as Hayes slid his arm behind me on the scalding leather upholstery.

We were in deep summer. I was surrounded by life, most of it young and skittish. But none of it seemed to live too long. The sluices along the highway were strewn with mangled does painted with their own blood as birds tugged determinedly on their viscera. Kittens smeared the residential streets like furry little hand puppets full of raw ground chuck. As we drove, we saw the occasional child's shoe cast from the window. All this heedless fecundity and rapid decay. All this and me existed in this thick golden miasma. I was encased, preserved like some primordial fly in this piss-colored nugget of amber.

We stopped by Krafty Korner on the way for rubber stamps and polka-dotted boarders, then dropped by the bakery outlet for day-old bread. Hayes had presumptuously assumed my cousin was an at-risk youth and had offered to mentor him before they'd even met. He suggested that after we went by my mom's we should spend the rest of what was shaping up to be a glorious afternoon together at the duck pond. I quizzed him on his notion of glorious afternoons. It was 105 degrees out. I'd just showered and my shirt was already sticking to me. But I considered the dude had been in the desert for the better part of two years.

Finally, we pulled into the gravel drive of the once-white stucco bungalow with its missing and broken Spanish tiles. The shutters were gone, though their outline remained. The Doberman out back began barking and trying to climb the chain link. Hayes quickly placed himself between it and me, which I took as my due. I didn't know

the dog's name, had no associations with it, had never been properly introduced. I looked at it for a minute, thinking of an appropriate greeting.

“Hey, Nethermeats” I sneered, as it climbed the chain-link in its effort to get at my throat. “No? Are you a Bitch Cake? Nappy Canoe? Not even warm, huh?... Well then, Hidey Hole, is it?”

“Rascal,” said Levi. “I think your mom calls him Rascal.”

“What's all that shit in back?” I asked, indicating what appeared to be an appliance graveyard. There was a defunct industrial sized smoker big enough for a crematorium, and an old pinball machine called *Space Tramp* that featured a painfully buxom blond with a Farrah Fawcett 'do in some kind of tiny, wafer-thin aluminum shirt dress open to the waist. An old cotton candy machine was resting on coasters by Rascal's enormous mud-caked food and water dish. It was like some kind of fucked-up fun park: Crazy-Ass-Mommy-Land. “She's been hitting the flea markets on Saturday mornings,” Levi said. “You see her there all the time, leaning outside the building, taking smoke breaks. She has my dad haul the stuff out here on his flatbed. *Space Tramp* is pretty cool.” He said she gave a little moan when the little balls got batted in. I somewhat resented the implication he'd been hanging around at my mom's house, playing with her toys.

I turned to Hayes. “See how we live? See how things are?”

Hayes moved my hair from one shoulder to the other, squeezed the back of my neck. This was the most physical contact he was allowed, and I sensed he was using the situation to his advantage.

“You want me to come in, or stay out here?” Levi asked.

I considered. “Why don’t you come in, put on the boob tube, make yourself a sandwich.”

We rang the bell and got no answer. We let ourselves in. It still smelt of corned beef hash, damp, and dirty laundry. The TV was on in the front room. Pa was musing half-pint’s head on *Little House on the Prairie*, but my mom was not in the room. A bright orange-and-turquoise afghan throw had been partially cast off the couch, which bore the definite indentation of her slight body.

“In the kitchen,” I motioned with my head.

We found her sprawled in front of the refrigerator hovering over the pullout freezer. She wore an oversized Powerball tee and threadbare black stirrup pants with bleach spots on them. Her fanny pack was open on the floor beside her, its contents were strewn across the linoleum. She didn’t seem at all surprised to see us.

“Did you shut the front door when you came in?” she asked.

“Why?” I asked.

“Yes,” said Levi. “We pulled it all the way closed.”

“Good.” She parted some bags of mixed veggies and buried her head in the freezer once more.

“What the fuck is going on?”

“It’s the change,” Levi informed me in hushed tones. “You know, the *change*?”

“What change?” I asked. “Looks like the same old shit.”

“The change of life. My mom says she’s been giving herself shots. Hormone therapy. She gets really hot and worked up.”

This, I'll admit was interesting. My mom, allegedly lucid enough from time-to-time to register bodily discomfort. I watched as she felt blindly for her soft pack of Kools and her Tweetie Bird lighter. I kicked the lighter in her direction and watched it traveled in a smooth trajectory along the ancient linoleum. She grabbed it up, bringing her head up out of the freezer just long enough to light up and take a long drag before submerging herself once more.

How much affection had she purposely withheld from me all these years? And I say purposely because I'd been awakened once when I was eight by the satanic furor with which she was lavishing kisses and caresses on me as I slept. As though a mewling succubus in a terry housecoat bent on draining my life force. The woman could only love me prone, an inactive object. Maybe she often did this, but I slept through it. That night I had been terrified by it, had cried out for my daddy. And when he came, she'd slipped out and slithered back down the hall and into the kitchen where I heard her open a pantry door and take down a snifter. Did she know, my little toxic pop-sickle, what an inspiration she'd proven? That every dean's list I made, every scholarship, fellowship, every promotion I got was thanks to her? That she loomed in the dark repository of my mind as the threat of what even the slightest of failures and weaknesses would bring.

I grabbed an old chair with water-stained upholstery from the small Formica kitchen table and drug it behind me, past the living room and into the hallway, positioning it directly under the attic hatch.

Behind me Levi was smiling fondly at the TV, at Mr. Edwards as he stroked his grizzly beard and guffawed at Laura.

Hayes scurried over to help, but I turned to Levi. "Give us a leg up."

My mom rushed us with surprising speed and agility as Levi attempted to hoist me.

“Hold up! What’s going on here?” she asked. “What are you people doing?”

“Where are all the mementos?” I asked.

“Mementos?”

“Precious memories! Photos! Awards! Birthday cards! Newspaper clippings! Baby teeth!”

She waved her hand dismissively in the air. “Gone, gone...And gone.”

“You got rid of the mementos?”

“You spect me to keep all your shit? Girl, I got shit enough of my own. I’m not – I repeat - *NOT* a storage unit.”

I peered down at the outsized bottle of Wild Turkey filled to the rim with old pennies, at the box of old tube socks against the wall next to a ancient meat-grinder, at the brown paper grocery bags full of the remnants of sales bills with the coupons cut out of them. With someone else, I might have assumed it was recyclables. She also had an impressive grouping of neon Schlitz signs on the wall. I delivered a little kick to the side of Levi’s head and he began to lower me as slowly and gracefully as though we were trusting, long-time figure skating partners.

“What did you do with it?” I asked.

“What did you *want* with it?” She narrowed her eyes and ashed on the carpet. Before getting an answer, she fell back into the sofa and drew her feet up under her. She became increasingly unresponsive, which is to say, she resumed her normal persona. She looked especially vacant, and I thought there might be a chance we could get into the

attic without her really registering it. But I was freezing. I was getting gooseflesh, and my olfactory memory is powerful. The smells were acting on me in awful ways.

Suddenly I was a little girl again, stuck at home by myself while my mom worked the night shift at the clinic. I was crying into the phone, trying to convince my dad to come get me. He was crying too. Once Tulsa's best-loved sportscaster, reduced to stocker in an office supply store. Legally, he said, he could do nothing until they straightened it out in court.

"Let's get the fuck out," I said. I was already to the door. Levi was picking up the afghan from the floor and Hayes was making a vain attempt to bid her goodbye.

We stumbled back out into daylight, shielding our eyes against it.

"Your mom wiped your history off the record," said Levi, as we trod through the dust and dead grass at the duck pond. "Like you're some kind of secret agent or something. That's hardcore."

We lobbed bread perfunctorily into the water and watched as it floated back to catch in the reeds and faded beer cans that bordered the water.

Hayes tore the bread and flung it gracefully from the hips, as if teeing off. "*Oh, now I don't hardly know her...*" he sang. "*..but I think I could love her...*" He shot me a loaded look and let go a massive wad of bread. "*Crimson and clover. Over and over.*"

"Oh, look at," he turned suddenly to Levi, "That turtle over there on the rock, sunning itself."

"That's pretty cool," Levi responded, sliding off his 'do rag and smoothing his hair back into a stumpy ponytail.

Hayes threw pebbles at a gaggle of geese and then ran ahead of them, extending his arms and bending from side-to-side like an incoming plane, as they came honking angrily up the rear. I perceived a certain fey quality in his mannerisms that kind of turned me on. I didn't want to be directly involved, but I thought of him with another dude, someone brawnier with some back hair. And then maybe some baby oil.

As we were making our way back up the hill to the Cutlass, a squirrel with no tail darted in front of us to block our way. He barked and bore holes into us with his shiny black eyes. Clearly he had little left to lose. I elbowed Hayes and told him to give over some bread. He threw a heel, hitting it square. The squirrel dragged it up into the crook of a diseased elm with him. He nibbled furiously as we passed, keeping us all the while in his peripheral line of vision. The wind ruffled the tiny wisp of fur that constituted what was left of his tail as we passed.

Isn't orgasmically a word? Hayes inquired of me in an email. *It has to be. But you're the authority. I tried to use it in my Sonnet 11 but spell check didn't like it. I checked to see how I should be spelling it instead, but the only alternative they offered was a noun: "orgasm ally". I just wanted to know, can I make up my own words? Also, do you think there's any chance we'll ever be orgasm allies?*

He claimed he wanted to finish the sonnet sequence before he presented me with it. Not that it mattered. I was stalling. The longer I could remain a faint promise to him, the longer those glowing progress reports would keep rolling in. But it was exhausting. He was always pushing the boundaries of physical contact. Lately he'd been pushing

other boundaries as well. He kept taking Levi bowling and giving him brochures from Tri-County Community College. He posited naïve schemes for reconciliation with my mom.

Hayes was also claiming of late that he was having flashbacks of his tour in Iraq.

“You know what it is to kill someone point-blank?” he turned on me one afternoon at the grocery store.

“Messy?” I had some circus peanuts, was compulsively mashing each spongy orange candy through the bag.

“Everyone kept calling me a hero,” he looked away. “My nephew Josh wrote a poem about me for the local newspaper. But I was like, Josh, what exactly is a hero? What does that really mean? I’m *no* hero,” he said pointedly, widening his eyes and bobbing his head a little for emphasis.

“Okay,” I put the defiled bag back on the shelf and tossed a new, untouched bag into the cart.

We examined red meat.

He knew nothing of food. I said look for the stuff that’s darkening, whatever looks iffy, your level of concern being directly proportional to the degree of tenderness you can expect. He kept going on about his deterioration as I selected a highly suspect package of stew meat. He spoke of night sweats, of waking up drenched, tangled in sheets, terrified. And, worse yet – alone. He thought I could help him.

“I am not – I repeat – *NOT* the V.A.,” I said.

I still wasn’t totally out of the woods myself. My needs seemed to have mass and were therefore constant – it all had to out somehow. I could bend spoons with the fucking

energy it took to convince people I'd abandoned my excesses. Sometimes things reached such a pitch that I slipped out of my office at work and hurried to the bathroom down the hall where I worked myself to orgasm with a mental montage of a young Eli Wallach, my ginger-haired Uncle Gerard, who'd briefly visited the states twice when I was a kid, and – perhaps most successfully – to the vague idea of just saying fuck all and hopping a plane for some sleepy sun-washed fishing village somewhere. Any sleepy sun-washed fishing village anywhere. I didn't want to know what they were saying. I didn't want to know what I was eating or how my gestures were received. I could look into their eyes and know all I needed to know.

My home was already no longer my own. Levi had been staying with me for the past week, allegedly trying to lay low from a rival Comanche gang over some girl. His folks' house had gotten tagged, Jessepe Auto received a bomb threat a few weeks back, someone slashed his tires.

“These are dudes are serious,” Levi said of the Comanches. “They don't know the law. Some of them are from Anadarko. Comanches eat dogs.”

Wasn't that the point of gangs, I inquired, lawlessness. Anyway, it sounded more high school hi-jinx than gangland. To reciprocate for my hospitality, Levi brought over some frozen wild turkey breast and venison he'd scored with his dad last season. One unfortunate and unforeseen circumstance of my sudden tribalism was the frequent presence of said girl, one Florimell Parker.

The first time Levi brought her by, she entered, swallowing her few words of greeting and feverishly text-messaging while Levi kept his hand protectively on one of her meaty knees. So this was what all this shit was about. Here was the people's Helen,

the face that launched a thousand rice-burners with aftermarket mufflers and rear spoilers. She was top-heavy, with a large, forgettable – but for the dimples – face. Her eyes were heavily lined with electric blue and she bore a mass of knobby cornrows, gathered atop her head in a scrunch. She definitely had something pharaonic going on, but this bitch was no Nefertiti. I located something I took for a neck, garroted by a dirty bit of hemp. There was the gum, worked lazily in one cheek, the tiny rhinestone constellations set into each of her blue talons, that ever-present (yet highly ineffective) red herring, patchouli. So I'm no Emily Post, but I recognize some things as untoward. Florimell was one of those things.

Love's young dream.

“But just don't go putting all your eggs in my basket,” I told Hayes as he packed an overnight bag. “Unless you want me to make hollandaise of your hopes and dreams. Got it?” I watched with contempt as he folded all his polo shirts impeccably and zippered all his high-end, department store gels and exfoliates in a Burberry toiletry bag.

“That was forced.” He beamed at me.

I told Levi the evening prior to keep some space between himself and Hayes.

“He thinks you're at-risk,” I told him.

“For what?”

“Not winding up a total douche bag.”

“Shit,” said Levi. “I don't want that.”

“Right,” I said. “You don’t. So no more fishing excursions on the lake. No more hoops in the afternoon. No more 31 Flavors. Be a good boy, and I’ll take you for a nice gelato at Vic’s.”

“What’s gelato?”

I was already in a tank top and PJ bottoms when Hayes showed up with a five o’clock shadow and his bags thrown jauntily over his shoulder. The sky was still blue, with snatches of purple, like a three day-old bruise. He stood there framed against it, a slightly off J.Crew model. “*Oh...well here she comes, walking over,*” he sang. “*Now I been waiting to show her...Crimson and clover.*” He stayed in my doorway to gift me: a bag of purportedly gourmet chocolate chip cookies and a huge bottle of Goldschläger. When I reached for them he stepped forward into me. I held the front line, pursing my lips tightly against the aggression of his tongue. He pulled back. “*Over and over.*” He winked.

Without looking, I reached down and relieved him of the cookies and booze. I held the cookies out for Levi to tear into.

Hayes slid his bags from his shoulder and commenced a search of my cabinets.

“No Jägermeister,” he said. “Means no Liquid Crack.”

“What did you expect?” I asked. “With this whole great goddamn wellness campaign.” I told him D.B.D. had been by right after the intervention for a ritualistic pouring out of my entire liquor cabinet. Not that I would’ve kept that frat boy piss in any event. I wasn’t feeling so discriminating these days.

With lavish wantonness we poured the Goldschläger into mason jars of Tang, used cinnamon sticks for garnish. We called it the Christa McAuliffe. When we finished

a drink, we fingered the gold flecks out, sucked them off and poured more. I began to feel my latent genius as it squalled through my body, spreading out, taking up position in all my nooks and crannies. I tore several cookies to bits, scouting for chocolate chips. I piled the chocolate beside me and left the rent flesh of the cookies scattered about, as if a kill site.

After rifling my closet, I brought out the Krafty Korner bag of previously untouched scrapbooking supplies I dumped them, along with some construction paper and a 64 box of crayons, all about the living room floor. We took our drinks and sprawled out on our bellies like enterprising kindergartners, intent on the creative representation of my memories.

I had Hayes render me, age 5, wearing a tank swimsuit and posing seductively on a park bench. We were working from my memory of what had been a duplicate of the photo my dad took of me so we could send it in a fan letter to John Schneider of *The Dukes of Hazard* fame. I never got a reply. No glossy, zilch. I hadn't yet learned at that age how enigmatic malaise could be more attractive to men than painful glee. I told Hayes to make my smile astonishingly wide, with a mouth full of dainty milk teeth.

Levi was to work on duplicating a pic he'd actually seen before, one of my mom and dad posing with my dad's millionaire best friend, Tulsa Thompson. In the picture, Tulsa, in a ten-gallon hat and blue velvet jacket, had stood between my folks, his arms laced between theirs. It was snapped beside the Roman bath on his nearby estate, Bison Mere. My mother's dark hair reached the small of her back. She was an exotic beauty, sleek as a seal pup in a bright orange caftan, wearing a smudge of chalky pink lipstick.

My dad was handsome but ungainly in snug madras print pants and a turtleneck. He dwarfed them both and seemed sorry for it.

Tulsa had introduced my dad to several gorgeous women after the divorce, but nothing ever took off. Most of them were too young to remember his days as a sportscaster. There was the initial attraction to his slight, tripping brogue, to his big, square jaw and general auburn handsomeness. But he had always been too gracious and uncertain to really capture their imaginations. There was not even the remotest hint of that sexy mal-intent that appeals to a certain cast of woman. Tulsa was still regionally famous these days, mostly for his Christmas parties. It was tradition for him to lap fish roe off the décolletage of the reigning Miss Oklahoma. Then he'd get a few in him, start loudly denying the Holocaust happened – that kind of shit. Every year I got an invite, but I'd never even RSVP'd.

The picture I drew was not from a photo, or even a memory of my own. It was based on the testimony Tulsa gave at the inquest regarding my father's drowning death on Lake Ponkawatsi. How dad seemed to be smiling, and everyone thought he was goofing. How his arms were raised over his head like he was going out for a pass. And then how the murky water covered his head and he never came back up. There were bubbles and ripples, and then the Pabst Blue Ribbon can he'd been holding was bobbing there in its koozy, where he'd just been. Accidental drowning was the official last word, but several of those who'd been on the party barge said there was an air of the purposeful about it.

That was two years ago.

I drew the Pabst Blue Ribbon can against rippling green water. I stamped it with a red heart.

When that was done, I drew the empty, overstuffed armchair that my best friend and fellow diversity consultant left behind in his office at G & K when he took off for L.A. I hesitated for a moment, then stamped that one too.

I pasted into the scrapbook my deed to the one square foot of an ancient Scottish estate my dad bought me, just so I'd have something. His brother Gerard pissed all his money away and sold the family home in Ayr. But this, he said, technically made a laird of me. The Laird or Lady of Bealkirkie. It cost him only £30, and I could pass the title on to my kids.

I crushed up my Risperdal into my fourth Christa McAuliffe and was just hot-gluing some pink ribbon onto a likeness of my rent hymen when something hit the picture window behind me. I turned to watch the yolky mass slide down the pane. A car revved its engine out front.

“Comanches,” Levi looked up, gripping his orange crayon.

I reached in the pocket of my PJs, took a Nat Sherman from its box and stuck it between my lips. When I rose, I could see the culprits, idling in their rusted-out Nissan (tomato red with a black hood), avec egg carton.

I went to my bedroom and took my dad's old .22 from my bedside table. “I'm going for a smoke,” I told Hayes. “Wanna come with?”

He tucked a green crayon behind his ear and jumped to his feet.

We sat on the steps of the front porch and I lit up. Hayes stirred his drink with his finger.

“Tell that pussy Levi Jessepe to come out,” said the driver. He was the uglier of the two boys. His face was like a black walnut; I could see his pores from where I sat.

“We want a word.”

“Levi’s inside, seeing how many different ways he can stick it to some skank named Florimell,” I said. “What I want to know, which of you sorry fucks is gonna lick that egg off my window?”

“Who the fuck are you?” asked the other, almost pretty, boy with a ‘do rag fashioned from black pantyhose.

“Povi McDougal, head diversity consultant at G & K, ” I said, getting to my feet. “Cousin of Levi Jessepe. Daughter of Gerald McDougal and Myra Konkapot. Laird of Bealkirkie. Like I said, Levi’s taking care of some business in the bedroom and also on the kitchen floor. And like I said, I’ll be requiring one of you two dog-eating, chub-fucking cunts to lick my window clean. That right, Hayes?” He was shoulder-to-shoulder with me now.

“That’s right, Povi,” he grinned broadly. With the crayon tucked behind his ear and the pressed button-down, he looked like some rock star children’s TV presenter. There was, however, a manic pleasure in his ice blue eyes I’d never seen before, something almost painful to look at.

“Look, bitch,” said the ugly driver. “Just get Levi. We ain’t got time for this shit. He did us some bad business. You appreciate that?”

I flicked my cigarette into the car and blew a stream of smoke up at the moon. I saw the pretty one wipe the butt frantically from his lap onto the floorboard and stomp it.

“You boys want to pretend we’re in Compton?” I took the .22 from the waistband of my petit fleur PJs and went up to the car. “Bitches – I’m *straight outta* Compton!”

“Sweet fuck...” muttered the pretty one.

I waved the gun at ugly and he fell out of the car. I fell on him and we scrapped. He seemed to have the better of me until I found his sweaty ball sac with my left hand and commenced twisting. He screamed through tears.

I punched him square in the nose and felt it give. Then I took him by the scruff and walked him like a dog over to the window, kicking him up the stairs. Hayes had the pretty one pinned to the hood.

I shoved ugly’s face into the window. “*Lick it!*” I hissed. “*Lick. It. Good!*” I saw the slow unfurling of his tongue, watched his eyes squint shut. I got a good whiff of his soured milk breath.

I thought to institute some call-and-response.

“HAYES!” I yelled back over my shoulder. “WHAT MAKES THE GRASS GROW?”

I heard a whimper behind me. I looked. Hayes had pretty’s hands secured behind his back with the black pantyhose.

“BLOOD!” screamed Hayes, blue eyes shining. “BLOOD MAKES THE GRASS GROW, SIR!”

“They say it ain’t good for you, you know...Raw egg,” I said as ugly was lapping up the last bits of it. “They say it’s rife with salmonella, all manner of bacterial shit like that. Be a shame to spend the rest of your shitty night with your head in the bowl and going at both ends...Wouldn’t it?” Through the window, I could see Levi sitting at the

kitchen table with his head down over his picture, coloring intently. I held him tight by his lank pageboy and stuck my mouth against his ear, getting a mouthful of cubic zirconia. “When I’m done with you, are you planning to *spit* or *swallow*?”

When there was no more egg left except what little bit had dried to a kind of crust, I let go. Ugly slid down onto his knees. I kicked his baggy-ass britches the rest of the way to the car. Hayes had taken the pantyhose from pretty’s wrists and made an elaborate hair bow for him.

We shoved ugly into the backseat and told pretty to drive. He reached back to untie the pantyhose.

“Leave it!” snarled Hayes.

Pretty turned on the ignition and they squealed off into the night, bow flapping in the wind.

I had some cuts, a few bruises. The knee of my PJs was ripped and my knee skinned. Hayes brought some hydrogen peroxide out of his Burberry bag, but I refused. I’d hurt myself worse than this roller-skating as a kid, I said.

I fried some deer sausage for us and took out the bottle of Stoli I’d stashed in my toilet bowl tank.

“I knew you were holding out,” said Hayes. “Always holding out.”

I felt responsive to him for once. “You know,” I said coyly. “I got a mean-eyed squint, apropos of nothing.”

“No,” he said, coming up behind me where I was stationed at the stove. “Apropos of *everything*.”

He sucked my neck and I let him. Levi was still at the kitchen table, looking down and rolling his crayons back-and-forth over the cheap vinyl tablecloth.

We ate our sausage with quiet intensity, with the vodka and the gun on the table, like some war-ravaged Eastern block family. We ate with relish, Hayes and I most of all. We kept our heads low over our plates, except when we were licking the grease from our mouths or gazing on each other.

“I think it’s safe to go home, kid,” I told Levi the minute dinner was finished.

He nodded.

“And get some guts about you, yeah?”

“Thanks,” he said quietly, still not quite meeting my eyes.

We saw Levi into his car and scampered back inside.

Hayes had my shirt off in one fell swoop before we hit the sagging double bed. He ripped the rest of my PJ bottoms from me. I wiped sausage grease frantically all over his Armani button-down and sank my teeth into his sculpted paunch. He grabbed me up by my ass and threw me hard against the brass headboard. I kicked him in the face and scissored his head. He pushed my legs apart with such force my hips popped. I grabbed his bristly thigh hair and yanked some out. Grabbing hold of my braid, he shoved my head savagely into his scrotum. I rammed my thumb as far as I could up his asshole. I had to go back in for my turquoise ring.

We laughed.

He bit my left nipple, reached over to my bedside table and came back with the Parker fountain pen my dad got me for my college graduation. He made to insert it somewhere, but I knocked it from his hand and boxed his ears. He grabbed my knuckles hard in his fists and cracked them. It hurt. We kissed with vigor and I bit his lip till the metallic taste of blood was thick on my tongue. He delivered a swift, powerful head butt. I leaned my head back and smiled contentedly up at him through the throbbing pain. I tossed my legs over his shoulders and shimmied down in the bed, the better to accommodate him.

Then, nothing. He was unmoved. For the first time, I allowed myself to look on the wee apathetic Vienna sausage of a thing.

“Well,” I said. “Okie-dokie.”

We fell apart.

Bat-like, I tucked my head down and folded the sheets around me. Hayes turned over on his side, curled up fetal and was asleep in minutes. I listened to his adenoidal distress. I lay there for a while, holding the space between us and listening in to his end of things. When he seemed in full thrall, I lit my next-to-last Nat Sherman. I took up Marcus Aurelius and my LED book light and tried to read.

Begin the morning by saying to thyself, I shall meet with the busy-body, the ungrateful, arrogant, deceitful, envious, unsocial, it said. All these things happen to them by reason of their ignorance of what is good and evil.

I grabbed my Parker pen from the table and copied this passage into my notebook. I waited for a moment and drew a question mark beside it. It was easy to see why D.B.D. was so gung-ho about this guy. There was also some stuff and twaddle about how all

men work cooperatively, like various parts of the same body, all cogs in the universal machination. There was a lot of shit about the baseness of the corporeal and the fleetingness and brevity of life, which I was kind of into. I clasped the book to my bare breasts in my ruminations and finished my smoke. When I was done, I flung the book across the room onto my dirty laundry basket and began plucking some of Hayes' errant chest hairs off my breasts.

He jerked beside me again. "Go ahead," he murmured, shaking his head. "She's...dead anyway."

I held the book light to him; its glow was terrifying and holy. I watched him in it. He was more beautiful in his night throes. I stooped to kiss him, felt his rheum thick on my mouth. He flopped for a minute like the catch of the day and sat up stiff with his eyes still closed. He fought to keep his head up. "*SIR?*" He fell back into the bed, clipping his head on the brass bedstead. He turned over and curled up again.

At some point I fell asleep. I dreamt that my dad kept popping up out of the waters of Lake Ponkawatsi. Each time he wore a different and highly exaggerated expression on his face: Happy daddy. Sad daddy. Astonished daddy. Finally he shot up wearing a completely stoic expression and spitting a steady stream from his mouth, like some gaudy fountain at Bison Mere. As he went back under, he did jazz hands. Upon waking, it took me a bit to discern Hayes licking the dried blood from one of my skinned knees. He was also loosely holding the .22 at my head.

He felt me move and looked up. "Hey, doll face."

"What we got going on here?" I asked.

"I'm fixing you."

“Praise be to God,” I said. “I was thinking to shit myself.”

He started work to work on my other knee with zeal. I let him.

“I heard you in your sleep,” I said. “Talking about loving up dead chicks.”

“You know, I caught your scent early,” he said. “I can smell it the way most men can poontang. I could tell you had the balls to do what needs to be done.”

Was this it? This cramped bedroom, with the hamper collapsing under the weight of dirty laundry and the impromptu desk of orange crates and plywood. The teeming stacks of Sallie Mae statements? Were they soon to be forgiven?

“Ah, Hayes.” I wiped my face with my hand. “*Shit*. I’m just getting my agency back.”

It was like that song, I said. I wanted to do everything. What a beautiful feeling. Crimson and Clover...*Over and over*.

“You’re so beautiful, baby, when you ache.” He was gently stroking the insides of my thighs. “And you ache all the time.”

“Look, I’ve got latent genius,” I said. “And shit tons of forward momentum.”

So I had summoned him. Like some guileless twelve-year old on the Ouija board in her parents’ basement, suddenly shocked to find Satan manifest between the fustball table and decades-old Hoover. Now I didn’t know how to take it back.

His sniffer, I said, appeared to be off. I recommended Lydia Pukowski for someone who seemed resigned. She exhaled defeat, I reasoned. With those tapered leg corduroys and sad cups of reconstituted soup for lunch. And she’d just been on leave with that tubaligation. Women, I pointed out, could sense entropy amongst their ranks.

He was now smoothing the hair away from my temple with the muzzle. “I know how to do it,” he said like an unctuous little boy. “I can do it clean. Go on and pick out something special from your closet. I’ll put it on you after. I’ll arrange you so beautifully. Then I’ll do me.”

His enormous blood-full member was hanging out the leg of his Ralph Lauren boxers, the painful color of an aubergine. It bobbed upward toward me optimistically from time-to-time, like a puppy snout begging to be petted.

“Your first time should be special,” I said. “You need to make sure it’s just right.” Besides, the title of Lady McDougal of Bealkirkie dies with me unless I have an heir.

He proceeded in his licking. “Look, I’m gonna sit up now.”

I pulled my knees up and struggled to a sitting position. I lit my last cigarette and took a few inspired drags before dropping it into a half full bottle of Pellegrino I’d been trying to develop a taste for. I listened as it hissed in its death.

“I’ve got something in my closet I can wear,” I said. “It’s how I want to represent myself. I’d like to put it on now.”

I parted the curtain panels on my closet and took down my custom-made pageant gown.

His eyes widened with incredulity. “But it’ll make a mess.”

“I want it to bear testament to what we’re going to do.” Besides, I told him. There was already a cigarette burn and a grass stain. It would be like a palimpsest of pain.

I took my time working myself into it, then did the requisite spin for him.

“Jesus,” he shook his head. “You rock my world.”

I sat on the bed, keeping the periwinkle satin clear of his leaking member.

“You’re probably right, Hayes. There’s just one way to do this. But I want it to be me that does it. I got all this agency now; I want to use it one last time. Can you show me the best way?”

“You promise me?” he asked. “Don’t let me go alone.”

I promised.

“Under the chin,” he said, “Like this.” He held the muzzle to the juncture where his strong chin joined that slightly weak slope of flesh.

Then I tried on myself.

“You got it, babe.”

“I’m a quick study.”

We thought of a gesture to make. “Let’s not leave a letter,” I said. “We could be here all night pouring our hearts out. You got those sonnets on you?”

He looked sheepish, my grim little reaper. “I could never really write any,” he admitted. “Words just don’t do you justice. What about your scrapbook?”

“Good thinking.”

He wouldn’t let me go to the living room to retrieve it, sprinting in there himself and returning seconds later cradling the baby blue album with the bright pink fleur de lis.

“Great,” I said. “Well, then...”

Before I could finish, he was tonguing me and simultaneously stroking the peacock feathers on my gown. It was fucking incredible, as kisses go.

He opened his eyes again. “Ready.”

We sat on the bed together and I positioned the gun. Hayes had cleared his face of all expression, like he was already one with the Logos.

My stomach seized up at the horrible crack when I brought the butt of the gun down on his skull. For one terrible moment, I didn't think he would go. Then he wobbled, his eyes fluttered. He dropped.

I checked his pulse. I looked through his wallet, found the number for the local V.A., took a free drink card for the drive-through Espresso Hut and folded it into the bodice of my gown. When I finally got to talk to a real live person at the V.A. named Virginia, I told her I had something at my place that belonged to her. Something that might need tending to. I looked back to where Hayes stirred faintly. Then I dropped the .22 into an old beaded handbag and walked barefoot to the Kum-N-Shop for whatever crap brand smokes they'd sell me.

A few cars passed, slowed down, kept going. I stroked my peacock feathers and began to plan for the following week.

It was all up to me again. I'd crack my knuckles and make my way back to the Gibson Room, where the latest gaggle of new hires, having partaken of the international buffet (which could include goat and crickets, for range) will have gathered for the afternoon portion of the workshop session. After just three days, they will have already formed factions and alliances, their own shorthand. These performative identities will remain as they form betting pools, knife each other, proposition each other's wives at the Christmas parties.

I have one week to break them.

I'd get them to work in pairs, interviewing each other about their ethnic background and compiling lists of all the racial and ethnic slurs they could think of. They'd probably get stumped and I'd have to come over with my master list to help out.

Once they've taken turns shouting the slurs at their partners and verbally degrading them, it will be time for the soul-cleansing wrap up.

I'd do something new this time. Maybe ask them to relax and look inward as I recited the Navajo Night Chant.

"Restore my body for me. Restore my mind for me. This very day take out your spell for me..."

Doubtless there will be smirks, some parodic sincerity. I'd falter.

"...Happily my interior becomes cool," I would say more pointedly. "Happily I go forth..."

A rogue elephant in a clingy cashmere shirtdress, I'd roam once more. Never let them know where you're headed – that was key. Striding down the aisle, I'd locate the source of the problem: a smarmy twenty-something intern who was growing out a head full of peroxide highlights. A glorified frat boy, some sorry approval slut who'd been trying to make up to the new hires, doubtless for networking purposes.

I'd sit on the edge of the table and place my open palm on his head, as if casting out demons. "NO LONGER SORE MAY I WALK." I'd give his head a little shove as I remove my hand, then pause a moment for clarity. It would follow.

Then I'd be up and on the move once more.

"Impervious to pain may I walk. With lively feelings may I walk. As it used to be long ago may I walk..."

Traipsing down the aisle, I'd let my fingertips graze the shoulders of the suits on both sides of the aisle as I pass. "May it be beautiful below me."

I'd raise my arms skyward, throw my head back on my shoulders to gaze up at the clunky, gargantuan prairie style chandelier. And notice for the first time, the delicate mottled effect of the parchment colored panes of glass. Maybe a spider's web spanning the length of two of the sconces. "May it be beautiful above me."

I would spread my palms in gesture toward the new hires. The problematic intern would be looking almost funereal. Fucking transcendental even. "May it be beautiful all around me."

Slowly I'd bring my arms to my side, leveling my gaze at them all. "In beauty it is finished."

At some point, I swore, I'd actually feel it.

There's Restless and There's Deep Water

I had just returned to my office after secreting some files in deep storage when I got the message via my new stepdaughter's online planner requesting dinner and maybe a sleepover at my place. Vance, my husband of two months, had set up linking calendars for the three of us so we could keep tabs. From 7:40-12:10, he'd be at Bob Wills Middle School, where he taught art. From 12:15-1:00 he'd be taking lunch on the go while picking up some of his students' recently fired ceramics at Faster, Pussy Cat! Kiln! Kiln! He'd be back at Bob Wills until 3:20. From 3:30-4:15 he'd be helping the near dead at the senior center fashion sit-upons from The Oklahoma Intelligencer sports section, from 4:30-5:30 he was hosting an ice cream social for the women's shelter at his arts and crafts style bungalow. After that he had a night class at the University. He was learning Chinese.

His waifish woman-child Widget was interred at the High School until 4:30, after a meeting of the textile and design club she'd co-founded and was thinking Thai, maybe Laotian.

This whole linking calendar function thing was an invasion of my privacy. This marriage, along with some measure of accountability might be just what I needed (no more grandiosity, missing time), but I could only go so far. My own calendar showed, ambiguously and color-coded in gray, a massive, eight-hour block of time I would be indentured at G & K, ending at 5:00. From 5:10-6:00 I'd indicated I'd be at the

coffeehouse, which meant I'd actually end up at the VA, sitting with my friend Hayes. With that in mind, I'd been toying with the idea of extending my stay at the coffeehouse until 9:00 or maybe 10:00, when visiting hours were over.

I closed my eyes and moved the pointer frantically from the Accept to the Decline button until I couldn't remember which was which. I clicked randomly.

I looked up to realize that I'd accepted.

Vance and I met when I joined the Sierra Club on the recommendation of my company appointed wellness facilitator, Doug. Hiking in the Osage hills, kicking around buffalo preserves, Doug assured me, would be recuperative. And it might ground me, he said. In truth, I was never happy unless I was flying too high, surfing the stratosphere and laughing at all the suckers down below.

I freely admit this.

On my first outing we went to hunt the roosting spots of prairie chickens, which led to a Day of the Dead party at his place, and me, decked out like a Catrina in a bustle and grease paint, rolling around in front of the altar he'd built to his dead mother and ravenously scarfing sugary blue skulls, post-coital. The marriage itself was breezy and progressive by design, but also by happenstance.

Vance originally wanted me to move into his bungalow by the university. He'd done significant restoration; it was quaint (William Morris print curtains, squat, lop-sided student pottery dented with little fingerprints, etc.). I wouldn't leave my white clapboard by the abandoned canning jar warehouse. I pointed to the cork floor in the kitchen that gave the place real character. Moreover, they just didn't make bathtubs that big anymore. In the evenings, I ritualistically ran the water as hot as I could bear and tried to soak away

the malice and vainglory I'd been exposed to over the course of the workday. This was the yard wherein the two neighborhood cats that had been hit and left to die were buried next to some volunteer rhubarb. I'd designated their graves with flint rocks and didn't like the idea of someone coming in and turning up their remains to put in a fucking hot tub or patio, or whatever. More importantly, I was convinced that the thing in my attic I couldn't get rid of with live traps and rat poison was spirit activity. And I had the sense it was significant in a tragic and unwholesome way, and that Vance wouldn't understand or have any affinity for it. I told him it was squirrels, but I couldn't just pack up and leave it.

A lot of people – my mom for instance – didn't even know we'd tied the knot so to speak. Vance suggested a big wedding with tribal dancers and a drum circle, which I think was inspired by my Native American heritage or what have you, but I quickly put the squats on that. In the end we'd gone to the courthouse in dress casual and signed things. I didn't read a thing. I signed page-after-page with a single, wobbly line and a dot that kept moving every time. The only thing I didn't sign away in that big marble sarcophagus of a courthouse was my name.

I, Povi McDougal, would never be Mrs. Vance Lassiter.

When the scribbling was over, I stumbled out into the light for a smoke. Widget was our witness. She wore a black velvet cocktail dress. Her head was so over large on her tiny pale frame and her enormous, haunted eyes were kohl-smudged. She looked like an Edward Gorey illustration or an engraving of an early Christian martyr. She knotted herself around the railing and snapped some shots with her Hello Kitty digital camera as we emerged.

What you'll see in those pictures is Vance smoothing the placket of his cashmere polo neck, looking smug and playfully censorious at the camera and me slightly ahead of him, rooting in the pocket of my suede blazer for a lighter and squinting off into the distance. At what?

Neither of us was too much interested in sex. I was in my prime but medicated and Vance was approaching his mid-fifties. So the deed was rare, a confusing paroxysm of heart-thumping despair and conciliation. Vance was fixed but a few times I took stick tests with me to the toilet and did them. It reminded me I had woman parts, and also, you never know.

In lieu of visiting the VA that evening, I took a long lunch and high-tailed it over there. Hayes was a former co-worker. We'd had a relationship of sorts and things had been veering in a sexual direction, but never made it that far before the freak-out. I could go all week and feel next to nothing, then go see Hayes and feel all manner of confusing shit. The drugs had disimpassioned him pretty good and watered down all that pent up urgency. But my visits were still innervating, a reminder that I had once triggered a psychotic episode. It did me some good. I kept my regular visits to him on the down-low. Vance just assumed I drank a lot of coffee.

For his part, Hayes had been placed there since before my hasty nuptials and didn't know about Vance or the marriage. So far as he knew, I was my same old self: untethered, indulgent, still gathering speed and further amassing my extravagances. And I had no intention of telling him otherwise. There on the dilapidated hospital grounds or in

the little sea foam green room where everything had blunt edges and was bolted down, I could resume my old incarnation.

I could also monitor his alarming condition.

“For the love of Pete, we have to be able to handle him,” Mandy Ogletree, R.N. told me when I confronted her about the Rohypnol they’d been giving Hayes. “He’s a big guy. We gotta bathe him and keep him settled down.”

She turned her bad home perm away from me and began dragging one fat little finger over a chart again. This was typical. You had to get in their space and declare yourself to get noticed. The nurses were huddled up, looking at candle party brochures around the station desk. Some were leaning against carts, texting. A wary doctor or two would stride hastily past, patting the pocket of his lab coat, trying not to make eye contact. Veterans drifted in and out of all this workaday activity in sweats and PJs, like shades in Hades, on another plane of existence altogether.

They were always changing up and adding to the serious drug cocktail Hayes was on. I harassed Mandy et al, checked the charts. I knew a few things about pharmaceuticals off-the-cuff, but I started bringing my laptop with me so I could consult the Physicians Desk Reference for inauspicious combinations, recommended dosages and major side effects. Lately they had him on lithium, Thorazine injections, and Xanax. And now they were slipping him ruffies and had also recently started administering a dropper full of Atropine (which I soon discovered was an extract from deadly nightshade), to prevent all the drooling that resulted from the aforementioned. The lithium, I could understand, but they kept switching up the dosage; his body couldn’t keep pace. And all the other shit was just to make life easier on them. It had me on tenterhooks.

Behemoth, chain-smoking Mandy usually made a point to pick up the phone or duck down an adjacent hallway when she saw me coming.

“Rohypnol is a date rape drug,” I said loudly, snapping my fingers in front of her face while she was taking down orders for drive-through Mexican. “What frat boys slip to little girls when they want to take them back to the house and gang-fuck them along with all their buddies and maybe tape it all.”

She eyed me while sipping from a huge sports canister advertising Diazepam, which I knew good and well was one of the Benzodiazepines. “Jesus weeps for that mouth of yours,” she said. “Now do I need to call someone to escort you from the premises or are you going to let me do my job?”

“Mandy.” I said it by way of acknowledgment but gave it the inflection of a curse, slid my bag back up on my shoulder indignantly and trounced down the hallway toward room 214.

The vinyl 70s issue furniture was peeling and had been patched here and there with duct tape. If you used the little sticks to draw the brown curtains back on their runners, Hayes had a view of the strip mall across the street, which included an arcade, a Chinese laundry next to a Chinese buffet with a façade sprouting two massive, gold-painted dragons, and a Beauty Academy from which young girls with high concept hair were continually leaving and entering, dragging their equipment bags behind them on rollers. Other than me, the most Hayes had to look forward to was Yahtzee with some of the guys. They played for USA Gold 100s, though Hayes didn’t smoke. He kept them all in a drawer and showed them to me when I visited, regaling me with tales of the awesome inside straight he rolled or how he had to make a new space on the score card to

accommodate his fourth Yahtzee. I hugged him. I congratulated him. I lied and told him he still had his upscale townhouse and his aquarium full of exotic parrotfishes that I was feeding daily. I tried once to bring in his air ionizer when I discovered red mildew wrinkling the sheetrock in his room, but Mandy followed me to the room to let me know that in addition to being blacklisted by the office of Homeland Security, the ionizer was on the hospital's prohibited list for suicide risks.

Hayes had just finished his lunch.

As always, he looked surprised to see me, gave me a big loose hug, standing clear of my breasts as if they might go off. I zippered his windbreaker up under his chin and held his hand on the way out to the rock garden in back of the hospital.

"How they treating you in here?" I asked, packing a cigarette as an icy gust of wind swept through. It was my usual conversation starter.

"Oh, you know. Pretty fair." His baby blues were wide and rheumy, his long black lashes wet. He had crusties in the corners, like a child on waking. He stared off at a crumbling sundial.

He leaned hard against me, less out of affection than from the lithium. He did everything now slowly and at a severe slant. He walked at a slant. If he was sitting in a chair without arms, you had to watch that he didn't just slide off the side. Once he'd been fastidious about his hair. Expensive cuts and fruity pomades, always perfectly mussed. Now it was dirty and was combed down to the side. He'd gotten flabby, too, with a pretty tragic paunch from all the inactivity.

I tried sometimes to take him for walks, but he kept running me off the pavement into the curb. When we tried to shoot hoops, it was exhausting. He'd start to dribble the ball, then just stop and let it roll off into the weeds.

"Sink it!" I'd roar as he prepared to make a shot. I'd stand there, squatting a little with my hands on my thighs like he was giving me the game of my life. He'd stand there, his U.S. Marine's hoodie straining across his gut, looking down at the ball like someone just yanked the pin from a grenade and handed it off to him. On the few occasions he held onto the ball long enough to try for a shot, he'd end up tossing it several feet to the right of the goal and I'd have to go after it again.

"That's good stuff," I'd said, clapping my hands together. "How about you stand a little more to the left for the next one?"

I saw something crusty on Hayes' jacket and worked to scrape it off. Another gust of wind swept through the grounds and he leaned against me with even more pressure, his cold, greasy black hair resting against my cheek. I tried to lean into him, gripping the edge of the bench so as to not fall off into a heap of jagged quartzite below.

"I'm probably pregnant," I told him.

"Really?" he asked, staring now at a cracked, iridescent blue gazing ball.

"Yep."

There was a lull in the wind. I bent down low and finally managed to light my cigarette. I said I didn't know the sex yet. I was making preparations to paint the spare room yellow. I wasn't about to raise any fucking Disney princess or, conversely, some Bud Light-swilling, date-raping, wide-receiver. I hoped he'd see things the same way.

"Did we ever?" Hayes asked.

“Kind of.” I asked on the stone pate of St. Francis of Assisi. “For the most part.”

“Wow,” he said, patting my back very lightly with his fingers spread wide.

“That’s good stuff.”

When I guided him back to his room, he asked me to jerk him off. He was pretty gone, and I didn’t have the heart to tell him he didn’t have much to work with. I just went through the motions for a few minutes.

“You *like* that?” I kept whispering into his ear. “Yeah, I can see you do.” For a second or two I really wanted the sad, limp bit of flesh in my hand to shoot forth. Let life sing through this man again, I thought. All the while, he lay back, watching the TV mounted high in the corner. The old Dean Martin Celebrity Friars Club Roast. After a few minutes, I made a show of cupping my hands together and hurrying to the restroom to “wash off.” But he didn’t seem to notice, was still lost in the TV. I reckoned he was somewhere in his burnt orange polyester and double-knit swathed childhood. Somewhere where Angie Dickenson was still hot and nothing could touch him.

So I gathered my things and left him there.

Widget cantered into my house that evening in a swingy, electric blue a-line coat, matching blue tights and white Chelsea boots. There was probably a skirt there if I’d scrutinized.

“Dad says, don’t forget you’re grilling at his place tomorrow. How was work?” She asked this with the optimistic upturn of a girl whose sole experience with work has

involved the occasional baby-sitting gig and holding up the counter and providing atmosphere at upscale boutiques.

“Punishing,” I said. “School?”

She shrugged. “Chem’s a bitch. But they’re letting us use the display cases to put together an exhibit of handbags through the ages. We’ve been combing thrift stores.”

She buried her pointed little chin in the immense collar of her coat and was looking particularly anemic. I suggested a steak at the Slip Knot and Barnacle supper club, someplace where she’d be required to really dig in and not just crown a sushi roll with some ginger and nibble on it.

When Vance and I started seeing each other, I assumed Widget would hate me, put up walls. But she didn’t. She called me mom without encouragement with her weird, affected accent I couldn’t place, like she was from South Africa or Ireland. These days she spent more time at my place than she did at her Dad’s. She set up house in my guestroom, littering the trundle bed with furry green pillows and sock monkeys. There was a triptych picture frame in honor of William, an intense, mustachioed boyfriend on an exchange program in Prague. She dragged me to gallery openings and bead stores. I felt gauche beside her, leaden. A petrified tree trunk beside a budding young sapling. She brought hipper-than-fuck friends to my place. They were awkward, stilted and seemed slightly confused till I gave them drink. Beautiful, pale anorexic young men and women. Someone might extract a dime bag from the pocket of his skinny black jeans. We passed a bowl around a couple of times. Sometimes they passed out on the floor of my living room, lying around on top of each other like many-colored Pick-Up Sticks.

I thought back to what I was up to at that age – studying Aleister Crowley’s *The Vision and the Voice* and trying to cross the Abyss so that I could become an esoteric master of the natural and supernatural forces of the universe. But then I went to college and got into rugby players and Kentucky bourbon and never really made it past the Abyss.

There was a mother of course, named Lydia, who’d gone back to school to earn a Ph.D. in zoology and was now living with a female colleague in Sao Paulo. Vance never seemed more bitter or more empathetic than when he spoke of her. I’d been in his house on a few occasions, poking around when I knew he was scheduled to be out. I unearthed some reassuring bank statements and some of his old ink sketches of mushrooms and wizards with intricate cross-hatching, but the only thing I could admit to being startled by were the pictures of Lydia that he still kept in his sock drawer. I took them out and spread them over his bed. The most recent pic was a Polaroid that showed her and a toddler-aged Widget giggling and soaping down Vance’s old van. Lydia proudly wore a skimpy two-piece that showed off a soft, post-pregnancy belly and a beet red caesarian scar. She had a great smile, but I could tell she was a lesbian just by looking at her. She had a very willful chin, this explosion of dark red Pat Metheny hair, and a scathing case of rosacea. They’d been high school sweethearts and had gone off to college together, which made it all the worse. She’d been a majorette in school, Vance had once mused in one of his weaker moments, with pulsing, muscular gams.

As it happened Widget and I were the most vital twosome in the nautically themed Oklahoma supper club that evening. Striped buoys hung from the ceilings with

rope. Rusty lanterns wired for electricity sat on the tables. All around us, the idle elderly were ordering square meals and insisting their beef was well done.

I ordered Widget a 16-ounce sirloin and a big glass of whole milk. She seemed to work each bite in her little cheek interminably. She was subdued.

“Why so glum, chum?”

The prompt was exactly what she’d been waiting for. She laid down her fork and lowered her big sloe eyes. Her grades were poor, she confessed. She couldn’t focus. Her dad suggested her Chi was out of whack, made appointments with his acupuncturist. He also recommended she do some volunteer work. But it was looking, she said, more and more like a state school for her.

“What?” I asked. “What about design school?”

She’d been making her own spending money lately selling her hand-knit leg warmers to friends at school and kept a fabric-sheathed dressmaker’s dummy in my spare room.

“I don’t know,” she said, still chewing. “Sometimes I think I’d like to do what you do.”

I paused for a minute to think. I did a lot of things.

“Diversity awareness, you know.”

“*Oh*,” I said. “Yeah. Well, it’s not a cakewalk. Everyone always says they’re okay with diversity, but they’re not. You got to really knock ‘em around to get them to admit to their hatred. See, they can’t work past it until they own it.”

“Does everyone hate like that?” she asked.

“Yep.”

“Even me?”

“Sure,” I said. “It’s no big thing. It’s just how things are. Tribalism. It’s real deep down under the surface.”

“Do you hate?”

“Yeah.”

“Who? Do you ever just hate full-blood white people?” She scrunched her little nose up and arched her faint eyebrows to indicate she was aware of broaching a delicate subject.

“Sometimes. I entertain a lot of stereotypes about the corporate types I train – and these usually prove to be on-the-money. Mostly I hate Germans.”

“Like Nazis and stuff?”

“The nation,” I said. “They’re clinically sadistic, off-kilter. There’s this Teutonic brutality in them that thousands of years of civilizing influence can’t touch. And many times I hate other women,” I said. Not so much the women themselves, I clarified, as what society makes of them: The dizziness and infantile, mincing voices. The feigned affability and compliance. The passive-aggression and duplicity. “Girl Power, honestly.” I worked my Glenlivet over and around the ice. “We’re all just waiting for each other to get fat.”

Widget wiped a milk mustache on her linen napkin. “Well, I mean it’s cool that you’re so aware of it and everything.”

“Awareness is the thing,” I said. “But you know sometimes it’s not so much hatred as the way we cause pain just by going along, being ourselves. For instance, how often do you think about race or notice racial differences in those around you?”

“I don’t know,” she said, making a swipe at the dark bangs that were plastered against her chalky white forehead. “I think I try not to notice that stuff.”

“Exactly.”

“Oh...yeah. I see what you mean.”

She was bored with graphic design. “I mean, it’s fun and pretty, but it doesn’t really make much difference, does it?”

“Well, Widget. It sounds like that’s something you’re going to have to deliberate on.”

Widget left a lot of food on her plate, which I scooped into a take-out container for her. When we stepped outside she slipped a box of Nat Shermans from her coat pocket. She didn’t smoke. It was my brand. She didn’t mention it, but offered me one, and I accepted, a little warily. She was starting to cloy, and the emulation thing raised another red flag for me. We lit up and as I watched her puffing self-consciously I had a thought.

“You know, my mom’s place is just a couple of blocks from here. You want to stop by with me?”

“Why did I think your mom was dead?” she asked, tapping off the ash before it was needful to do so.

I shrugged. “Easy mistake.”

It had been nine months since I’d last seen my mom. She was a nurse at the Indian clinic and had been working four shifts on, three off, which left plenty of time for her benders. According to my calculations this was day two of her downtime. When I got there, it was after 10:00. Her little snowman mug was sitting next to an empty box of

wine and she'd been moving all the furniture around her house again. Of course, as with most of the projects she undertook (marriage, motherhood, rehab), she'd stopped halfway through. I found her sprawled over the back of the sofa that was now sitting diagonally, smack in the middle of the living room. The TV was on but was pushed up against a wall, its back facing out. The only light in the room came from the nightly news, which strobed dramatically against the wall.

I gave the back of her sullied white sweatshirt a shove and she snorted to.

“What are you up to? Your box run dry?” I asked, straddling the back of the sofa.

She lifted her head. “Rearranging. I’m rearranging *EVERYTHING!*” she threw one hand up into the air for emphasis and laid her head back down.

“Some kind of feng shui thing?”

“You come here to fuck with me?”

“No,” I lied. “Came for a smoke.”

Without moving from her position, she lowered one hand into the seat of the sofa and retrieved her pack of Kools from beside a brimming ashtray.

I snatched them. “I got married a few months back. I wanted to introduce you to my new stepdaughter, Caroline. We call her Widget.”

Widget stepped forward and gave a quick frenetic wave.

“You can’t raise a child,” Mom said gently without lifting her head. It wasn’t said maliciously, and I would have to defer to her on this matter. It was something she knew a thing or two about – not raising children.

“Of course, you’ll note she’s seventeen.”

My mother finally sat up, propping herself on her elbows and squinting at Widget, who was turning her ankles out in her Chelsea boots. Mom's hair was shorter than I'd ever seen it, and mashed down on one side. "That marine has a teenage kid?" she asked. "He can't be a day over thirty. Isn't he still in the VA?"

"Not the marine," I said, lighting a smoke and offering one to Widget. "Someone new. And Hayes was fucked up by war. I blame the government."

My mom turned to face me. "Camp-follower," she spat. "Victory Girl."

"You dated a marine?" Widget asked, trying to give me a sly, knowing look that fell far short of being convincing.

"I wouldn't call it dating, exactly," I said.

"His wheel's still spinning, but the hamster's long dead," my mom explained. "He's lost the plot. Premium piece of man-flesh, though."

I snatched a dirty afghan from the sofa and folded it over my shoulders. "Hayes was good to you. Too good."

"Who's this husband, then?" she asked, with a light shake of her head to signal the relative inconsequence of the whole affair.

I gave her the relevant details: The community involvement. The separate houses and bank accounts. That he was older, that I was trying to get grounded. She didn't seem impressed.

"You," she pointed her lighter at me. "You waltz from one war zone to another."

"I'm just telling you how things are."

"So now, you're human like the rest of us?" My mom tried to find her cigarette with the lighter. There was a long pause. "Or are you still trying for immortality?"

She then proceeded to tell Widget about the summer before college when I stayed locked in my room muttering and slamming shit around and waiting for my transcendental promotion from Exempt Adept to Master of the Temple.

“Great story,” said Widget, who looked even spookier in the glow of the TV.

I buried my face in my hands, then rose with a laugh that sprung from the soles of my feet. I smacked the back of the sofa in my mirth. “Well, shucks,” I said, looking around me and catching my breath. “We better be getting back.” I started to dismount the sofa.

Mom laid a cold little hand on me. “Wait!”

I watched as she tried to sit up straight. This feat finally accomplished, she looked proud. “Girl,” she said. “There’s no divine spark in you. You wear a stink of mortality like the rest of us.”

It was a frighteningly lucid and articulate moment for her.

I threw myself off the back of the sofa and took Widget by one knobby little shoulder.

“Fuck you, old woman.”

Mom scratched her buzzed head and reclined on the back of the sofa, smiling impishly up at the ceiling fan as we let ourselves out.

Vance initiated lunch. Between his PTO and City Arts Council involvement, we hadn’t seen each other for the last three days. So I clicked my acceptance; it seemed the thing to do.

When I met him, Vance pranced up and blocked my way like we were prepping for a do-se-do. Then he sidled up to me and took my hand. We bought five-dollar hot dogs from a tubercular vendor and walked around the old downtown, still holding hands, pausing in the storefronts to look at refurbished church organs and used Zeniths with enormous rabbit ears and trailing kraut in our wake. It was hard to eat a teeming dog with one hand. I told Vance of a voucher to a day spa that my wellness facilitator had given me in a little care basket the week previous, reminding me to take care of the outside as well as the inside. I'd scheduled a facial after lunch, I said. A third of my dog slipped from the bun and landed on the sidewalk. I crammed the rest of the bun in my mouth with my one hand and drove him back to the middle school, where gangly, pimpled school kids with big heads and hands swarmed him, their messiah, in bifocals and man sandals. I stayed idling, watching the jubilant pubescent parade as it wound its way back to the gaping blue cafeteria doors of Bob Wills. Then I made my way to the VA. When I pulled up, a young, sweat-clad mother was changing her kid's diaper on the front ledge of a decorative M4 Sherman tank.

I reached 214 only to discover Hayes had a roomie. A James Wilcox. The curtain partition was drawn, but it sounded like a party over there. A lot of whispering and some fine hee-hawing. Every once in a while someone would strike out at the curtain. Hayes was sitting in a chair, just coming out of a nap. He was rubbing his eyes with balled up fists. It was going to take a while before he would register my presence. When Mandy waddled in behind a cart bearing Jell-O cups, I took the opportunity to get the skinny.

“What’s up over there?” I nodded at the curtain. “You all run out of beds? Having to double and triple up now?”

She looked evenly at me while peeling back the lid on the Jell-O cup. “It’s a case of Dissociative Identity Disorder,” she said, handing the cup and a spoon to Hayes. He yawned and gave her his spread-fingered pat on her broad back. “And before you unleash a profane tirade on me, you should know he’s been cleared by the resident psychiatrist for co-habitation. In fact, it’s been recommended.”

“Co-habitation,” I said. “Don’t believe in it. Folks need space. Elbow room.”

“This isn’t a luxury suite at the Ritz.” Mandy handed one of the snack cups through the partition.

I watched the bizarre shadow play behind the thin curtains, straining my ears. I always assumed that there would be a lot of shouting associated with such as that, but so far James was respectfully trying to hold things down to frantic whispering back-and-forth. I could only catch bits and parts of what seemed an extended debate on the merits of lime versus orange Jell-O – which kind he/they thought tasted better and which they judged most nutritious. One thunderous old guy who sounded like a confederate colonel claimed that he “heartily recommended orange for one’s constitution.” One small childlike voice piped up to suggest lime, and one weepy female-sounding creature worried that they were both made from liquefied human embryos.

“They all get along over there?” I asked Hayes when Mandy had waddled on down the hall.

Hayes hadn’t picked up on what was wrong with the guy.

I tried to explain there were many different personalities in his roommate. It was actually like having several roommates in one.

I leaned forward and lowered my voice. “You know what this means, right? No more hand jobs.”

Hayes looked at me with a blob of Jell-O in one cheek.

“I mean, are you okay with this?”

Hayes took another bite. He furrowed his brow.

“Are they all pleasant?” I asked. “It’s okay,” I said. “It’s not tattling.”

He looked down and shook his head, with the spoon still in his mouth.

I folded my hands and leaned back in my chair. No. They could never all get on and be friends, could they? Just like with my human and divine self. No telling what they could accomplish if they could just be friends, focus on a common goal.

I was tapping my fingers rapidly and compulsively on the blond laminate bedside table.

“Look, Hayes,” I said. “The next time he does something to you, I want you to ask him to stop. After that, I want you to go tell Mandy. If that doesn’t work, you beat the everliving snot out of him.”

I was still tapping my fingers and must have been visibly fuming, because Hayes reached forward and patted my knee lightly. “It’s okay. Carrie’s really nice,” he said.

I stopped my fingers. “Who the fuck is Carrie?”

Hayes blushed. “A new girl.”

I felt the green-eyed monster stir.

“Really?” I smacked my hand down on the table, sending a lime green New Testament to the floor. “Another slatternly gum-snapping nurse? Another little needle-jabbing, vein-losing, Doll Tearsheet straight from community college?” I could see her now. Bright pink Sponge Bob scrubs, black-and-blond streaked hair, phlegmatic smoker’s cough.

“Scary Carrie!” the little kid voice sang out from behind the curtain.

“Oh! Let’s please not argue,” the weepy female implored. “Let’s just cook for the poor girl. Can’t you see she’s starving?”

Hayes poked around in his Jell-O like he was looking for flecks of gold.

I collected myself. “It’s okay,” I said. I bit my lip and began wiping his chin for him. “I’m glad she’s so nice. Do you want to maybe tell me about her?”

“She’s not a nurse,” he said. “Really. She’s like a...um...Oh, what do you call them?” He yanked on his hair with his free hand.

“*Pissant!*” boomed the colonel. “You know damn well that girl’s a candy striper!”

“She gave me something.” Hayes opened the bedside table and handed me a leather-bound book. I opened it. It was blank.

“A journal?” I threw it on the bed. “Frankly, Hayes. – and not to be *snide* – but what do *you* have to journal about?”

“She brought me the Bible too,” he said. “She said I could write letters to Jesus, ask him things – and tell him all the things I couldn’t tell anyone else.”

“Some little cheerleader for Christ? A *proselytizing* Doll Tearsheet? And you lapped it up. She must be hot. Well, I’ve heard every last thing now. What do you write in these letters to Jesus?”

“I talk about you,” he said. “And the baby.”

“Ten little fingers and ten little toes!” exclaimed the female voice. “Can’t wait to dress her in ruffles and bows!”

“You really think she’s delivering these letters to Jesus?”

Hayes folded his hands in his lap. “No, I keep them in the journal. She says it’s just good for me to write them. Don’t be mad at me.”

“Does she snoop around and read them?”

“Yes – but only so she can pray for me.”

Here I was, running around, lying and sneaking just to look out for him, living a double-life just to keep up his morale, meanwhile he’s making time with some drugstore missionary.

I grabbed up my bag. “Look, I’m going to have to go now, Hayes. And I don’t know when I can come back. I have more than just myself to think of now.” I rubbed my abdomen. “And I have a fucking life away from this house of pain. That’s what.”

Hayes slid the rest of his uneaten Jell-O aside and played nervously with the placket of his PJ top.

There was some shifting of the curtain.

“*Well!*” roared the colonel. “It appears we have appointed our worst generals to command forces, and our most gifted and brilliant to edit newspapers!”

As I was opening the door to leave, I heard the curtain part. I turned to see James Wilcox: redheaded, rosy-cheeked. A touch louche, to be sure, but surely no older than nineteen. He re-tied the belt on his blue terry robe with an air of decision and a fierce kind of savoir-faire and drew the curtain once more.

Next morning I was lying on my sofa staring at a blank TV and trying to cry. I'd finally started to work something up when the doorbell rang and it crawled back up again. I lay perfectly still, staring at the door. It rang a second time, followed by a slow, patient rapping of the stiff doorknocker.

"I'll get it." Widget padded through the living room in petit fleur print thermal underwear and a hoodie pulled up over her head. She'd slept in her dramatic eyeliner and looked like something ghoulish.

"Has he ever hit you before?" Vance asked, saluting us and pointing at his Bluetooth. He mouthed the words 'Crisis Hotline' at me.

Walking over to my kitchen table, he scribbled a note on the back of one of a pile of credit card statements and held it up. *Christmas shopping*, it said. Then I remembered he'd initiated a four-hour block of shopping for today and I'd forgotten to respond.

Widget was on the sofa next to me and took up my hand. "Let me make you some herbal tea and an English muffin."

"How about a bloody Mary with a stalk of celery?" I asked.

She cocked her be-hooded head. As she stroked my hand, I watched the tears well up in her eyes. Then she bounced back up and went to the sink to run water in the kettle.

I pulled a camping blanket over my head.

“Through a picture window?” Vance asked. “Lacerations? And were you treated for that?”

The blanket still smelled of campfire smoke from the evening Hayes and I pitched a tent in the Osage hills and roasted some dogs. I breathed deeply.

I lay there, breathing the blanket, thinking about this time when Aleister Crowley and his secretary were out wandering around in the desert. Crowley didn't really need to wander in the desert. He'd pretty much already crossed the Abyss and mastered the universe and what not, but his secretary was still entrenched in this existential crisis. So they bought some doves and drew a square and sacrificed the doves so that the spirits would manifest. Then they did battle with evil forces for the better part of the night. Next morning, they wandered around looking for this one town so they could get some coffee. When they got there, the town was no longer there. Erased by the desert. No coffee, nothing. So being transcendent didn't mean everything was going to work out. What was the point?

The shopping took place in the midst of an ice storm. It was raining ice. All around you could hear its satanic pop and hiss. Somewhere a PA was playing Burl Ives. “Holly Jolly Christmas” then Steve and Edie doing “Sleigh Ride.” I looked around trying to find the source of the music and couldn't. It came from everywhere and nowhere.

Vance was still on his Bluetooth, telling some woman to open up a new account and transfer her money into it as soon as possible.

We all decided to split up. I picked up a book of Chinese brush paintings for Vance and Widget bought a Lladro figurine of a preening swan for her mom. It was fucking expensive and dainty, like you didn't want to hold it too hard.

“Will that ship okay?” I asked when we met back up.

“We can use bubble wrap.”

“Do you think she's into that kind of thing?” I asked, dubiously.

Widget shrugged her little shoulders. “She might be.” This was followed by a marked decline in spirits.

We'd only been going at it for an hour or so before she recommended we get some smoothies and I put my feet up. I assumed her blood sugar was low again.

We followed the pale, incandescent Widget like the Star of Bethlehem to a trendy boutique that ranged all over an old brick warehouse. There was loud, mewling Sri Lankan hip-hop. I recognized a male clerk wearing a shrunken tee with a picture of a white kitten in a tiara as a friend of Widget's named Fritz. He'd brought out a ridiculously oxidized little clump of hash at my place about three weeks ago, claiming to have brought it back from the Netherlands wrapped in saran and wedged up his pooper. Which sounds a lot more altruistic than it really was, considering how much traffic his pooper got on a regular basis. It looked like a lost cause, was crumbling all over my carpet. We were all drunk on some Moet I had leftover from my intimate post-wedding festivities and were too lazy to bake it into something or fuck with the shottie, so we just

ate it. I could've gotten a better buzz from inhaling deeply at the gas pumps, but I didn't want to embarrass Widget by casting aspersions.

As Widget was changing into an argyle jumper, I caught a glimpse of her through a chink in the curtain. I could count the ribs in her back. I felt slightly nauseous and had to go out for a smoke and to watch people slide around on the ice. If a confrontation between my human and divine aspects ever took place, it was going to play out during an apocalyptic ice storm. Of that I felt sure. Just as I was finishing my smoke, some grotesque old woman in a fur coat with magenta-colored hair shoved a twenty in my face. She bent down eye-level with me, made me promise I'd only use it for food.

I promised.

She smiled, patted the knee of my corduroys and walked on, picking her way over the ice.

When I went back in, Vance was leaning against a pillar and explaining the procedure for getting an emergency protective order. Widget was at the register with something teal-colored and hairy. A wrap of some kind, I think.

"Cash or credit, sweets?" asked Fritz.

"Hey, hey" I said, waving my twenty and elbowing my way toward her. "I got this."

She turned on me. "Where were you?"

"Out for a smoke."

Her eyes started to moisten again beneath her heavy severe bangs and she favored Penelope Tree. "What are we going to do?" she asked suddenly, gripping both of my arms. Her plump lips were quavering.

I didn't know what she meant, but sensed I didn't have the answer.

She grabbed her bag and ran out of the store. She was no sooner out the door than her Chelsea boots slid out from under her and she landed on her back. Her tiny legs encased in plum colored tights stayed in the air for a moment. People seemed to come out of nowhere to help her, but she just stayed where she was, covered her face with one arm and shooed them away with the other.

Hayes and I sat in his room on January 3rd wearing limp Santa hats. Being as it was the holidays, I figured it was time to cool down about the candy striper. James & Co. had decamped and Hayes was sitting up a little straighter. I'd made a lot of phone calls and raised some hell about the Rohypnol and they'd quit giving it to him. I figured once his mind cleared a little he'd knock it off with the letters to Jesus and Carrie would take her message of Christ to some other hapless vet with PTSS. I brought a package of shortbread and a couple of oranges for the vitamin C. I also gave him a Jew's harp so he could express himself, and a big open-mouthed kiss that he returned with surprising alacrity.

He gave me a small handful of Xanax he'd been rat-holing and a watercolor he'd done. I looked at it for a minute before I determined it was intentionally abstract. All squiggles and blobs and broad strokes. There were places where the colors had bled together. It was altogether a scattering of indistinct shapes that might suggest anything, in all my favorite colors.

“How are you?” he asked.

“Okay,” I said. “Really lonely. Mornings are rough, you know. I’ve been getting sick a lot, but they say that won’t last long.”

I’d been chomping at the bit all week until I finally got my break. I’d called in sick at G & K, saying I thought I’d contracted a nasty case of giardia from the Y swimming pool. Once everyone was out of the house I put on a long, loose tunic and headed out.

We peeled our oranges in silence for a few moments.

Hayes was starting to get more lucid. I wanted to encourage this. “Tell me about that little boy in Fallujah again,” I said, draping my leg over one of his armchairs. “The one you used to take Juicy Fruit to. You remember him?”

“Tariq.”

“Yes, Tariq. That’s right. Will you tell me that story again?”

“He lived with his sister’s family,” Hayes said, gathering his robe around him. “He’d lost both his parents. The first day I was there, making rounds, he brought me this stuff. *Oh*,” he put his head in his hands, rocking with frustration. “I can’t think!”

“Hey, it’s okay, baby,” I reached over and touched his knee. “It’s okay. I remember. You told me it was manna. Like how God fed the children of Israel? Only this was more of a candy, processed, in a wrapper.”

“Yes, that was it. He said it was from...tree sap?”

“Yes, tree sap. That’s right.”

“So I gave him some Juicy Fruit. And every time we saw each other we’d trade.”

“You’re such a cool guy, Hayes. That’s why everybody likes you so much.”

“Do they?”

“Yes. Everywhere you go. You’re so physically attractive and funny. And *really* smart. Sharp as a tack.”

He turned suddenly anxious. He reached up to yank off the Santa hat. “Do I still have my parrotfish? Are you still feeding them?”

Man, I wanted to say, they took everything you had.

No more exotic fishes. No more G & K. No townhouse. No wet bar. No Bowflex. No home planetarium. His mother had come for his beloved Jeep Wrangler Sahara and drove it back to her gated retirement community in Phoenix.

“Yes, Hayes,” I said. The parrotfish are doing great. Just swimming around, having a big old time.”

He settled back in his chair. I asked him if he remembered how he used to have to evaluate my job performance at work. “Like you were giving me a report card. Remember how you told stories for me?”

“But you *are* good at your job.”

“No,” I said. “I’m not always. But you told the board I was because you wanted to leg wrestle me, you horny little monkey. You remember?”

“You’re so beautiful,” he said, “And so strong.”

I handed him a piece of shortbread. “You remember that time I caught you taking my mom out to dinner? You dressed up all slick and took her to that Hungarian place to wine and dine her on Bull’s Blood. And I found you out?”

He furrowed his brow, started to fret again. “I wasn’t trying to leg wrestle your mom.”

“I know that, Hayes.” I handed him an orange wedge and took one myself. “I think you were trying to make things better for me.”

“Are they?”

“Hey,” I changed the subject, sticking out my holiday bloat for him. “Check this out.” I took his hand and held it to my tummy. “See if you can feel it move.”

Hayes sat there for a minute, his fruit-sticky fingers spread wide over my belly. It was getting hard to keep sticking it out. I hooked my hand on one hip and tried to arch my back a little.

A smile spread across his face. “I felt it! It was just a tiny kick.”

“Well. It’s just a tiny foot, isn’t it?”

When it was time for his nap, I kicked my Tony Lamas into the corner and we got under the tightly tucked sheets of his twin bed together. The white sheets had VAMC written in black permanent marker across the hem. His head was limp on my breast in no time. But I couldn’t turn loose that easy. I had the Xanax in my bag but had been thinking of holding them for Widget – she’d been so tense lately. I stayed where I was and held Hayes in his aquatic slumbers. His hair had been washed recently. I twiddled it, catching the scent of green apple.

I wanted to stay there. I wanted Hayes to crawl up inside me and curl up tight. I could carry him with me and drop him out, moistened by my juices and laughing, when he was over things.

I was just about to doze when the gleeful voice of a girl cut the still. “Napping already, Daniel?” it said, that optimistic upturn at the end hitting me over the head.

I picked up my head to see Widget walk into the room, clutching Hayes' Jesus journal.

"Mom?" She dropped the journal and stopped short.

She backed up, got a running start and leapt onto the bed and began crawling on her knees toward the head.

"Wait a minute," I said. "Kick off your shoes,"

She threw her legs over the side and pulled off the now scuffed, white Chelsea boots, throwing them into the corner by an oblong credenza.

Hayes roused. We arranged the pillows and made room.

Twilight Western

I was suspended without pay for a month due to my enthusiasm for one of G & K's young interns. Not for my enthusiasm for him, *necessarily*, but for what he signified. The quiet assurance. His dignified homeliness. His precision and purity, like there was a Platonic form up there of the ultimate quarterly report, the ultimate no-bake cookie, the ultimate secret handshake, and he was going to give his utmost to faithfully represent them. Tyler. *Tyler*. My protégé, my legacy – or so I'd thought. Overeducated, overqualified, so gracious. Giving off the faint scent of anise. There was a master's thesis on Wittgenstein. A daily uniform: a black long-sleeve tee and khakis with a patched knee, scuffed doc martins. Who wore doc martins these days? Tyler, wary of the things of this world, wore them like a hair shirt. He was so focused and helpful and average looking I was sure he'd never given it up. I ached for him in a largely wholesome way.

The diversity awareness program didn't get interns like this everyday. Or ever. I considered him the latest in a line of pioneers who were going to dismantle the way cultural and gender sensitivity is currently ingrained in corporate America. First there was Ari, my own mentor, who left for L.A. with his wife so she could start a career as a plus-sized stunt double. He left me with the wisdom of his experience, but also with a shit storm on my hands. Now I finally had a little deputy, someone I could leave my imprint on, someone to carry on.

And he'd cleaved to me, his mentor.

Then I found myself *in utero* in the Watson Room, the narrow, high-ceilinged, womb-like room with the red damask wall covering where the big decisions were made. All the old dead guys who'd made G & K what it was hung, figured in oil all around us, leering in their white privilege. I fidgeted at the end of the long mahogany table, chewing my nicotine inhaler and eyeballing the restless board members as my underhanded colleague Humberto read off the allegations from the intern's formal complaint.

“On one occasion you referred to Mr. Howell as ‘My good thing,’ he read “ ‘my sweet, sweet little man’.”

Humberto was Venezuelan. It sounded much worse when he read it. Overblown and seductive, like something said during fellatio prep.

I yanked the inhaler from my mouth. “That wasn't how I said it!”

Humberto looked over the top of his glasses. “Please, then. How *did* you say it?”

“Not like that!” I said, “Not in that Latin way, with those kinds of bedroom inferences.”

Mr. Shuttleworth, the hearing-impaired xenophobe, furrowed his brow. “What on earth is he saying?” he asked loudly, looking around him for clarification. “I can't understand every other word out of his mouth.”

No one dignified it.

“Has Mr. Howell misquoted you?” asked Berto, that cool cucumber. “If so, please tell us what you actually said.”

“Just that he was sweet.” I said. So sweet.

“And also your ‘good thing’, your ‘little man’? You have some sort of claim on him? In what way is Mr. Howell *yours*?”

“I’m *mentoring* him.”

“In the appropriate, non-threatening way we encourage here at G & K?” smirked Humberto. “Or in the classical sense?”

I was, I said, an older sister figure for him. I looked around me at the board members. They were all blowing over their coffee, doodling on legal pads.

“Are you all going to allow this witch hunt to continue?”

No one spoke.

Berto shuffled his papers for a minute. “He says you spat into a napkin and cleaned his face with it one day after lunch. Despite his protestations.”

“Where is young Tyler?” I asked. “I’d like him to look me in the eye and spew this horseshit himself.”

Humberto fondled his lime green silk tie with the bursts of red poppies on it. It was the tie of a glad-hander and an idolater. “Mr. Howell finds you intimidating. Naturally, he feels very vulnerable right now and is too afraid to give his testimony in front of you. I promised him that I would represent him today.”

“Impartial inquiry, huh?” I snorted. “What else did you promise him, Berto? A cushy position, provided he drum up some sham charges against me?”

Berto was supposed to be my second but could never just play the bitch and bite the pillow. Ever since he’d been hired two years back he’d been trying to tone down my confrontational, pioneering diversity workshops. Mobilizing against me, jockeying for my job.

“Well...” From the other end of the table, Mr. Gibson, the most senior of all the board members, jostled a little in his wheelchair and fingered a bright yellow carnation

on his lapel. “Things have certainly changed around here.” He paused a moment to moisten his lips. “Gone are the days you could take your secretary out for a prawn cocktail, slip her a little surprise in the back of your Packard, and bring her back to the office to take dictation.” He looked around boyishly for approval, rubbed the arms of the wheelchair, innervated by reminiscence.

“What I think Mr. Gibson is trying to say,” said the elder Mr. Carraway at Gibson’s right hand, “Is isn’t this all getting blown out of proportion a bit?”

Mr. Gibson leaned to Mr. Carraway and placed his hand on his old friend’s. “You remember Sally Beaton? She had that little gap between her front teeth. Whistled a little when she talked? Freckled up chest?”

Mr. Carraway was thoughtful. “Petite redhead?”

Mr. Gibson winked and gave his head an appreciative little shake. And then something passed over him and he moistened his mouth again and started to tear up. I hung my head and took measured breaths; I couldn’t take it when Mr. Gibson got affected. It got to me. It was the last thing I needed: rich old white man tears going straight to my soft spot.

Humberto was unmoved. “It’s our job,” he said, “to raise awareness about just such issues as these. To teach sensitivity. And to *practice* it.” Additionally, he said, while this wasn’t probably the appropriate forum, the diversity workshop participant evaluations were in and not so great, overall. One participant said my performance was “histrionic and tinged with a fretful bombast.” Again, from his mouth it sounded so bad, like someone describing some monster at Nuremburg.

Mr. Gibson was full-on sobbing now. Mr. Carraway was standing behind his old friend, patting both sides of his lapel and a few nearby suits were also now standing and fiddling with their leather portfolios with impotent good will. I poured myself a glass of water and tried to focus past the pathos by imagining my rage as a many-headed hydra ready to feast on the unjust. But of course there was no justice, only strategy. Point and counterpoint. Had I not learned, a long time ago, to keep my game face on and my ear to the ground?

“God help me,” I said steadily, “if the day ever comes when I can’t reach out to someone. Or execute my job with the passion and conviction that burns in me.”

There were several seconds of silence as I gulped the entire glass of water and wiped my mouth on the back of my hand.

I poured another.

My people, I told them between gulps, numbered only a couple hundred after the French Indian war. There were some odd 2,000 Mohicans left today. We’d survived. By the skin of our teeth, but still. I was their voice. Ill will and base envy wasn’t going to silence me.

“Plus,” I rose, tucking the inhaler behind my ear. “I got an attorney named Susan who’s got bits of my detractors in her stool. You all got zip.”

For the first couple of days I rarely left the sofa. God, I prayed, just return my strength to me one last time. I'll tumble walls and take all these fuckers with me.

I'd been toying with the idea of maybe breaking into another field for a while. I had a graduate course catalogue from the university and had been thumbing through it, circling things, dog-earing pages. Looking at the degree requirements caused a powerful wistfulness to well up in me. A flood of nostalgia for a time when I was expectant and *virgo intacta* and the world was still rife with possibility for me. I'd once been close to completing the requirements for a minor in anthropology. I was into primates. I wanted to be Jane Goodall, that solitary, introspective figure on the hillside watching that whole great chimp carnivale. Their tool use, their alliances, their rudimentary seductions. Their bloody insurrections. I wanted to be the one taking notes and making these big time theories. And, especially, holding the babies. To think, there was a time in my life when I felt so tender for those hairy little cousins. I could have suckled one, taking my notes in a cramped hand as it hung off my tit, pulled on my braid. Then, an advanced degree in zoology had its appeal too. And I could go into cryptozoology, which would be even better. What a kick to get a genuine academic grounding and then go mercenary. I could spend years and shit tons of grant money to try and find some presumably extinct variety of salamander, compromising my shot at tenure with whimsy and caprice. To be on the shady side of science and reason, waking every morning, balls in hand, with the sole intent of dragging home the purple unicorn and blowing everyone's fucking mind with esoteric shit – that must be some high.

There were no such highs left for me now. Not with Berto occluding my vanguard diversity agenda, nor without my little protégé.

I spent my time eating cheese grits doused in Hellfire and Damnation sauce and ordering pay-per-view boxing. Trinidad vs. Jones Jr., Mayweather vs. Hatton. I was paying dearly for it all, and I wanted them to kill each other dead. I luxuriated on the sofa amid my extravagances. The coffee table was littered with the remains of take out: moo shu beef and hot and sour soup and two orders of spring rolls. I'd cleared some space for the fondue setup I'd gotten from Mr. Gibson for a wedding present and had insisted on keeping after the divorce. I broke out some Glenlivet and was sipping it out of a cordial glass, each sip a forest fire in my mouth, the hot promise of a glorious new day.

Things went on in this vein until I got the call from Ari, my former mentor. The turncoat who ran off and left me behind in this nest of vipers. He'd left the world of diversity education to work as a life coach. Lately he'd been getting paid the big bucks to help celebrities reach personal goals. I'd been a mass of festering heartache for a while when he left, but the truth is I was relieved. Sometimes he came at you like a prophet, a visionary, telling you fucking awful truths in edifying ways. But a lot of times he was just a really bad trip. It was a coin I was pleased not to have to flip anymore. I professed to have a lot of contempt for what he'd been doing with himself in L.A. since we parted ways. It was something shameful, and I had an idea it proved finally that I was the better, the stronger of the two of us.

“You busy?” he asked.

“How'd you know?”

“I hear things.”

“I’m thinking of quitting G & K, going back to school to study something else. I think I could do some good for the chimps. Or maybe the orangutans. They’re staring down annihilation while we all just jack around.” I could maybe take out some more student loans and live off them for a while. The debt would be forgiven when I died anyway, and I never really pictured myself living past middle age.

“What about the great apes? They get any love?”

“I tried to tell you how it was all going down. He won’t rest until he has my head on a platter.” A person didn’t just start washing someone else’s Xanax down with Tanqueray in the public facilities without provocation.

But Ari was all about personal responsibility.

“You’re a big girl,” he said. “I trust you to get your hands off little boys and back around the board’s balls soon enough.”

“This some kind of affirmation?”

“Hey,” he chirped. “Guess where I am.”

Mallorca, I guessed. Draining a mimosa and painting Miriam’s toenails pink. Or, conversely, in a Turkish prison, taking his licks and moldering with guilt.

“Guilt,” he pronounced, “is for the weak of character, the dying.”

“Look,” I said, skewering a baby carrot on my fondue fork. “Rodriguez is giving it to Haliwell up the ass right now, sending him straight to goofy town. There’s going to be a KO any second. Is there something of great import you’re fixing to relate?”

He was in a Victorian Colorado mining town called Deadmans Pass, he said, working with Dewey Lee Hobbes. Did I remember Dewey Lee Hobbes, the character actor? The guy everyone knew by sight without remembering his name. The one who

played Fatty Arbuckle in that breakaway indie film a few years back. “The face of a cherub,” he prodded, “the body of the Shmoo?”

Of course I remembered. I’d never be able to get that scene with the icicle out of my head. The rapturous malice, the sexual gluttony of a sick fat man. It was a guilty turn-on.

“I got him to that disgusting state in three weeks flat,” he bragged. And it hadn’t gone unappreciated by the critics. Ari had been raking it in since then, uglying up celebrities and beautifying them again. “Constance Tiddleworth,” he said, “I gave her those jowls and that huge cottage cheese ass when she was prepping for the role of Queen Victoria,” he said. “Now she’s a dame. I should be the fucking dame. Anyhoo, now Dewey’s looking to get more mainstream work. I’m trying to make leading man material of him. He needs to lose half his weight in two months. Let me tell you, it’s taking a toll.”

“Change can be painful.”

“...on me.”

Ari and Miriam just bought a vacation home in Deadmans Pass. He thought it would be a good place for his chubby little grub to recharge his batteries, flit from his chrysalis a bright, pleasure-giving thing. He wanted to know, would I come out to discharge my responsibilities as a godparent to his kid Ruthie.

“You need a babysitter.”

“I want Ruthie to know you,” he said. “You legally permitted to operate a motor vehicle at this time? I’ve got a hi-fi. Come and play? Cowboys and Indians.”

I clicked off the TV and sat there for a moment, manically dunking a broccoli floweret.

“Ari,” I said suddenly. “Do that for me. Make me the ingénue.”

“Oh, Povi...” he sighed. “The sun has set.”

The initial scenery was best forgotten: an endless string of dirt farms, rusting oil wells, and the occasional blue-roofed promise of a Stuckey’s with their satisfying pecan logs. I’d totaled my Outback and had to borrow my cousin Levi’s old Cutlass. There was no air. I forewent the bra and donned an old wife-beater. The truckers got an eyeful and I didn’t much mind. I told myself with each bead of sweat it was all the toxins leaving my system. Beside me on the front passenger seat was a stuffed purple unicorn and a big bottle of Flintstones vitamins for the kid.

Luckily there was a tape deck.

I fumbled through a Redwing shoebox of old audiocassette tapes, picking them up to read the looping girlish script on the spines, throwing them into the seat, reaching for others. As they played, I reviewed the vaudeville of my apoplectic girlhood. The Happy Mondays was the frenzied binge eating of Chili Cheese Fritos. The Circle Jerks and The Misfits, the purging of them. The Smiths was the winter I confined myself to my bed with vague aches and dizzy spells until the truant officer visited and persuaded me to rally. Fugazi was a boy with liberty spikes who smoked clove cigarettes and put my hand on it. The Wu-Tang Clan was the first time I really knew what to do with it. Ancient

glories and devastations were revived for me in the old Cutlass on long stretches of bad road.

I made the dangerous mistake of eating at a Mongolian barbeque in a small highland town with a population of approximately 1,200 and spent the rest of the afternoon stretched out on a bright orange booth in a truck stop greasy spoon, in between trips to the little girl's.

“Boy, she's a merciless one out there today.”

I opened my eyes and looked up to see a guy with a red, braided beard in a Sturgis tee and fringed vest.

“Yes,” I said. “She's a bitch. A harlot. A soul-sucking strumpet.”

“You making it okay?” he asked.

“The shrimp was off.”

He bought me a Mountain Dew slushie. “This is to fortify yourself,” he said. “So you can get back on that horse.”

“Many thanks.” I rested the bottom of it on my forehead and let the cold condensation run down my temples.

“Christ saves.” He saluted and I watched him leave. I expected he'd be on a hog, but it was a just a little yellow Yamaha, a toy thing.

Eventually, when nothing came up but bile and tears, I made to compose myself and heeded the call. I remounted. The forward movement was something great. Woman and rust bucket, become as one, lumbering toward the respite that felt like my due. I drove through a twenty-percent contained forest fire, or rather, just skirted it. Smoke hung low on the highway and wrapped itself around my car while just to the right was a

huge pillar of fire. A little helicopter danced above it like a gnat. Naturally, my thoughts turned to God, that entity that drew up contracts, and would punish your children and your children's children if you fucked up, and might not stop there. When the pale blue holograms of the Rockies first began to appear on the horizon, Zion buzzed through me. Might there be something my old mentor could still teach me? Something that would make all the difference? I imagined epiphanic moments in the fresh mountain air. Surely clarity would come at that elevation.

The old girl had trouble pulling the climbs. I stopped frequently to let the breaks cool, sitting on the hood, taking pulls off my nicotine inhaler and glowering up to the sun. People passed me on blind curves and leaned out their windows to leer. I just gripped that big wheel and gave her the gas nice and steady. Deadmans Pass, when it appeared, was an alpine dream, a tiny gingerbread town at 12,200 feet.

Let me die up here in this place, I thought as I descended onto the town, with my eyes wide open and all my old grievances forgot.

There was an enormous lunging, snarling bear carved from a tree trunk along the front walkway leading up to an old painted lady on Main Street. It held a sign welcoming me to the Meiers' place. As per instruction, I found the key in a flowerbox by the front door and let myself in. Everything smelled like pine needles. All the furniture was made from birch and aspen by local craftspeople. There was a giant chandelier in the living room fashioned from elk antlers. There were some hideous southwestern oil paintings in

light greens and reds and burnt sienna with Indian women cradling babies like placid ethnic maddonas. As I clomped around in my boots, I began to notice laminated signs with large block letters everywhere. One on the hallway mirror read, YOU'RE A GRUESOME DISGRACE TO THE MEMORY OF YOUR DEAD MOTHER. There was one on the sofa that warned, WEIGHT LIMIT: 800 LBS. The big stainless steel fridge said, NO NEEDY, SUCKING VORTEXES, PLEASE.

Clearly, Ari was tapping into the same philosophy of confrontation and aggression that underlay our diversity awareness program, but to much more lucrative effect.

I compulsively started yanking on all the porcelain knobs I could find in the kitchen, opening all the cabinet doors until I unearthed the liquor stash. There was some promising stuff, along with a note affixed to a large bottle of Bombay Gin that said, WHY DON'T YOU JUST BLOW YOUR SCRAMBLED BRAINS OUT? IT'LL BE QUICKER AND LESS EMBARRASSING FOR EVERYONE.

Unmoved, I took down a highball glass and sat at the kitchen table with a bottle of Kentucky bourbon and a fancy tin of almond biscotti for dunking. I found a handwritten note on the kitchen table beside a small, baby pink vase of Eidelweiss: *Hope you've had a pleasant trip. We're at the park doing cardio. Main St. Two blocks on your right.*

When I'd finished my refreshment, I worked my hands in my pockets, feeling pretty positive about the fact that I was a woman who could still almost fit into my short denim cut-offs, and meandered down the sloping sidewalk to the city park and adjacent hot springs pool. All around were acid blondes in micro minis and chukkas getting out of rented Jeeps. There were families queuing for buggy rides and some storming old timey

ice cream parlors, but nothing intolerable. Leave it to Ari to find a place like this. When I got to the park, I found Ari reclining in a recumbent bicycle with a red flag flapping on back. He was chewing on a stubby cheroot, pedaling alongside a panting fat man I vaguely recognized as Dewey Lee Hobbes.

He was your classic fat man, straight out of a 30s film. A regular Zero Mostel. This immense, buoyant apple in pressed shirt-sleeves and pleated high-rise slacks. He wore a thin leather belt that cut him right across his middle. His cheeks had the rouged look of a robust infant or a corpse at an open-casket viewing. His forehead was high-domed and shiny and the thin, scraggly comb-over was secured with pomade, though long strands of it were hanging limply down with all the physical exertion. There was actually something inspiring and reassuring about him. Like thumbing through a J. Peterman catalogue and realizing you can still dress like Myrna Loy if you got the itch. They just didn't fashion fat guys like that anymore. I couldn't figure the discontent. He could have been such a proud man.

"Pick it up, pick *it up*," barked Ari through the mouthful of cigar. "Faster, you obscene, nebulous mass. *Not that fast!* We walk before we run. Walking now. Walking...walking. With a sense of purpose. Not ambling. Not loping. Not promenading...or perambulating. Christ. *Faster!*"

I looked over to the little stiff-legged figure hanging in the harness of a kiddie swing, whimpering and sucking in her lip in perturbation. It was little Ruthie. I recognized her from the photo on my fridge next to the Thai take-out menu. Was she cuter in real life? Yes, of course she was. She had Ari's dark, calculating gaze and

blowzy grandiosity. Ari waved over at her as he pedaled past. I leaned against the swing set and tried to knock some of the sand out of my Tony Lamas.

Ari stopped in mid-peddle and sat forward in the recumbent, staring at my shorts. He'd grown his dark, curly mop out a bit and had gathered it into a samurai ponytail smack atop his head. "I'll be. If it isn't Minnie the Moocher. The hoochie-kootcher."

"I have a liberal arts education," I said, trying to get my hands back in the pockets so I could pull down on the inseam a little.

Ari looked back over his shoulder at Dewey, who was still making the rounds. "Hey, Dewey! Take five, will you? That's five. Not seven. Not eight."

Dewey bobbed his purple face in acknowledgment and collapsed onto the merry-go-round, sending it reeling counter-clockwise.

Ari jogged over to me. Ruthie made a desperate swipe for him when he was within range.

"Hey Ruthie," he said. "This is Povi. She's our second-in-command, if mommy and daddy die suddenly."

I reached out for her mass of dark, sweaty curls as she made another lunge for him, with a face suddenly deformed by infantile tragedy.

"Well," he said, irritably. "Pick her up! She's not diseased. She's just teething."

I wrestled her out of the swing and tried to keep her in my arms while she kept grabbing at Ari. She was wearing diapers and a flimsy yellow tee that read, *My Mommy Went to the Republic of Armenia, and All I Got Was This Stinkin' T-Shirt.*

"There now," he said. "Princess Ruthie's not got anything but a bad case of the cutesy pox. Isn't that right? Isn't that right?"

In her frustration, Ruthie wheeled suddenly from Ari and, with a manic little shake of her head, sank her tiny milk teeth into my bare shoulder.

I sucked it in. “Where’s Miriam?”

“On location,” he said. “In Tashkent, Uzbekistan. She’s doubling for a woman playing the vengeful, ass-kicking wife of an Islamic radical during the fallout from the Andijan Massacre. Doubling. Can you believe that? She could carry the whole thing. Carry it like she carries the world on her big, handsome shoulders. I’m still a fan, Povi. You know that? I’ll be a fan till the very end.”

“Sounds refreshing.”

Miriam drank six raw eggs for breakfast and devoured entire tuna steaks for dinner, was five-feet ten, solid muscle. She had thick, glossy black hair down her back and a rack to be reckoned with. She was all natural and scared the shit out of me.

Ari beamed. “She also just doubled for Salma Hayek in a film about the first Chilean female cage fighter.”

“Salma Hayek?” I asked. “Isn’t Miriam a little large for that?”

“You haven’t seen her lately, have you?” he asked. “I’ve been working with her.”

Just next to us at the hot springs pool, kids were battering each other with flaccid water noodles and large, old women in ruffled swim skirts were using the handrail to lower themselves down, leaving their heft behind as they spread out into the curative waters. Meanwhile there I was, stagnating with a painful camel toe in the same, unraveling pair of cut-offs I’d worn to ill-fated keggers as a college sophomore, while all this change and renewal went on around me. Ruthie’s head smelled sweetly of infant

sweat and Johnson and Johnson's. I ran my face lightly over the outcroppings of fine corkscrew curls and felt her teeth release.

Ari decided to call it a day. He wheeled over to the merry-go-round and checked Dewey's pulse. "Up, big guy," he said. "We'll hit it harder tomorrow. When first the rosy fingers of dawn appear."

Ari took us all out to the restaurant at the old Bluemont Hotel to celebrate my birthday. The room was largely empty. Ari said most of the younger tourists had been packing out the South American/Cambodian fusion grill by the fire station and the newly opened sushi and oxygen bar on the second floor above the Olden Tymes photography studio.

"What kind of rubes would order sushi this far inland is what I want to know," he said. "No. Give me my heavy, clunky retrograde haute cuisine any day."

"But the oxygen makes sense," I offered. It occurred to me maybe I could get some clarity there.

In the Bluemont dining room, glasses of melting ice water were sitting on tables laid with tablecloths the color of blood clots. In the middle of the room stood a large fountain of a porcine, bacchanalian infant gleefully directing his stream of piss into the air. In the fountain's basin, a smattering of burnished pennies. An anemic looking teenager in oversized tails played Scott Joplin in a less-than-jaunty tempo.

When the hostess greeted us, Ari expressed concern the teenage pianist's rapacious acne was going to put him off his food, so we were seated at a table as far from the musical entertainment as possible. He held my chair for me and I spread the skirt of my gingham sundress over my lap. Dewey had seemed so bashful and downtrodden upon first meeting me that I was worried I had shamed him with my shorts. But I could register no improvement since having donned more modest attire.

Ari began digging around in an large insulated lunch bag. He spread a plastic disposable tablecloth before Ruthie. Next came several Tupperware containers of blueberries, dried banana chips and goat cheese. He presented it all for her consideration before handing Dewey an avocado and a large sports bottle full of juiced veggies. I couldn't decide whether the muck was orange or green.

We were joined by a very timid waiter named Giles with the smoothest, most hairless male hands I've ever seen. There was something affectedly European about him but it was belied by his general gaminess. No doubt some disaffected queer from the next pudunk town over, trying on a new persona.

"Give us a big bottle of something really old and expensive," Ari said. "Stun me. Devastate me. Break my heart."

Giles stared off wistfully into the corner of the ceiling, in the general direction of a gold-leafed acanthus detail. "Very good," he said, snapping out of it and meandering slowly in the direction of the wine cellar.

"Well," said Ari, rubbing his hands together. "What does the birthday girl want most of all?"

"A means of production," I said with rue.

“Ssshhh,” he held his forefinger up to my mouth. “Don’t tell me.” He presented a penny to me on his thumbnail. “Go make yourself a wish.”

I took the penny and wended my way past empty tables to the fountain. It was a lot of pressure, this. I stared for a moment at the tiny fat stone fist gripping the wee shoot of manhood. I closed my eyes and listened to the tinkle of water, to the labored ragtime strains. Once I fixed on something, I lobbed my penny as hard as I could into the center. It made only the tiniest plop, the faintest of ripples and sank slowly to the dirty, tiled basin bottom.

I can’t reveal what I wished for; it might still happen.

Back at the table, Giles presented a 1971 Moulton-Rothschild claret he promised was just the thing. He pulled the cork and placed it gingerly on the table. “I’ve left the dust on,” he said.

Ruthie was sitting in her highchair with the unicorn. She’d warmed and was offering me slobbery kiddie biscuits shaped like Sesame Street characters all new to the pantheon since my day. I ate them with overblown relish. As I ate, she prepared more, scrutinizing me as she slavered on them. Dewey was downcast as he worked on his juice. I reckoned that while a joyous fat man was a wonderful thing, a penitential fat man was a hard pill to swallow.

“That dinner?” I asked him.

“Breakfast and lunch too,” he said. “It’s not too bad.”

“Right. You up for a part?” I asked.

“Nothing in particular. It’s more of a general image overhaul.”

“Ah,” I said. “There a lady involved?”

“Not any one lady, exactly.”

Ari refused to look at the menu. “What kind of game do you have, Giles?”

Giles looked thoughtful. “Well...”

“No, wait... Songbirds! Sparrows, partridge? Chukars? Anything that warbles delicately, presented in a nest. Can we make that happen?”

Giles looked up at the ceiling in trepidation, as if he were waiting for something to drip on him. “No songbirds, I’m afraid. We do have a wonderful braised pheasant.”

“Shit, that’s disappointing. I was hoping for a little decadence. Yes, okay,” he said dismissively. “The pheasant for two.”

Giles stole a glance at me, as if to gauge what manner of woman such a heedless *bon vivant* would have in tow. I saluted him with my wine flute. From his glib expression, I’d say I came up somewhat short.

Ari had a kind of affected content going, like a hospitable sultan. But you could really see the wear around the eyes. “What do you think, Povi, of my new place?”

“Yeah,” I said. “Only the longer I’m here, it doesn’t feel exactly real. Like a movie set or something.”

“Now this is interesting. Why does *real* have to be *ugly*?” asked Ari. “Why does it have to be Oklahoma, all scrub brush and red clay, when it can be this place? The mountains, the falls, the old livery. You ride, Povi, or did you only get the substance-abuse gene? I know Buck at the livery, I can take you out for a little canter.”

I had a vision of Ari in his baggy hiking shorts and the soccer hooligan ponytail, leading me through a field of edelweiss and chokeberries. That most unfortunate thing in

me, that little sloe-eyed puppy in me, rolled over on its back for a tummy rub. I wanted to give it a taste of my boot, to kick it till it yelped.

“Look,” I said. “I like it. I’m just wary. It’s my way.” Truth was, I kept expecting Jack Palance to round the corner and menace me. Or Julie Andrews to come whirling over the next hilltop. Or all of my colleagues and acquaintances to show up for another, somewhat more scenic, intervention.

“You want real, I can take you to the Faltering Mule saloon. On any given night the locals gather. Not the healthy, monied, time-share crowd either. These folks have lived too close to the sun all their lives and spent the hard winters in the bottom of a bottle. Too much drink, not nearly enough oxygen. They’re dizzy and dehydrated. Their faces tell stories. They’re craven.”

“Yes,” I said. “The People. Take me to them.”

“And this old place,” he said. “According to the literature it’s crawling with spirits. Moaning and knocking and kvitzing around. Not your average ladies in white either: gritty, lusty prostitute ghosts.”

“My favorite.”

Dewey was making me nervous, sitting there silently, ruminating over his nutritional dredge. But I was thankful to have him there, nonetheless. He was really going to work out as a buffer. What with the swanky surroundings, the quality booze and Ari and me being together in a private residence and all, there might’ve been some frightful tension. I hadn’t felt this awkward in male company since the night of junior prom. The Red Lobster, the Econo Lodge. It had always been there between us, the tension. I’d never even been sure it was of a sexual nature. But it occurred to me that if

left to our own devices, we might first explore that possibility, if only to discount it once and for all. Having a needy, self-loathing fat man between us would doubtless prove enough of a damper.

“What about you, Dewey?” I asked in an attempt to draw him in. “You like it out here?”

He nodded vigorously, looking animated for the first time. “There’s an apple tree out front of the house. Deer and elk walk right up into the yard and eat the ones that fall.”

“Dewey grew up with his secretarial mom in Scranton. Never had enough money to go on vacation. He takes a lot of pictures,” Ari smiled smugly, like the proud parent of a gifted child. “Keeps a little album. Maybe he’ll let you see it.”

I stuck my tongue in my claret and wagged it back-and-forth. “Yeah,” I said. “I saw one of those bull elk grazing down by the visitor’s center. It looked put-on. That thing had a savvy look to it. Something rehearsed, professional. Unionized.”

“So now the visitor’s bureau is staging Disney moments with domesticated wildlife?” Ari mopped his face with his hands. Why did I always have to whip it out and piss on every passing parade, he’d like to know.

“I have a serious distrust for shiny, glittering things.”

“Stranger in paradise,” he said, topping off my glass. “Have another. Drink until you can concede a thing or two. I propose a toast,” he said, holding his glass aloft. “To all Povi’s future concessions.”

When I cupped my wine flute tightly to my chest, he leaned across the table to Dewey and clanked his glass against the half-empty sports bottle, much to Dewey’s surprise.

The pheasant was overcooked and flanked by woody asparagus. Giles began to hover more and more. "I'm sorry," he said finally. "I just have to ask... You're such an icon in the community." He handed Dewey a white polyester-blend napkin to sign. His signature was careful and deliberate. I could make out every letter.

"Community of what?" Ari asked when he'd gone back to the kitchen.

"Sniveling, sycophantic pixies?"

My room was upstairs, past what Ari referred to as "the wall of tiny feet."

In fact, the upstairs hallway was covered in black-and-white photographs of the specimens of Chinese foot-binding. They looked like little cloven hooves bandaged in silk. Like Miss Piggy feet in folkloric footwear and ballet slippers. I took this as yet another sign of Ari's moral degeneration. In my room was a photo on the credenza of Mariam leaning back on the rails of a yacht in a diaphanous Pucci print kaftan with a plunging neckline and huge chandelier earrings. She looked like an Onasis, only a lot less unsettled. I turned the photo face down and stacked my college catalogues beside it.

Ari told me he would have given me the spare room with the double bed as opposed to the twin, but mine was the room with Ruthie's crib, plus he had a baby cam rigged up in that room to monitor Dewey during the night.

"Dewey's under surveillance?" I asked. "Why? Nighttime binger?"

"No," he said. "He knows better than to try that. It's his heart. He's got it into his head he's got heart disease and is afraid he'll go in the night. It makes him sleep easier to have a camera on him."

“Do you usually watch it?”

“I have to set boundaries.”

As it turned out, Ari didn't need a babysitter. I could plug Ruthie with the binky in the evenings and rock her while doing my best Joan Baez, but he'd actually employed a local sixteen-year old for daily care. She came in the mornings and entertained Ruthie with a series of developmental activities as prescribed by Ari. Ruthie and I caught glimpses of one another as we passed through rooms. Ruthie would spit the binky out and hold her little arms out to me, a slobbery little supplicant. It got to me.

I wondered what was going down back at G & K, what kind of wishy-washy, conciliatory nonsense Taylor was picking up from Humberto. Clearly nothing he'd need to combat the level of unchecked white privilege that was rampant among corporate fuckholes. While Ari worked with Dewey during the days, I spent my time floating from one idle amusement to the next. I hung out in the old bookstore on the bottom floor of the Bluemont, buying up books I'd never read about local rocks and minerals, flora and fauna, the hyperbolic accounts of regional spirit activity by zealous local historians. Every day an afternoon shower moved in and I went up to my room to take out the rocks I picked up here and there and tried to use the guidebook to identify them. I went on the silver mine tour. Rode the cart into the side of the mountain. Learned how the jackhammer got its name. I bobbed in the restorative mineral waters, careful to keep my mouth and nose closed to enterprising bacteria. I skimmed the leaves off the top of the hot tub off Ari's deck and read the want ads in the local papers as I soaked. Commercial drivers, baristas, construction workers. I had none of the skills to support myself in a place like this.

I hiked up to the falls and collapsed on a boulder with my heart pounding. I slept there in the sun. I was awakened by two young honeymooners when the girl started screaming that she'd found a body. Every third day or so, the fire alarm would sound and everyone would run out of their condos and rentals to watch for signs of smoke in the mountains. They were always just these little disappointing puffs of smoke, not at all like the huge, punishing wall of retribution I'd held my breath at on the way out. I'd smirk past the crowds of rubber-neckers on my way for my morning espresso, at their inexperience with real, uncontained devastation.

One day when I was on my laptop at the oxygen bar doing a job search, I received an email from Tyler.

Everything's in the shitter. Please come back.

Apparently Humberto was trying to convince the board to buy real estate in a virtual world so that employees could explore diversity topics through the use of avatars. He held a meeting to try and explain virtual worlds to all the 70-plus board members using his own avatar, which was a busty blonde in a black leather cat suit.

I walked to the park to find Ari. He was sitting in a swing and dragging his feet in the sand below, leaving deep ruts. He looked serious, dejected. He'd taken the ponytail down his curls were perched on his head like a mushroom cloud. He'd sent Dewey to the sauna at the hot springs complex, he said, to "sweat out some of the putrefaction."

"What's up?" he asked.

“Humberto’s barking mad,” I said. “He’s got to be stopped.” I filled him in on the details. “We pioneered this diversity program,” I said. “It falls to us to stop this thing. I need help. Go back with me.”

“You know I can’t. I’m with fatty.” The black curls were falling over his eyes and he had to tilt his head back to see me through them. “Want to have a picnic?”

“He’s a person, Ari. Not just a BMI.” I fell into the swing alongside him.

“You two sweethearts or something? It’s part of the process, Povi. Razing them to the ground so they can be built back up from scratch. It’s the humiliation and supplication phase. You know the drill from our diversity workshops.”

Ari kicked off on his swing and began pumping his legs.

“But that was noble.”

“So is supporting your family. Not that I would expect you to understand the cohesion or mutual obligations of the family group. Not really your style, is it?”

It was another glorious day. We were sharing the park with a couple of very young, blond women surrounded by little tow-headed toddlers in GAP logos. The women were talking to the kids and to each other in their loud, public mommy voices. The kids kept wobbling up to us like they were waiting to be cooed at. I was pressing my temples, feeling around for pressure points.

I let Ari know I had vague dynastic intentions of my own.

“Do tell.” He was climbing really high now. It was making the whole swing set jounce.

“I have to get some things in order first,” I said, “and settle on a sire.”

“So, you going back to school, or what?”

“I’m giving it thought. Look, why am I here, Ari?”

“You know,” he shouted down at me. “Things are really taking off for me. They’re breaking my door down, or rather, their PAs are. And I’m getting to where I could use some help. A clever, capable little business associate. You interested?”

I worked on a figure-eight in the sand with the toe of my boot. “You think I’m life coach material?”

“I could mold you,” he said, as he began losing elevation. “Like old times.”

“Fuck, Ari. I thought we were warriors for The People.”

He suddenly let go and leapt from the swing. He catapulted through the air, landing on his feet and barely clearing the bright red teeter-totter. He rose slowly from his squat and sat heavily on the merry-go-round.

“We were what we needed to be at that point in time.” He retrieved his stogie from a velcro cargo compartment on his shorts.

“But where’s the social vision?”

“Social vision...” He raised one pale leg and struck a match on the sole of his L.L. Bean comfort moc. He took a few puffs. “You were always soft, weren’t you? Crusty on the outside, gooey on the inside. Oozing out all over the place. Running around chasing rainbows, taking stabs at miasmas. Trying to capture yourself an *ignus fatuus* in a mason jar. ‘Where’s my utopia?’ ” He mewled in mockery. “‘Has anybody seen my utopia?’” He flicked his match, hitting a springy pink elephant square in the trunk.

He watched me for a minute, then came over and smoothed a stray strand of hair behind my ear. “Christ...maybe you are the ingénue, after all.”

Another ridiculously blonde child tottered over to flash me a wet, toothless grin.

I narrowed my eyes at it until it turned tail and scampered back to hide behind its mother's shiny brown leg.

"Hey," said Ari, huskily "What do you say we go back to the house, put on that Juan Garcia Esquivel?"

I reached into the pocket of my cut-offs and attempted to extract the inhaler. "The sun has set."

I was sitting cross-legged under the Wall of Tiny Feet with a gin and tonic, the mineral guide and a couple of rocks I was hoping might be geodes once I'd looked hard enough at them, when Dewey finally topped the stairs in his jogging suit. He bobbed his head in recognition and started to go into his room.

"Hey," I said. "How was the colonic? Can I come in?"

He little ears turned red as a roma tomatoes. "Sure." He held the door for me.

The east wall was covered with poster board collages of Hellenic male physiques cut from magazines. The west wall was plastered with pictures of the morbidly obese.

"Some wall art," I said.

"Oh," he said. "Those are my story boards. Ari said it's the best way to stay focused on my goals. It illustrates the trajectory."

"Yeah," I commiserated. "They made me scrapbook once. True story. But you really think you're morbidly obese?"

“Don’t you?”

“Heavy maybe, but fuck...I mean, this guy here. I remember him from the news. He couldn’t make it out the front door of his doublewide. They had to use Jaws of Life to extricate him. You’re active. Ambulatory even. And so productive. I’m no head shrinker, but I think you may have a distorted self image going on.”

“Maybe those pictures are more metaphoric,” he worked the loose dangly bits of his comb-over back into place. “They show how spiritually trapped I am.”

I handed him my gin-and-tonic. “Talk to me.”

“I know a lot of beautiful people,” he said. “But nothing ever works out. I’ve even tried those Internet things, you know. Where you fill out those questionnaires: ‘When you go shopping, do you a) always park the cart back in the stall, b) shove it into a parked car, or c) Take it back in the store and offer it to a fellow shopper?’ What am I supposed to choose? I never allow myself to get a cart. I always use a basket so I can’t buy that much.” He took a swig of the drink and handed it back.

He was sweating, lifting his sweatshirt to fan himself. I got up and opened the French doors that led onto the veranda. The temperature was dropping.

“I’m the critics’ darling,” he said, “And yet I don’t feel validated. What about you?”

“Oh,” I said, sitting on the bed next to him and draining the drink. “I’ve got my critics. But I feel pretty valid, all the same.”

There were snow flurries on the air.

“Hey,” I said. “I’ll be right back.”

I went down to the fridge and started grabbing things: take-out containers of Tex-Mex, pastrami, a wheel of brie, a jar of some of those little cocktail onions. I ran back upstairs with it.

Dewey covered his face with his hands when he saw me. “I can’t do this,” he said.

“Yeah you can. Eating – it’s like riding a bicycle.”

He was turning bright red. “But Ari,” he said. “He’ll be so furious. You don’t know how he gets.”

“Yeah,” I said, twisting the top off the onions. “I’ve got some idea.”

“But what if he refuses to work with me anymore?”

I opened a container with a leftover burrito in it and handed it to Dewey. “Then I guess you won’t have to pay some little smart-ass punk six figures to heap emotional abuse on you anymore. I can think of worse things.”

He started to protest again. “Hey, Dewey,” I interrupted him. “You ever wet kiss a girl?”

Dewey nodded. “A few times.”

I grabbed two fistfuls of his sweatshirt, forcing an onion into his mouth with my tongue. He seemed surprised, but chewed it.

He tasted like V8.

I woke up to Ari sitting on the side of my bed. He had a breakfast tray with an eggcup and some melba toast, and was furiously thwacking a soft-cooked egg.

“Rise and shine, morning glory,” he said in a clench-jawed sing-song. The ponytail was at attention. The nostrils flaring. He flicked the top off the egg and shoved the tray in my face. “Eat up.”

“Breakfast in bed,” I said. “No one’s ever done that for me before.”

“Well, I wanted your last day in Deadman’s Pass to be special.”

I reached on the bedside table for my glasses. “You’re kicking me out?”

“I’ve got it on tape,” he said. “The whole disgusting spectacle. The baby cam was trained on you the whole time.”

“It’s not like I fucked him,” I said, knocking the melba toast that Ari kept sticking in my face out of his hand.

“No, *worse!* You *fed* him. He’s on a raw foods diet and you fed him garbage. You were like two grizzlies at a campsite, pilfering. I’m on a time-line. That little stunt set me back about four days. My time is worth big money.”

For a minute I thought he might cry. I tried to reach out and touch his cheek, but he jerked away at the last minute.

“Okay,” I said. “Fuck. I’ll pack my things.”

“There’s no need to hurry,” he said. “I don’t want Ruthie upset. I thought maybe the two of you could spend some time together today.”

“I’d like that,” I said.

When I made my way downstairs, Ruthie was at the kitchen table drinking orange juice in her big, white Elton John sunglasses. The unicorn was at her side. She blew me a kiss.

Ari was at the stove, tending a pot of quinoiis. “She wants to go to the library,” he said. “My card’s sitting on the table.”

“Yibary,” Ruthie confirmed.

It was a small library. There was a grizzled old dude on one of the two computers and an older lady sitting at a table copying down recipes from *Ladies Home Journal*. The librarian was a portly forty-something in a denim jumper who seemed to know Ruthie.

“My little friend’s back.”

She gave Ruthie a row of stickers. Ruthie sat down in the middle of an aisle and stuck them all over her self. Then she ran up and down the aisles, dragging her unicorn and yanking down all the featured books and pulling all the books off the displays. When she’d done, she must have had twenty-five books. The librarian stuffed them all in brown paper bags for us. Ruthie couldn’t believe her good luck, was smiling and trying to catch her breath, like she was having some kind of manic episode.

“Who’s going to have to read all these books to you?” I asked, when we got outside. “Do I have to read all these books to you?”

She threw herself on my leg. I felt her tongue on my knee.

“Okay,” I said. “Okay.”

I looked around me. Another bright, sunny day in Deadman’s Pass. The delivery trucks were just making their way down the pass and into town to drop off their goods at the shops and restaurants. Business owners and real estate agents were waving to each

other. People with braids and large dogs were walking down the sidewalks with walking sticks. It was beautiful and I needed to leave it.

Right then.

I strapped Ruthie in the car seat Ari had installed in the back of the Cutlass and handed her a sippy cup full of juice. I took the books from the bags and arranged them in two piles on either side of her.

I hadn't driven the car for three weeks. It seemed even slower than usual as we made our ascent up the pass, past the falls, and out of town. "What do you want to hear?" I asked, picking up some tapes. "Dead Milkmen? Iggy Pop?"

When we'd been driving for about forty minutes, I turned to find her looking at a pop-up book about amphibians.

"I have so much to tell you, Ruthie," I said, looking up at her in the rearview. "So much to relate. First of all, you're not a princess, Ruthie. I know, I know...it's hard news. But as it happens, you're actually a queen, Ruthie. With a war on your hands."

She was Boudica, Nina Simone.

"This is *dire*. You have an overwhelming obligation to your people and to history itself."

She wouldn't sleep soundly, I told her, but she'd have big, unwieldy sepia dreams. Wake up heartsick but impermeable. She would eat till you're full. Dress for comfort.

"No, Ruthie," I said. "You won't be cute when you grow up."

And yet people would blush at a mere glance. Her laugh, her shrieks, will cause pain and she should practice both. She would survey people, positions, entire fucking regions and designate them hers. Her realm was wherever she was.

“Wherever you walk,” I said. “Whatever you see, is yours.”

Sometimes as she walked, she’d lose true north. She’d exhaust herself. Sputter and spin.

“Queen of what? You’ll wonder. Where the fuck is this place?”

Then, closing her eyes, she’d spin in a circle, point blindly and open her eyes to see where next. They’d send search parties, of course. They’d get hold of her favorite lambs wool sweater and hold it under the noses of keen, wily dogs.

“My advice: Roll in dirt and leaves to hide your scent. Find caves, dig holes.”

They’d want to drag her back and shower her with ticker tape and plastic beads, make a figurehead of her.

“For Christ’s sake, Ruthie – keep moving.”