

A MEMOIR
HAPPY ANNIVERSARY
COSMIC SPONGE

Compiled and Edited by
Gregory Charles Erickson



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iUniverse, Inc.
New York Lincoln Shanghai

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For Patty

Preface to the second edition:

First of all, thank you. You and millions like you over the past twelve months have made this work an international bestseller in all media.

Shortly after I received the following, I, like my former colleague Fred Ratliff, left New Union Press Service. I began devoting my time to doing what I could to verify the truthfulness of this document prior to publication.

Although catalogued as a work of fiction, this is fact...in my opinion. How can anyone say otherwise? If it's a hoax, it's one that rivals the Shroud of Turin.

The “datebook”—all seven thick volumes—exists and sits on my desk as I speak. It is more a diary or journal or collection of further autobiographical reminiscences than an agenda. I haven't completed my reading of it, because the penmanship is erratic and changes from page to page. There may well be enough material in these volumes for a follow-up, although I expect trouble from government censors. We'll see.

I was able to unlock and explore the offices of the Patricia Lorraine Mattingly Memorial Foundation the day after this transcription arrived, because I used the same password as had Fred. There I found everything as described: the paintings and sculptures, the piano and the shelves filled with recorded music. The stack of hundred-dollar bills—still with the bulldog clip gripping it—in the drawer. I found walk-in closets crammed with clothing for men and women of all sleek shapes. Women's shoes by the dozens of pairs—a museum of feminine footwear—from size five to size ten, often with soles unscuffed. (And more than a few men's.) I located a cubbyhole of an anteroom allocated to nothing more than jars of cosmetics for all the shades skin comes in and a cityscape of cologne and perfume bottles. There were eyeglasses in sufficient number to start a frame shop. Contact lenses in two-compartment containers, arranged by prescription from weakest to strongest, near-sighted to far-sighted, in a line across a master-bathroom vanity two yards long. Ticket stubs filling a four-foot vase to the top. Boutonnieres and corsages carefully dried and displayed in a crystal bowl. Yellowed newspaper clippings in neat,

boxed stacks. An autograph-filled guest book which itself would draw a fortune at auction. “So glad to have been invited—keep up the splendid work,” reads the message over one prominent signature: “Hillary Rodham Clinton.” Tucked inside that book, a handwritten note card—a *billet doux* of great subtlety—from, simply, “Diana.”

I found hundreds of photographic prints and thousands of negatives. Many of the latter had been ruined by a hole punch, but others looked all right. Also, I couldn’t help but notice the pen-and-ink triptych mentioned here—three studies of Marcia Lynne Gaydos; one finished, two not. My plan is to reproduce and intersperse some of the photos and drawings throughout the text of the third, upcoming edition—not for prurient interest but because I feel it would be dishonest to withhold them any longer from public view.

Courtroom wrangling is likely to drag on for months regarding that plan. (Since ratification of the Personal Privacy Amendment, things have tightened up. An interesting question is whether the photographs I want to include legally belong to relatives of their deceased subjects rather than to the PLMMF, which is now a sole proprietorship managed by Yours Truly.) I want to respect the wishes and feelings of those whose loved ones are no longer with us; however, I am a journalist committed to disseminating the truth.

Please forgive me if what I say next sounds heartless and cold.

Approximately five hundred individuals lost their mind and then their life here, yet the end result was more positive than not. They couldn’t have known at the time, but they would contribute much to our global society. It is not within my purview to thank them posthumously, but I do feel grateful to them for their unwitting sacrifice.

Regardless of your traditional political preferences, I believe you’ll agree with me that Cheri Beth LaPatin has been one of the best things to have happened to this country, and our world. She burst out of nowhere to romance us, educate us and lead us. Her election appears as certain as tomorrow’s sunrise, and all of us will be the better for it. Where would she—and we—be today had this, this *thing* and its unfortunate “acquaintances” not laid a path for her? I don’t mean to say she wouldn’t have made it on her own. She just might not have made it so far so fast.

For years I have been telling myself and friends that if I were to become wealthy I would seek contentment in full-time philanthropy. My dreams have come true. Today, after Fred Ratliff’s withdrawal from the foundation’s checking account, the untaxable value of investments exceeds \$15 billion. Even by current standards, that’s a lot of money. I have retained advisors Gloomis McGraw & Appleton to help me disperse these funds to relevant and deserving charitable organizations over the next several years. (Please do not call or write.)

I want to allay any fears you may have about UVD. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention have not uncovered more than a few cases since the death of Bart Andrews, and these have been contained. (The datebook was of help.) I had wondered whether any of the victims, before succumbing, had been raped by a hospital worker, maybe, opening a hole through which the virus could attack the general population. Authorities say that did not occur.

LaPatin appears healthy—very much so. I have no reason to suspect that she and Andrews consummated their relationship sexually. It doesn't seem likely that a shift took place between them, simply because Andrews in his transmission appeared to be so well in command of his mental faculties. LaPatin too. Only she could know. (Her administration has not graced this work with a comment. Nor, however, has it attempted to block its publication.)

Lastly, I must thank Fred Ratliff.

Fred, I hope you don't hold it against me for changing the foundation's password and moving its offices from the crumbling Lake Point Tower. If you don't, then stick your neck out of your shell and let me hear what you've been doing all these months, you ton of a surtle.

—G.C.E., January 2035

NEW UNION PRESS SERVICE

CHICAGO

INTEROFFICE MEMORANDUM

Encrypted

TO: GCE—NUPS D.C.

FR: FSR

DA: 11/20/33

TI: 5:16 CST

RE: ANDREWS

GREG:

HEY, BOSS, SORRY I HAVEN'T TOUCHED BASE WITH YOU BEFORE NOW. YOU DESERVE TO KNOW WHAT I'VE BEEN UP

in the inky distance, the velvety darkness, appears a protozoa larger than any supernova. Through this immense single-celled life form course fluids of yellow, magenta and cyan. These are made of particles, which spin and loop through true pube, through transparent tubular passageways.

SO FAR THIS MORNING, I'VE BEEN DOING THIS, JUST THIS. HAVEN'T EVEN FIXED COFF

The particles have faces.

They have names.

HARD TO SAY WHAT IT IS I'M DOING.

Larry Hibbs.

Patty Mattingly.

David Sciubba.

THE GUY'S KIND OF A SLOW TALKER, BUT

Margaret Newcombe.

Lori Griffin.

Jerome O'Neill.

IT'S NOT EASY WATCHING HIM AND LISTENING TO HIM AND WRITING
WHAT I WANT TO SAY TO YOU AT THE SAME TIME. RIGHT NOW IT LOOKS
LIKE HE'S GOING TO CONTINUE WITH THE NAMES. I'LL TAKE A MINUTE
TO TRY TO

I am not who or what you know me to be.

I am older than I look.

I am not one but many.

I have lived inside half a thousand bodies over the past century—one hun-
dred years to the day—by moving in and taking over.

I'VE GOT

I soak up souls like a cosmic sponge.

I'VE GOT AS MUCH OF THE TECHNOLOGY OF NEW UNION PRESS
SERVICE UP AND RUNNING AS I CAN FROM HOME.

do not expect you to believe me. If I were Gabriel blowing my horn, you
would angrily slam the windows shut and go on about your work. If my image
were that of Jesus Christ being broadcast upon His return, you would curse
and change the channel.

I'M NOT DOING WHAT I FIGURED I'D BE DOING TODAY, BUT I'VE GOT
A FEELING THIS IS GOING TO TURN OUT TO BE WAY MORE IMPOR

Bravo.

I'D BE HANDLING THIS BETTER IF I WAS AT THE OFFICE. PUT SOME-
BODY ELSE ON IT, MAYBE.

You are not gullible.

I value your cynicism.

NATIONAL POLITICS ISN'T MY BEAT. I NEVER MET THE GUY, I NEVER
WAS IN THE SAME ROOM WITH HIM. AND NOW ALL OF A SUDDEN I'M
HIS BIOGRA

The remains of my talent...

The fact of my talent remains.

THIS'LL WRECK YOUR SCHEDULE, TOO, BUT YOU MIGHT WANT TO
TAKE THE TIME TO READ IT AS YOU GET IT INSTEAD OF LATER. THAT'S
WHY I RANG THE "URGENT" BELL.

EXPECTING TO HEAR THAT ANDR

To take on the body of another, I must have sex with it. And I must have sex
with it thoroughly and well, at least insofar as my needs are concerned, for it is
at the instant of my orgasm that the "shift," as I call it, occurs.

SAY WHAT?

THINKING HE'D TAKEN A TURN FOR THE WORSE OVERNIGHT—WHICH IT SURE LOOKS LIKE HE DID—I SLAPPED ON MY RAYCHARLES THIS A.M. WITH MORE THAN MY REGULAR AMOUNT OF ENTHU

Could I have shifted from man to man or from woman to woman? I do not think so, for reasons I will express.

MY OLD-TIMEY HOLO-BOARD AND -SCREEN CAME INTO VIEW. THE SAME OLD GOBBLEDYGOOK FROM PRESS SECRETARY WOJTOWICS. I STARTED RATTLING MY THIMBLES. (YOU KNOW ME: I STILL HAVE TO TYPE TO FEEL LIKE I'M WORKING.) THEN

bouncing and exuding and huffing and puffing subside, I open my eyes and see the *former* “me,” of one sex, lying on top of or under the *new* me, of the other.

It is disorienting.

YOU CAN SAY THAT AGAIN.

FROM OUT OF NOWHERE UP POPPED THE BIG MAN HIMSELF, OVERRIDING MY SECURITY SOFTWARE, WRAPPED IN SWADDLING CLOTHES. I ALMOST DIDN'T RECOGNIZE HIM, 'CAUSE HE'D LOST SO MUCH WEI

morning roughly seven decades ago, for instance, I awoke from a fitful sleep—the body I then occupied had consumed far too much Crown Royal and who knows what else some few short hours before—and reached for a pair of eyeglasses. When I found them and put them on, I saw that I did not need them. Beverly Ellenwood—blond, thirty-four, I believe a veterinarian...yes—along with having a perfect “twenty,” as it was said (that should be “ten”) of a figure, had twenty-twenty eyesight. And I was—right you are!—Everly, Beverly Ellenwood.

Blonder yellow Eve.

DON'T ASK ME WHAT HE'S TALKING ABOUT.

HE WENT WAY OUT OF HIS WAY TO PROVE HIMSELF: HE LET ME CHECK HIS VOICEPRINT, HIS HANDPRINT, HIS EAR. PERFECT MATCHES. EYES, THAT'S ANOTHER MATTER. FOR SOME REASON THEY DIDN'T SCAN—THEY DIDN'T SCAN AS EYES, NOT EYES OF ANY ONE PERSON. BUT I'M SURE THIS IS NO PRANK. (OR A REALLY GOOD

body lying next to me, the one out of which I had shifted, was that of a Michael something Cooney, an affluent attorney, myopic.

HE COMPLIMENTED ME ON MY REPUTATION. (I CAN ONLY HOPE THAT WHAT'S GOING ON RIGHT NOW WON'T RUN IT INTO THE GROUND

In assuming the body of Beverly Ellenwood—do you not love that name?—I had acquired a smattering of its mind. Had the telephone rung, I would have answered it—groggily, I suppose—exhibiting Beverly Ellenwood's vocal man-

nerisms, and possibly recognized the caller as one of Beverly's friends, if that had been so. But had the friend inquired as to her whereabouts the previous Wednesday—she had missed an appointment, say—I would have had to stall, lie or hang up: I had no clue, and this was unrelated to my debilitating hang-over. Many of Beverly's most recent experiences would never bubble into my awareness.

I did not have them in me.

The lethargic body of Michael Cooney most certainly did not contain them.

Where they had gone I did not know and did not, at that juncture, care.

I do care now. I like to think they flew off to enrich, or at least to boggle, the minds of others, appearing as wholly unaccountable flashes of insight or imagination.

I'D LIKE TO STOP HIM AND ASK HIM WHERE THIS IS GOING, BUT I CAN'T DO EITHER. IT'S A ONE-WAY FEED. I'M TRYING TO FIND THE POINT OF ORIGIN, BUT HAVING NO LUCK. I'M THINKING REED, OR MAYBE THE WHITE HOUSE ITSELF. ALL I SEE IS WHAT LOOKS LIKE A HOSPI

felt slightly out of touch; but I found the prospect of reinventing Beverly Ellenwood from scratch to be thrilling. As a creative person you might relate to it best if I say it this way: It was as though someone had mailed me a screechy—that is, a sketchy screenplay in hope that I would bring it to life, provide all the nuances of dialogue and character development, by, on a day-to-day basis, living it.

WHAT YOU'RE GETTING IS A VERBATIM TRANSCRIPTION AS HE SPEAKS, LIKE IN THE EARLY DAYS OF TV CAPTIONS FOR THE DEAF. YOU'RE ABOUT ONE LINE OR SENTENCE BEHIND ME. I'M

I was starting over.

I was *always* starting over.

SORRY YOU HAVE TO READ IT RATHER THAN WATCH IT, BUT HE'S GOT A LOCK ON THE VIDEO. I CAN'T DOWNLOAD IT OR COPY IT AND I CAN'T FORW

Sometimes I have appeared to myself—if not others—to be scatterbrained.

THE BEST I COULD DO WAS PATCH THE AUDIO INTO MAIL AND HOPE THE VR SYSTEM WOULD HANDLE EVERYTHING. FORMATTING IS UP FOR GRABS. I'VE SET THE PROGRAM TO ADD A LINE SPACE AT SHORT PAUSES AND A BULLET AT LONGER ONES. THE GUY TALKS IN PARAGRAPHS AND, HELL, PROBABLY IN CHAPTERS.

Anyone else would have been viewed likewise, had he or she become the repository of so many vicarious, fragmented memories, so many nebulous thoughts devoid of context and indistinguishable from dreams.

I KNOW—IT'S YOUR JOB TO EDIT. YOU'LL PROBABLY FIND WRONG WORD GUESSES, STYLISTIC WEIRDNESS AND MAYBE SOME BAD PUNCTUATION. BUT I WOULDN'T TOUCH ANYTHING IF I WERE YOU. THIS MIGHT BE A NEW ROSETTA STONE OR SOMETHI

I am capable of the most lappable lasses...laughable lapses. They usually happen soon after my life in a new body begins.

I CAN'T BE SURE YOU'RE ALWAYS GOING TO SEE EXACTLY WHAT HE SAYS—HE LOOKS TO BE IN PRETTY BAD CONDITION AND TENDS TO MUMBLE. HE'S ALSO GOT THIS TONGUE-TIED PROBLEM—LIKE A SHORT CIRCUIT—THAT MAKES HIM SAY THINGS INSIDE-OUT. "LAP-PABLE LASSES," FOR CRYING OUT LOUD.

HE'S GETTING A DRINK OF WATER. I HAVE ONE SIDE OF MY GOG-GLES ON HIM AND THE OTHER RIGGED TO CHECK FACTS. WHEN ANDREWS MENTIONS ANYTHING THE SYSTEM CAN SEARCH FOR, IT SHOULD AUTOMATICALLY START SEARCHING, ASSUMING THERE'S ENOUGH INFO TO GO ON.

IF THERE'S ANYTHING I CAN ADD, I'LL COME BACK, BUT FOR NOW I'M GOING TO TRY LIKE HELL TO CHILL OUT AND LET IT ROLL.

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One of those lapses: That first morning as Beverly, having flung the unneeded horn-rims aside, I padded off unsteadily to wash my face. (And what a face it was, even with its smeared makeup!) Beverly Ellenwood's bathroom—my bathroom now—reeked sickeningly of urine, for a puddle of it sat growing thick in the middle and crusty at the edges on the floor. I guessed I had visited the toilet sometime earlier in my brand-new formal...my brand-new female form, that is, half-drunk and half-asleep in the darkness, had adhered both hands to the wall before me for support and had relieved myself while standing.

Are you thinking that the warm liquid spraying onto my bare legs should have told me something was amiss? I am too.

It was I who was a miss...apparently a thoroughly discombobulated one.

Another humorous example? Shortly after I shifted out of the body of Beverly Ellenwood, I dressed in street clothes as the young man whom I had become, checked to see whether the Ellenwood body was dead or alive, conscious or not, and left that residence in search of a more enlivening abode...swiveling my hips with Beverly's purse slung over my shoulder, La-la-la. (A derogatory epithet shouted by the driver of a passing delivery van alerted me to my error.)

More than once I have tiptoed silently out of the meeting place I had arranged for a shift, before my former body had opened its eyes and its mouth, locking the door behind me and driving away. Each of those times I have stopped, slapped myself in the forehead and scurried back in an attempt to set things right...an hour or so after nosy neighbors, paramedics and police had congregated like ants to sugar at the site.

Much more important than what I did not know about myself as Beverly Ellenwood the morning after the shift is what I did know about everything else that had transpired. Nearly one hundred percent of Michael Cooney's consciousness, the accumulated *consciousnesses* I had controlled while occupying Cooney's body, had made the transition.

My new mind's gain was the old mind's loss: The fleshy shell of a human being on the bed housed a brain no more capable of conceptualization than a salamander's.

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Through perseverance of an intensity that has continually impressed me, I have risen from the bottom to the top of the social ladder, rung by rung by rung. My increasing physical attractiveness and expanding intelligence have brought me ever-more-desirable bodies in which to reside.

Of these, Beverly Ellenwood's marked a high point. There was a devil-may-care, try-anything-once attitude about it that was most invigorating. I found challenge in keeping up with it, if you see what I mean. The Ellenwood entity was capable of doing all I wanted it to do and more—except wearing platform high heels, or any other kind of high heels, without rebelling. (It had not done so in what must have been a year or more and its feet had lost their protective calluses.) My recollection of its active eyebrows, its enigmatic half-grin, its self-deprecating sense of humor and rippling thighs and calves remains intact as it floats in the murky memory stew of my myriad existences.

Blonder yellow Eve indeed. I wish I could show you what I looked like then.
WHAT TOWN? TELL ME WHAT TOWN.

Your jaw would drop, as the teenage Boy Scout's did that balmy May morning when he stood at my open screen door, wagging a bar of chocolate in my direction. He rocked backwards, lost his balance, and sat down with a whump on his tail bone, gasping, for I had answered his knock wearing only a pair of black satin panties, only halfway on.

A confection was exactly what I felt my tumbling rummy needed, so I leaned out, took the bar, thanked the lad and swaggered away as the door slammed shut. I gobbled down chunk by chewy chunk while waiting for coffee to percolate.

I was pouring myself a cup when I heard voices—eager whispers and anxious shushes—emanating from the stoop. I peeked around the corner to see three guys uniformed in olive green peering through the screen, straining themselves, as it were, for a glimpse. “Hi, men,” I said, raising my arms toward them, “Come in.” With their bugging eyes glued to the candid nipples of my emphatic breasts, they did so, after a brief argument which decided who should do so first by reason of rank. “Can you stay, say, an hour? I'll trade you something cool for your candy.”

At the end of that hour I took down the name and number of my favorite—by far the eldest and tallest, the outspoken leader, the inquisitive one, the rapid learner, the most resourceful and obedient of the three.

By noon the whole troop had stopped by to barter further, but I was too busy preparing Michael Cooney's body for its eviction to respond to the persistent pounding.

Beverly Ellenwood's identity had been a keeper—pardon the slang—for a time. When the end of its “run,” you might say, drew near, I vacillated. The prospect of leaving it was like good chocolate: bitter and sweet in equal measure.

I picture two male senior citizens—pot-bellied and balding, sopping beads of sweat off their jowls—repeatedly telling the apocryphal story of the “Big Naked Blonde” to their salivating great-great grandsons, either including or deciding not to include the part about the change stranges, the strange changes they saw in their troopmate after his second, unaccompanied visit with her.

Have you ever wished you could return to your high school Sophomore year knowing everything you know now as an adult? So has every man. So had I. And that, in the competitive-swimmer's body of the eldest Scout, is precisely what I did.

Oh, the impression I made on all the girls...and Miss Protiva, the miniskirt-wearing mathematics teacher on whom all the boys had a distracting, preoccupying, failing-grade crush.

I have been quite good at algebra ever since.

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My unique talent made its presence known during my first experience with sexual intercourse. My name: Lawrence Howard Hibbs. Let me see: That would be...herbal window branches. How idyllic. The year: nineteen-forty-nine.

By then my father, who shall remain deservedly nameless, was long gone. My mother Arlene had done better for herself and for me without him than with him, although her life was arduous. (She took in ironing—sheets and pillowcases.) She managed to put food on our table, make payments on our sham, on our ramshackle shack of a house and shelter me from serious trouble with the law. But in my southern Wisconsin hometown of Monona—did you not always think that to be a depressing sound?—with its populace of less than a thousand, there was little for me and others of my ilk to do but suck on cigarettes, get drunk and find things to destroy.

MONONA WAS MY HOMETOWN.

I had one chum and one chum only, a fellow of approximately my age—two years older, actually—with whom I used to throw rocks at windows, slash tires, plan petty thievery. His name was Walt—Walter.

WALTER WAS MY FATHER'S NAME.

I started calling him Stogy when we were eight and ten or thereabouts. He had tried to stoke, well yes, stoke and then smoke a stolen cigar the size and shape of a hunting hound's turd one day and had become violently ill.

NOBODY I EVER KNEW CALLED MY DAD ANYTHING BUT WALT (TO HIS FACE), SO

In his mid- to late teens, Stogy had sponsored my admission into the Solemn Order of the Turtle. I do not remember where he said he had picked it up, who had sponsored him, or what it meant. (It could well be that it originated in the armed forces. Perhaps you can find out.) The ceremony, if it can be called that, involved the initiate's being asked to solve a series of riddles. The most obvious answer to each, something obscene, proved incorrect; a perfectly "clean" solution was required. The humor was in seeing that people without exception have dirty minds.

One of the riddles: What goes in pink, hard and dry and comes out pink, soft and sticky? Shame on you!

Once initiated, there was nothing for a new member to do save answer one question, loudly and in a ritualized way, whenever and wherever it was asked. The traditional inquiry was, “Are you a Turtle?” But I always prefaced it when I asked it of Stogy with, “Hey, you stupid shit.” The traditional answer was, “You bet your sweet ass I am.” He always added, creatively, “you piss face.”

I do not recall the punishment for lack of response, but it must have been substantial, because neither Stogy nor I ever refused to answer the question, no matter where we were and who was listening—not that we would have given a fucking fart, as we used to say.

It would please me to initiate you, but I cannot, considering that I would not be able to hear your replies. Yet if you are a member, to be true to the Order, you must now say so, aloud.

Are you a Turtle?

NOPE.

Stogy had been my mentor in another, far more enriching, area of interest.

“Think much about doing it?” He asked me one day, the day of my initiation, in more ways than one, out in the woods.

“Doing what?”

“Fucking.”

“Oh, yeah, all the time.” I did think about it much, trying to figure out what it meant and how it went.

“Ever jerk off?”

That had always sounded stupid to me—something only jerks did. “Naw.”

“Your prick’s yours—you can do what you want with it. I’m gonna jerk off right now. This is private. You stay here.”

Stogy shuffled away and knelt down by a stump. His back was to me, but I could guess he was undoing his pants as though he needed to take a leak. Kneeling? He set about something that seemed aptly named. “How does it work?” I called out enviously, for Stogy appeared to be having the time of his life, all alone.

“Wha-wha-wha?” he groaned. “Just play with it and rub it and shut up.”

I did.

“What am I supposed to be thinking about?” I called out a short while later.

“Oh-oh-oh,” he whined. A spooky urgency in his voice filled me with anxiety.

Buttoning up, he stomped over to where I crouched cowering and whispered, “I won’t look. Know that Sally?”

All us boys in Monona knew that Sally, or thought we wanted to. Sally Trainor had blossomed early and hugely. If her breasts were not the talk of the town, they were at least the talk of the high school which Stogy had

infrequently attended. He had once got me sent to the principal's office for the hallway outburst which followed his comment that the best place to stand in a rainstorm would be under Sally Trainor's tits.

"Think about her showin' 'em to ya. Think about how big her nipples must be. That should do it." It began to. "Then think about stickin' your prick in her hole."

"*What* hole? Not her—"

"You don't know about that hole? Man, have *you* got a lot to learn."

Up to the moment that Stogy began telling me the truth about sex as he saw it, I had accepted without question a procreation theory of my own fuzzy and comfortable manufacture. It went as follows:

Married people, while asleep, have sex. This results from the man's thing touching the woman somewhere—at her navel was my guess. A baby starts growing in her. Husband and wife wake up and discover they are going to have to raise a kid.

Stogy passed on to me an alternate theory, which he endorsed as God's honest truth, and it troubled me greatly.

The concept that sex, A, took place while husband and wife were awake, B, involved a whole, yes, a whole new hole about which I had not previously heard anything, C, was available to men and women who were not married, and D, was fun—better than jerking off—well, it consumed every cell in my brain. I stumbled around for days with an image of me watching my prick inch through the grass of the woods like a grub with the strength of a man, dragging the rest of me along, into Sally Trainor's second hole, as one of only two thoughts. The other was Stogy's contention that Sally would kick and scream...if she *liked* it. I believe his knotty—*knotty*, as full of knots, rather than *naughty*—revelations and my nagging need for proof would have driven me mad by the age of seventeen...had it not been for release in the form of Patty Mattingly.

It was indeed Patricia Lorraine Mattingly who became my unsavory...no, not at all unsavory in my view. My unlikely savior. Barely four feet tall. Galoshes protecting what I assumed were patent-leather Mary Janes. Frilly anklets...no; I am combining a pair of related memories here. Knee socks. Light brown hair in braids, with bows. Under her coat, the rest of the parochial school uniform she wore every weekday: white blouse with ribbon necktie; plaid, pleated skirt; navy blazer with embroidered pocket patch. Under that, I could only imagine, and not well.

MATTINGLYS AND HIBBSES LISTED WITH THE STATE AS '49 MONONA-AREA RESIDENTS.

I'LL LOOK INTO THAT "TURTLE" THING IF I CAN. I DON'T THINK I EVER
HEARD OF IT BEFORE. HAVE YOU?

BUBBLE GUM?

Marginally patriotic retina.

Marginal reptilian atrocity.

Impartial clarinet gyration.

WHAT THE HELL?

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I concealed myself in a ditch alongside a desolate rural route one temperate late-November dusk as Patty shambled home in the sleet, humming “Jingle Bells” in a mindless, noteless way, kicking stones, carrying books as girls do—hugged to the chest. I leapt up, took one of her shinny skins in both hands and yanked her off her feet. She landed with a thud as her belongings skittered away across the gravel. Like rolling a log, I tumbled her down. She uttered not a word. Stoic, one might say. Needlessly I clapped one hand over her mouth to be sure she would not cry out if she liked it; with the other I fumbled about the placket of my trousers. All the while, I spoke aloud, as if chanting a mantra, as I had done every time I had masturbated, “Sally Trainor, Sally Trainor, Sally Trainor; tits, tits, tits.”

I do not remember Patty’s hole, the particulars of how my penis found its way to it, or what happened next. A void exists in me where there should be a memory of that momentous inaugural—seminal, as one might put it—shift. I must have passed out. That is to say, Larry and Patty both must have passed out. How long the two lay in limbo together I cannot say. Only seconds is my guess, for I lived to tell the tale.

Picture my surprise when I grew aware of myself shaking uncontrollably with cold, lying on my back in the ditch with what I thought to be me—the body of putridly pimply faced Larry Hibbs—squeezing the air out of my lungs. Picture my surprise when, as the last of its autonomic thrusts came to an end, the male body went limp, a weight so immovable I feared I would be trapped forever there. Picture my surprise when I was able to free myself, and, though woozy, take inventory.

Ruled pages filled with classroom notes—flopping down the road like crippled seagulls, too sodden to take flight, bleeding blue—were mine. The books—spread-eagle, spines broken—were mine. The toes so numb—one rubber boot on, one off—were mine too, as were the Mother Goose underpants, which had been torn away by Hibbs and were soaking up mud.

I was a girl—a notion incomprehensible to my mostly “Larry” mind.

At first as I set off for my new home, without books or boot or pants, I could hardly walk; however, as the physical pain subsided, I began to run, my arms outstretched like the wings of a flutterby. Butterfly. No, flutterby is most correct.

The Hibbs carcass was found, around midnight, by a posse of neighbors, drowned in icy slop one foot deep. I joined the whole community, except, I would wager, Arlene Adah Hibbs and Stogy, in bidding it good riddance.

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For months thereafter, the Mattinglys exceeded their humble means in finding me counseling which I did not want.

What I wanted, as you must surely know, was sex.

This I kept to myself. I waited, intuitively sensing the evolutionary aspect of my talent.

Prior to the assault by Larry Hibbs, Patty Mattingly had been a well-mannered, respectful child. I endeavored to remain so, reining in my roiling, adult-like emotions and drives. If I could be patient, living would be cozy, enlightening, entertaining, different.

I became an actress. Life itself was my part, and I was a star.

Effortlessly, I did well in school. I made the honor roll time and time again, accepting accumulating accolades with a smirk. I skipped a grade. The combined intellectual capabilities of Larry and Patty did not amount to the mind of an Einstein, but they surpassed anything that would have been expected of Lawrence Howard Hibbs, or Patricia Lorraine Mattingly, separately.

I applied my brain power to more than Arithmetic, English and History, becoming a master of observation, using all leisure moments to analyze human behavior as would an anthropologist. I focused intently on the contrasting dissimilarities in body language between the sexes, for I wanted nothing more than to be perceived as demurely girlish. It would have been easy to grow up “tough,” as it is said, by letting an excessive amount of the Hibbs personality remain at the forefront, but I did not: I pushed it out of me and flushed it away like so much sewage.

Copies of *Sir!*, *Stare*, *Modern Sunbathing* and other men’s magazines were kept on hand by the owner of a downtown barber shop. (This I remembered from my days as Larry Hibbs.) Occasionally, at closing time, I would stop to visit. In return for my allowing the barber to sit with me on his lap in a far corner and run his fingers up and down my legs, he allowed me to take some of the publications home “for my cousin.” I slipped each issue into my lease, my

loose-leaf notebook, fished a lollipop from an apothecary jar, and smiled sweetly on my way out.

I did not find pictures of nearly naked women sexually stimulating, as would have Hibbs. They were better than that: a promise of the future, illustrative of what I knew I was becoming. I gave these images balance by stealing, or buying, if necessary, women's fashion periodicals. My aspiration; my inspiration.

My new mother was small and had a trim figure. Whenever she and my new father were away for the evening (I seldom accompanied them to my Aunt Rita and Uncle Frank's house), I experimented with her panty-girdles and hose and shoes and brassieres. I stuffed various items—sandbag ashtrays worked best—inside the cups of the bras in an effort to approximate what I estimated to be the weight and consistency of breasts. I enjoyed bounding around the house that way—with the boy called "Cousin" Rick Mattingly skipping along sideways nearby—feeling them bouncing so weightily and jauntily up and down. I practiced walking in high heels which almost fit me when I filled them to the brim with cardboard. I used safety pins to tighten my mother's dresses around my hips and raise their hemlines. I played with her cosmetics and stood in front of mirrors, and Rick, working out the details.

If my mother found out, she did not let on. After all, she would not have disapproved of my doing this (minus the audience), but rather would have taken it as a sign that I was, despite my having been viciously deflowered at the age of nine, a normal female child looking forward to growing up normally.

The men's magazines, which I hid in the attic, would have been much more difficult to explain. So too would have been the thoroughness with which Rick and I regularly played "House," and then "Doctor."

Rick and Patty Mattingly were in actuality, I should explain, unrelated. Born Richard Charles Jerdee, Rick had been orphaned at the age of twelve and taken in, later to be legally adopted, by Frank and Rita Mattingly. The differences in ages, grade levels and schools would have banned Rick and Patty from socializing much prior to the rape, even if they had wanted to. (Rick's "pet" name for Patty had been Miss Ish, and Patty had called him The Meanie.) The rape marked a turning point in the way I—Patty—was perceived and treated by both sets of Mattingly parents and by Rick. My mother and father, my aunt and uncle were convinced that I should never be left alone. Rick threw a furniture-kicking tantrum when first commandeered into looking after me for an evening. Soon, he was volunteering at every opportunity.

I became a participant in a sort of the morphing, as it would be called, special effect in movies. I willed my legs to lengthen, my hips to widen, my waist to narrow, and they speedily obliged. The premature budding and burgeoning of my bosom—"They're getting bigger every day," Rick said—was as riveting to us as weekly episodes of "You Are There."

Rick and I continued to play together for years until my uncle, who had found silk stockings and a silk slip—gifts intended for me—in his son's dresser drawer, ordered him to enlist in the navy. I was sad to see him go, for numerous reasons. It was through our affectionate and scientific examination of and experimentation with each other after I reached puberty—early—that I had learned about consensual sexuality. With Rick I had discovered to my dismay two of many fine points of shifting: One, orgasm—my orgasm—without penetration, though pleasant, did not bring on a shift. Two, penetration without orgasm—mine again—was for me unfulfilling in every way. We tried and tried, coaxing and pleading, but Rick and I never quite got it right, which, in retrospect, I can say was probably for the best.

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Over the summer before the start of tenth grade, the summer that Rick shipped tearfully out, I rehearsed in the privacy of my room a flamboyant debut. I had saved my allowance and baby-sitting income (and Rick had done some shoplifting on my behalf) to accumulate makeup and clothing of the type I thought apropos for a young woman having my physical charms and cultural objectives. I smuggled these things out on the Friday of the first week of classes in a bagged bundle which I called my physical-education uniform while blaring, while wearing the blouse, skirt and cardigan which my mother had set out for me that day as she had done every day.

In a girls' rest-room stall at school I changed into my new wardrobe and left the old in a heap on the tile.

Having taken notice of girls who were then called "tramps," I made certain not to be one. I was stacked...well, indeed I was. But what I meant to say was that I was decked out in stacked heels, and a sleek suit. My hair done up in a radiant, Grace Kelly-esque French twist, I looked mature and sophisticated enough to be a visiting graduate. Priests, nuns and classmates who saw me arrive and depart rubbed their eyes as though they had slept ten years between eight-thirty and nine-fifteen. I had stopped traffic, and the effect of this on my self-esteem was euphoric.

I strutted to a nearby bus stop and paid the fare for the short trip into Madison. I spent the day strolling along arbored campus pathways, smiling at everyone, unabashedly studying the college men and women as closely as they studied me.

Perhaps they thought I was an exchange student from France.

David Anthony Sciubba and I met that afternoon at a drugstore magazine rack—we had both popped in to get a look at Hugh Heffner's Miss September. A first-string halfback for the Wisconsin Badgers, he was—a "dreamboat" of a Junior. Over a shared root beer float at the fountain he begged me to see him that night. We decided on something casual: a movie and a meal. This gave me reason to have my hair re-done and to shop for an outfit needing less in the way of undergarments than what I had worn from Monona.

Sciubba waited for me in the lobby of the apartment building which two store clerks had described to me separately as the nicest in the area.

His car was a utilitarian Chevrolet sedan, which, though bleak, would serve its purpose, for its stench, its bench-style back seat was lengthy and deep.

Exiting the theater where I had been mesmerized by the cast if not the plot of *Giant*, I said to him, "I'll be your Carroll Baker if you'll be my James Dean." Together we voted down hamburgers and fries and set out into the country, for our greatest hunger had nothing to do with meat and potatoes.

Braggadocio notwithstanding, Sciubba was a novice. My willingness—all right, call it wantonness—might have contributed to his lack of élan. I had assisted him in pulling my sweater up and off; he had expected more of a fight. So I changed course: I slowed down, told him to stop, shooed him away from the hem of my poodle skirt, and his defeated, deflated Vienna sausage of a penis filled up with new life. I realized then that, used judiciously, a woman's "no" was to a man an aphrodisiac far stronger than the heralded Spanish Fly. In all species, the chosen female appears coyly hesitant, discriminating; the accepted male thus can feel winningly persuasive. Another lesson learned.

Within moments I had shifted for the second time.

Let me see if I can recall and describe what I felt.

Moisture from our combined rhythmic exhalations had collected, condensed and begun running down the windows in branching rivulets. David entered me the only way he knew how: forcefully, harshly, exhilaratingly. Simultaneously my fingers curled into my palms, their long nails nearly puncturing skin. David used my breasts for handholds as he licked and nibbled and bit my face and neck and I clawed at the blanket which he had spread across the seat.

From deep within my vagina arose a vibration like the roll of a distant drum. It radiated upward, through my belly, to my chest and into my throat. My jaw fell open to set it free. The sound I emitted was a guttural groan which both tightened me...frightened me and tickled. It must have frightened David, too, for he pulled out. "More," I whispered. He ground his groin into mine, and another drum roll took form and rose up. My lips pulled back. From between long canines came a growl like that of a big lady lion. My claws scratched at the blanket till nothing was left but threads. Yet again there came a rumbling, and the ear-splitting roar that sprang forth from me shook leaves from the trees outside the car.

The forest went into a crazy spin. Something had whipped the wool out from under us and had sent me tumbling through space.

I grunted and wheezed as though I had been tackled. The spirit or life-force or mental essence of Patty Mattingly had charged into the physicality of David Sciubba with the impact of a shoulder to the polar, the solar plexus.

The body of the girl underneath me had grown alarmingly quiet. Looking back, my guess is it was not at that moment lifeless—only temporarily unconscious—but I believe I thought I had killed it. I slid it off the seat. Biceps bulging, I picked it up by belt and brassiere—like a bale of hay by its wires—and lugged it out into the woods.

The song playing on the Chevrolet's radio, I recall now, was "The Great Pretender" by the Platters. I felt like a pretender. I was no longer simply Patty Mattingly and not fully David Sciubba. I carried my bulky new musculature like George Reeves wore the padding in his tights.

That feeling faded. The Patty personality receded kowtowing, as if it knew it had worn out its welcome.

IF THIS SCIUBBA DUDE WAS A SPORTS FIGURE, HE SHOULD HAVE BEEN WRITTEN UP SOMEWHERE. I'LL LOOK.

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Washboard abdomen, V-shaped torso, thick thighs, the face of Burt Lancaster in *From Here to Eternity*. Popular, to say the least. Within a small circle, famous. Attention-grabbing.

YUP, GOT HIM. IN HIS HEISMAN-TROPHY-HOPEFUL POSE. THE ABOVE DESCRIPTION OF HIS FACE IS APT.

Dave, man, you are beginning to smell like a washed-up trout.

In my wallet there is seven dollars; in Patty's purse, ninety-seven. I think that to be a lot for a girl her age to have been carrying around until I remember my theft of it—and forty-some dollars more—as Patty, from Patty's mother's bureau.

I thanked her. She—I—had planned ahead in a way I found remarkable.

The shift from Larry Hibbs to Patty Mattingly had ended with Hibbs getting what he deserved, as the people of Monona saw it: He had died at the scene of his crime. David Sciubba, on the other hand, escaped such a fate and is on the lam.

I have money enough for a motel, if I can find one that will let a minor check in without first notifying his parents. I have money enough to drive far away. But I do not have money enough to pay for a motel room, buy clean clothes, eat and drive forever. Furthermore, the car I drive belongs to a fellow Badger, who will report it missing tomorrow. I will wind up out of gas and have to sit shivering, waiting for the cops to snap on the handcuffs.

Suddenly it hits me—a plan so cagey if perverse I run the car off the road. I have enough money to get to Milwaukee, get the motel, the change of clothes and...what? Did you guess? A prostitute. Sure. A new “wham, bam, thank you ma'am” identity as a woman, someone who could not possibly have done what David Sciubba would be accused, tried and convicted of having done.

The innocent that was Sciubba was thoroughly unprepared for this projected experience. I recall my consternation in imagining where to hook for a, er, look for a whore—I had only recently learned the correct pronunciation of the word. I had heard stories about “red-light districts” and that “street-walkers” could be found there “walking the street.” Those stories portrayed

that street, whichever town it ran through, to be crime-ridden, filthy and not the sort of neighborhood into which I would have the courage to venture, big as I was.

I began picturing in my mind the type of woman I would be after the shift. Used goods. Goods used and used and used again, full as a hot-water bottle with the slime that all the men I had fucked had left behind: stinky stuff the consistency of snot. Bad breath. Decaying teeth. Probably an addict. I would have to get out of town or else answer to a “pimp,” some kind of boss-man who would beat me and cut me and take my money and leave me shiftless for all time.

Maybe another speedy shift would follow...but into whom, into what? The kind of man who rented pussies. And so it would go.

It had been a rough night. I slept for hours.

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Saturday morning I reopened Patty's pocketbook, as a dream had instructed me to do. There I found a dog-eared envelope addressed to Patty. Inside it was a letter from Rick.

"My love," it began, the printing vertical, draftsmanlike and manly, the spelling and grammar imperfect but the vocabulary surprisingly expressive, "as I get ready to leave for basic training and from there maybe to sail to the ends of the earth, I'm thinking about us. I hope the months we spend apart will deepen and strenthen"—he spelled it the way he said it, "strenthen"—"what we have. Heading into the unknown, I carry thoughts of you with me, and they will keep me strong.

"I sometimes reach out with my eyes closed into the darkness, imagining that my hands can find you, hold you. My fingers hurt from trying. I picture your body and mine together, getting closer and closer in the darkness until we blend like cherry syrup in a Coke.

"I think about how you touched me the last time. You took my, me—you know what I mean—in your warm soft loving hands and held it, me, and looked at it, me, and kissed it and kissed it. It was like what I had there was precious to you, as precious as you and your body are to me. When you invited me inside you, I felt like I was doing what I was put on this planet to do.

"When we started, we were just a couple of dumb kids. At least I was. And I was old enough to know better. Maybe I took advantage of your youth. Do you think so? But now that I am a man (I hope!) and you are becoming lots more woman than girl, I feel good. I'm sure we committed lots of sins. But what we did was make love. Build love. Grow love like in a garden of it. A watermelon of love so big nobody can get it into the truck. How can anything that 'makes love' get a person condemned to hell?

"Patty, Patty, Patty. I hope you feel the same and will save a place for me deep in you—I didn't mean it like that, know what I mean?—until I return.

"All my love."

There was a postscript: "I hope this comes out right. You are the world I want to live in."

Reading Rick's letter gave me an erection. I remembered our farewell meeting, caressing his testicles and penis, watching him grow hard, giving him the go-ahead with anguished, expectant nods, my hands on his buttocks, my fingertips creeping into the crack between them, pulling him into me...and I felt like a faggot. I threw the paper out the window in disgust and cranked the engine.

While driving I began to recuperate. I allowed myself to miss being Patty and making love with Rick. I missed Rick. I wished I had shifted into him instead of David Sciubba, for I knew I would have loved feeling Rick's kind of love. Would that have been an encumbrance? Yes, I decided. Had I shifted into Rick, I might not have recovered emotionally from Patty's demise. There is no love without loss, no loss without love.

Never love, I told myself. Never, never, never fall in love. That way, you will have nothing to lose.

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I did not expect much tactical help from my old friend as I dropped coins into the slot of a pay phone. I suppose I simply needed to hear a familiar voice.

"It's Dave Sciubba."

"Who?"

"Larry. Larry Hibbs."

"Like hell. He's dead. Been that way for four, five years. Who is this?"

"Stogy: Hey, you stupid shit, are you a Turtle?"

"What the..."

"Say it."

"You bet your sweet ass I am...you piss face. What? Who?"

How would I explain to Stogy what had happened? He would never find it credible. And besides, this was a long-distance call.

"I can't go into it now. Let's say it's a case of mistaken identity. I'll try to fill you in later. Trust me. I'm in a big mess. I need cash."

"Well, I could wire you—let's see—a dollar seven cents. How's that?"

"I mean it. Lots of it. Cops on my tail. Any ideas?"

"Head out of state. Find a diner. Start a fire, like Larry and me used to talk about. Get new clothes. Get another car somehow. Hit the road and don't look back."

Stogy always had been the "thinker," to use the term loosely, of the two of us. "I'll be in touch."

"How about you? Are you a Turtle?"

"You bet your sweet ass I am."

"Who are you really?"

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Outside of Waukesha, I turned into a...truck stop. I bought a new pair of blue jeans and an ill-fitting shirt. I bathed and shaved as best I could. In the dining area I chose a booth.

A plump but not fat young waitress in a stained pink jumper and white apron glassed, cast a glance in my direction, then turned away. I caught her looking again, pressing a wisp of oily, brassy hair back into her “bun” as she did so. Not bad, I thought to myself, but she’s got to get herself a make-over. She brought me a menu and said she guessed I was just passing through. I replied, “Not if all the women here are cool as you.”

“Where’s your rig?”

“Don’t have one. I’m a...dentist. Joined my dad’s practice in...Green Bay. That’s my kid brother’s rattletrap outside. My car is a Thunderbird. In the shop.”

“You look awfully young—”

“It’s probably the jeans. See me in my...smock with a drill in my hand and you’ll believe, you’ll believe.”

She bit the tip of her tongue and let me see her do it. “You have a nice smile—I guess you would. How about dinner, if you can hang around? Not this garbage, but home cooking? I get off at five. You could walk—I live right over there.” She pointed to a dilapidated house whose frayed canvas awnings flapped woefully. “I’ll leave first, then you follow if you want. Park in back. I don’t need these busybodies sticking their noses into my personal life. Cream and sugar?”

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Gurgling with beer and breathing but immobile, the body of David Sciubba lay sprawled across Margaret Newcombe's bed as though it had fallen through the roof from a plane. The aged box spring still chirped like a cage full of crickets.

In addition to much of what Sciubba had held in his head upon his departure from the diner, I now knew a great deal about brewing coffee, waiting tables, making change, getting tipped, suckling.

I had been right about Margaret's potential: The rouge, powder and lipstick I put on worked wonders. I combed out my hair, discarding the doughnut-shaped plastic-mesh and wire-spring gizmo that had been imbedded in it, and drew it into a frisky ponytail. The Sciubba body began to rouse itself, so I quickly gathered up several pieces of clothing, stuffed a suitcase and chugged my car, a rusty Pontiac, across the road.

"Evening, there," I said to the night cook, having no notion of his name. His eyes wide as two of 'em sunny, he waved. "Evening, Darlene," I said to one of the other waitresses on duty. Kate, a cipher to me, was not going to be coming in, I was informed. "Did either of you see a compact around here anywhere?" They of course had not.

"No, Peg, I didn't."

So I was known as Peg, not Margaret, in spite of the badge pinned to the bumper jack...the jumper, that is, back at the house.

"You look nice tonight. You wouldn't have a date, would you?"

"I wish. No, I have to pick up Gordie from my mom-in-law—she's not feeling well—and take him to Ed's. Staying in town with Judy. Be back tomorrow for the noon crowd. Would you make up something for me? Hot fudge sundae in a cup to go? And a Pepsi. I'll man the register till Nancy gets back."

Everything contained in that paragraph had come to me at the instant I spoke the words. Seeing no dubious reaction from either of my coworkers, I assumed it had all made sense to them.

My son stayed with his grandmother during the day. There was an "Ed." My son's father? My ex-husband? And a friend, or a sister—yes, sister—named Judy living in town.

Amazing.

I made a point to save the thought: I could learn much about each newly assumed self by listening carefully to what came out of its mouth.

Keeping one eye on the house across the highway, I filled a mug with coffee and lit the corner of a greasy rag with a match. I flipped the cloth into a bin which contained used paper napkins and sauntered to the register. Business had been good. (How come I never got a raise?) I piled up the twenties and tens and fives and ones. Then I shouted “Fire!” and let things take their course. While scampering toward the rear exit, I turned to see Nancy, Darlene and their customers battling the blaze.

My take: six-hundred-thirteen dollars.

I reached for my wallet, then realized I had no wallet in my pocket, no pockets in my jeans, and no jeans.

I was wearing pedal pushers. Split at the seams.

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Funny, the mistakes I made when I was a beginner. I thought my talent was a way to accumulate wealth, and it was, temporarily. The first few times I shifted into the body of someone who had money, I bashed to the...I dashed to the bank and withdrew his or her every cent. (I could not always dredge up a signature that exactly duplicated the one on file, but I usually got by. This worked best when I was able to stop dithering about it, stop thinking about it, shut my eyes and let the writing write itself, Zen-like.) I spent all of the cash on new clothes. Within days, given a chance to shift again, I did so, and the fashionable new articles of attire were useless.

Buy a sports car? A speed boat? A motorcycle? A mink coat? All feasible, provided I retained any one identity long enough to enjoy the purchase. Most often, I chose to shift, leaving the automobile—now registered to an individual generally incapable of driving—or the yacht or the bike or the fur to my past body's next of kin.

I once tried storing currency in an airport locker for later, post-shift retrieval. It was stolen or confiscated before I could get back to it. I had forgotten where—in which pocket or purse, with which body—I had left the key.

What hurts is that for decades I was not able to take along with me anything other than disjointed memories to mark my progress. No scrapbooks. No souvenirs on a mantel. No memorabilia of any kind for a nomad such as I.

That all changed with the opening of the Patricia Lorraine Mattingly Memorial Foundation.

I am getting ahead of myself.

CHECKING ON THE FOUNDATION. CHECKING, CHECKING, CHECKING. JESUS! SCREEN AFTER SCREEN. I NEVER PAID MUCH ATTENTION TO IT, BUT IT'S BEEN A BIG DEAL NATIONWIDE AND INTERNATIONALLY FOR GOING ON 40 YEARS.

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Lori Anne Griffin had looked to newly ordained Father Jerome Peter O'Neill for guidance during her scary confirmation in nineteen-sixty-five. She had grown into adolescence half-listening to the youthful priest's rambling sermons every Sunday morning since then, paying scant attention to him either spiritually or physically. But Lori Griffin experienced a change of heart when an enlarged consciousness seized her rapidly "developing," as the vernacular has it, body. Overnight, I—that is, the new, improved Lori Anne—took great interest in everything Father O'Neill had to offer.

The occasion was an activity of the Saint Mary's High School Youth Group. Students had organized a car wash in the parking lot adjacent to the school in Arlington Heights, Illinois. All the members of the group, including myself, had dressed appropriately for the outing: in shorts and swimsuits. I was wearing a football jersey long enough to almost pass for a modest dress. Beneath it, I wore underpants only.

Father O'Neill was out of uniform: He had donned Bermudas and a knit shirt, which showcased his All-State gymnast's build. With a glance at him I lost interest in all the moist little boys in my midst. I made certain whenever O'Neill was near to have my T-shirt become saturated, ensuring that my large, ouchy-hard nipples would protrude prominently from under the clinging fabric.

He came by to talk. I expected an admonishing speech about "decency" and an order that I go home for more clothing. It proved instead to be a compliment, spoken through unmoving lips as if by a ventriloquist: "Growing up pretty fast, there, aren't we?"

Pretty. Fast. Wheel!

I had hoped to see Father O'Neill again that evening at Buffalo Grove Days, a festival held in the next-door suburb each summer, and I did.

Out of sight of my parents, I had left the house in my tightest, most abbreviated cutoffs and bow-tied halter.

Under the Ferris wheel to our left and with hot-dog and cotton-candy vendors to our right, O'Neill and I wove our way through infected, through insect-infested beams of electric light and the commotion of romping children, discussing how things had been going for me with school. (He seemed particularly interested in my shower-room shenanigans.) Those youngsters and their parents alike greeted my man with respectful recognition, for he was wearing his collar at the time.

Father O'Neill repeatedly lost control of his eyes, which zoomed up and down along my roller coaster of a bosom. Each time, he would turn away, probably to beg forgiveness for his trespasses, then be drawn back.

To him I was temptation personified.

The words he cried out in a whisper, taking the lame, the name of the gourd, the name of the Lord thy God in vain, as he lay atop me in the dewy weeds of the surrounding forest preserve moments later sounded exactly like prayer.

What does a man in a priest suit do with the wailing, thrashing body of a sixteen-year-old girl which he has for all intents and purposes plowed into the topsoil? Here is what I did: I genuflected, kneeling down gently on its shin...on its neck with one shin until its convulsions came to an end.

Leaves and old newspaper would keep it hidden until I could return.

Taking the long way around, I skirted the dwindling groups of revelers and jogged to an intersection where I was recognized and given a lift by a matronly parishioner. She took me to Saint Mary's. There I changed from one suit into its crisper twin, packed some casual clothing, wrote a note and picked up a car.

Over the curb and across the field I drove to where Lori Griffin's body lay as I had left it: face up, eyes open. At any other time this might have attracted attention, or a citation, but amid all the other vehicles strewn about the site, the presence of mine parked haphazardly was not seen as peculiar.

I half-dragged, half-carried the unclothed body to the car and stuffed it into the trunk, along with shorts and halter. I drove and drove until I reached Paradise.

Michigan.

Paradise, Michigan.

This minuscule community some sixty miles northwest of the Straits of Mackinac was and is the only settlement of any size in the proximity of Tahquamenon Falls, a tourist attraction during the day but an unlighted wilderness at night.

After dark I took off my priest clothes and folded them neatly. Using a tire iron like a hammer and a slab of slate like an anvil, I smashed the body's fin-

gertips until they were mush. In a craftsmanlike manner I tapped out as many of its teeth as I could while fighting off clouds of voracious mosquitoes. I tossed cutoffs and top and teeth down into the churning water. Moments later I shoved the body over too, but not before ramming the point of the tire iron as far as I could up inside it.

This high degree of mutilation, a first for me, would appear to be the work of a servant of Satan, not a man of the cloth.

In the moonlight I scrubbed my hands under the spigot of an artesian well, put on clean slacks and shirt and followed directions on a billboard to “rustic roadside cottages.”

From the office of the manager I phoned in to Saint Mary’s at daybreak. Everyone at the rectory believed me when I said I had traveled to the home of a sickly parent, for I could have done so easily: Celeste O’Neill, my aging mother, resided in Paradise.

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Near Milwaukee, my massive, midnight-blue barge of a Lincoln veered off course and did its own steering like the pointer of a Ouija board westward, toward Madison, toward Monona.

I stopped at a sandwich shop to change back into my black priest's suit. I can only guess what prompted me to do this: It offered closure; it was another "washing of the hands," a method of distancing myself from the grisly activities up north. I felt and looked pious, especially when I bowed my head to say grace over ham and cheddar.

Madison and all area communities had grown dramatically since my relocation—the population of Monona had increased by a factor of five—but I was able to find Stogy's neighborhood and his parents' house as quickly as if I had never left.

A boy about Lori's age came to the door. Surprisingly well-groomed. Strange as it may sound, I thought this was my friend of many years ago. I had been through a great deal; was I in shock?

"Stogy?" I said.

I could not believe how much my pal had changed...and how little. I had expected him to look nearly fifty, which is how old he should have been. Another shifter? Maybe everyone in town exhibited some form of paranormal powers.

"Who? No one here by that name. Sorry, mister—ah, Father. I believe you've got the wrong—"

"Walt?"

"You want my dad? Come in."

I REMEMBER THIS MEETING NOW AS IF I READ ABOUT IT SOMEWHERE.

A frail-looking man with coarse graying hair sat low in a thread chair...in a threadbare easy chair in front of a portable black-and-white television set, half watching, half dozing in its blue glow. As his head fell back and his mouth fell open, I could see that he was in possession of fewer teeth than was the body of Lori Anne Griffin.

A half-smoked cigarette seemed ready in seconds to get a rise out of him anyway, so I said, “Stogy? Better either finish that or put it out.”

“What the hell...sorry, Father. What’re you doin’ here? Waddia want? What did you call me?”

“I wanted to say hello.”

The boy left us alone, no doubt wondering whether his dad’s health was worse than he had been told.

“Hey, you stupid shit,” I said, “are you a Turtle?”

“What’s going on? How would you know what Larry used to call me? He’s been dead since forty-nine. What did he do?—leave a diary behind or something?”

“Answer the question.”

“You bet your sweet ass I am. Sorry about that, Father, it’s the rule. Now, either tell me what you want or leave. I’m not Catholic.”

“There’s more.”

“To what?”

“You always say, ‘you piss face.’” He squinted at me and swiped the corners of his mouth with the back of a gnarled hand. “Have you got a beer, Stogy?”

We sat on his front porch for an hour, me attempting to tell him my story, he attempting to accept it.

“Listen,” I said near the end, “I can remember practically everything you and I did together. The time we hanged that rabbit with fishing line?—how it looked like it was trying to fuck the tree? The time we poked that garter snake’s eyes out with a bobby pin to find—”

“Larry told you that? I didn’t tell nobody. It’s not the kind of thing comes up in polite conversation.”

“And do you remember the phone call about twenty-five years ago, from the guy who said he was Larry Hibbs and needed money? Yes? No? Well, it doesn’t matter—that was me, too. Nobody told me any of this. I’m Larry Hibbs, in a manner of speaking. I’m also a lot of other people. Do you remember that girl?”

“Which girl?”

“Patty. The one Larry raped in the ditch? The one you met behind the old barn one day the summer after? The one who seemed to be leading you there, turning around every so often to make sure you were following?”

“Patty? No.”

“The one who said, ‘I still want to be friends’?”

“No.”

“The one who lifted up her dress and said, ‘You can touch it once but that’s all’? That was me, too.”

“No. No. Hell no. Too...just too...”

“Face it, man.”

“I was confused there for a while, but it’s all clear to me now: You’re Larry Hibbs. And a girl named Patty. A football player. And a priest goes by the name O’Neill. Who else?—everybody?”

“Yes and no. But to make things simple, I’ll call myself Larry. Oh, and you don’t have to ask: I’m a Turtle. You bet your sweet ass I am.”

Before climbing back into my limousine, I handed Stogy three hundred-six dollars and fifty cents. “Your share of the loot from the diner,” I said. “It worked like a charm. *Dominus vobiscum.*”

“Hah?”

“You’re supposed to say, ‘*Et cum spiritu tuo.*’”

“Izzat the Turtle thing in priest talk?”

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When I can, I prefer to shift in a hotel room reserved in my name. Thus I need do next to nothing with the old body on my way out—I simply leave. (If it remains docile, that is.) The body left behind is that of the person in whose name the room was reserved. Right? The new body I occupy is unrecognized by the hotel staff. I make sure no one sees me exit any room. Then I am on my carefree way.

If I must do the shifting at home, I arrange for it to be the home of my new acquaintance. After the shift, that home is mine. I must only encourage, shall we say, the old body to vacate the premises, and I can get on with my life. I have clothes to try on, food to snack on, books to peruse, records to play, a car in the driveway, plenty of time to make plans.

The first few hours I spend in my new house or apartment are usually immensely enjoyable. I find out things about my new self that surprise me, amuse me, sadden me—much as performance art, a potion, a motion picture or a novel can elicit otherwise-unfelt emotion. I am likely to discover proof of riches, a fascinating occupation or engrossing family hardships. (Sometimes I have been alerted to health problems which I might otherwise have overlooked.) As thoroughly as I can I go through closets, cabinets, moldy boxes stored in basements and garages, wastebaskets—anything that helps me develop some sense of personal history.

“Now that you have destroyed me,” began the electronic-mail message, “I can’t help but wonder how you feel. Got what you want, finally? Proud of what you did, are you?”

“You cunt.”

The address at the top read, “To: margay-at-IX-dot-netcom-dot-com.” The writer’s own email moniker did not, as it is said, ring a bell.

“You told me I couldn’t give you what you needed anymore. You said you had a whole new life waiting. You said it was too much work living with me. Well, now you’ve got a bigger job—you’re going to have to live with yourself. Have fun.

“I only wish I could find a way to hurt you the way you’ve hurt me. You need to know how it feels to be stepped on. Something sneaky, so you’d never know how it happened. I would like to ruin you. I want the world to see you for what you are—a phony from the tits up.

“Your head is so full of lies that you’re convinced I’m the one who’s wrong here. You don’t know you’re lying to yourself right now, that’s how screwed up you are. Deep denial, cupcake. That’s what happens to people who lie twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week—they lose touch with reality. The truth is I never did anything to deserve what you did to me. You don’t care, and that’s why I know you’re fucked for all time.

“See ya.

“P.S.,” the message read in conclusion, “My heart is breaking. Does this mean I love you still?”

Part of me wanted to reply, if only to determine whom it was that “margay,” Marcia Lynne Gaydos, had “destroyed” and how. Part of me wanted to inform the writer that he need not continue to obsess about his destruction at the hands of Marci Gaydos or plot a way to ruin her, for she had slit her wrists. I gave in to that part of me.

Marcia Lynne Gaydos: Many Yogi calendars. Real agony dynamics. Lady saying romance. I like the sound of the third anagram best, but the second is closer to the truth.

ANAGRAMS. HE’S EITHER DOING THIS IN HIS HEAD AS HE SPEAKS THE NAMES OR HE’S FIGURED IT OUT AHEAD OF TIME. IT LOOKS AS THOUGH HE’S DOING IT AS HE GOES. I LIKE ANAGRAMS TOO. MAYBE I’LL CALL UP SOME EXTRA SOFTWARE AND PLAY ALONG.

A little history goes a long way. I do not need it in great quantity, really, since the greatest pleasure in assuming a new body is not in dwelling on its past but in creating its present, if only for a week or so.

Its future? I have, for the most part, not concerned myself with such matters.

Beverly Ellenwood was a veterinarian, having skills I felt I would never use—why would I? I did not report for work at the animal hospital. I did not care much for her decorating style or her sleepy suburb, so I moved. Why stay?—to sit there and read *Better Homes and Gardens*? No, I used her looks and outgoing personality to clut about—Hah!—to flit about the community, being wined and dined, being taken to plays and clubs, until, within days, I grew tired of myself and ordered a subordinate to report for duty.

Marci Gaydos had both a body and a talent that were superlative. So I retained them, worked with them, strove to fully utilize them; settled in for a lengthy stay and stayed.

Again, I digress.

FOUND A DOZEN MARCIA L. GAYDOSES SO FAR. I'LL NEED A LOCATION TO FIGURE OUT WHICH ONE OF THEM THIS IS.

GOT FR. O'NEILL. GYMNAST AS STATED. HIS DEATH SEEMS TO HAVE BEEN A BIG DEAL IN NORTHWEST CHICAGOLAND.

WHY WOULD JAIL-BAIT SEXPOT LORI GRIFFIN HAVE "SHIFTED" INTO A PRIEST? HOW MUCH FUN COULD THAT HAVE BEEN?

You might be asking, Why a priest?

For some years I had been pondering whether there might be a supernatural explanation for what I was. I remembered being taught in Patty Mattingly's school and later in Lori Griffin's that Roman Catholics believed in angels, saints and transubstantiation—the concept of bread and wine at Mass, through the sacrament of the Holy Eucharist, becoming the Body and Blood of Christ. Catholics are required to believe this is not a figurative but a literal change. Many say they do believe, even though, by any test conducted, the bread and wine would be found to be *bread*, for Christ's sake, and *wine*. Catholics believe in the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin bodily into heaven. *Bodily*. They read stories about statues that cry tears of blood, and they believe. They heard that the visage of Mother Teresa had been found in a baked good's swirls of cinnamon, and they believed. Having accepted over time an onerous philosophy, Catholics continued to search for proof that it was worth the trouble. And because only Catholics looked for such signs, only Catholics, self-affirmingly, could see them for what they were when found. They wanted, needed, accepted and professed to understand the unknowable. I felt a priest could help.

I was disappointed. What someone oft-quoted had once said proved true. I paraphrase: "If God were a fact, there would be no need for faith." Jerome O'Neill filled me with faith, for a time, but no appreciable factual explanations for anything whatsoever. The more I questioned the O'Neill ideology, the more I heard myself answering with muddled mumbo-jumbo the likes of "Blessed are those who believe without seeing." Fact as not the friend but foe of faith had been a Roman Catholic mindset for two millennia, I reminded myself.

Silly me.

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At Advent, as if in a vision, Susan Donna Campanello appeared one Sunday morning during Holy Communion. Her form-fitting skirt was inappropriately short for an audience with John Paul Two, but was not considered scandalous by the liberal upper-class congregation of Saint Mary's. She wore patent-leather spikes as evil as thorns. Her thick, meticulously coifed hair was Sacred-Heart red. A ring on her finger the size of the pope's.

When I spoke the words, "The Body of Christ," she closed her eyes and parted her lips to accept the Host. Everyone else in line had done something similar, but when Susan Campanello lingered before me in that pose, her slippery, beckoning tongue haloed by a ray of sunshine, my penis rose—oh, saints preserve us!—heavenward under my vestments. She took in the wafer and held it, massaged it until I began to melt along with it, and then swallowed. Before turning away, she glazed into my gazed-over eyes with a look of fervent hope.

Annual moon landscapes—that is one anagram for Donna's full name.

WELL, I'M A BIT DISTRACTED BY ALL THE MASSAGING AND THE SWALLOWING, BUT MY SOFTWARE ISN'T: ANOMALOUS CANNED PLANS IS ANOTHER.

"Bless me, Father, for I have sinned," she said.

The physiognomy of the woman was hidden from me by the cross-hatch Masonite privacy screen between us. I was, however, able to recognize the back-lighted bouffant hairdo. The sinner was Susan.

"My last confession was one week ago."

"Yes, my child."

"Father, I have been having impure thoughts about a man who is not my husband."

"Have you f—...have you carried this beyond thoughts?"

"Oh, no, Father!"

"Is this man married also?"

"No, never."

"How did you come to know him?"

"In church, Father."

"A parishioner, then."

"Not exactly. A priest."

"My child, this is infatuation. It is a sin, but it is, as they go, not a mortal sin...so far. This happens. The priest represents authority—a father figure—as well as purity, kindness, respectability, safety. Adults and children alike—"

"The priest is you."

"Mary, Mother of God!" I exhaled, barely concealing my elation. "Has this infatuation affected your marriage?" She insisted it had not. I told her to banish all fantasies about us, to trust in the Holy Rosary for inner peace. I informed her of her penance, which I kept light, and, as is *de rigueur*, I demanded of her a good Act of Contrition. In conclusion, before blessing her a final time, I spoke, *soto voce*, "Call the rectory. I believe we should discuss this face to face."

Susan sat with fingers intertwined in her lap, shapely legs crossed at the knee, listening politely, as I skated anxiously around the room in figure eights, lecturing her by rote about the Church's incontrovertible stand on marital fidelity. I concluded my harangue and placed a parental hand on her shoulder. She grasped my fingers and drew them to her lips, and from there to the vicinity of a rapidly pounding heart.

I lingered long enough to determine that she wore under her sleeveless cotton sweater a brassiere of Spandex purely for the sake of propriety to compress her nipples and not for support, since, being especially firm, her breasts needed nothing of the sort.

Did that come out right?

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Bondage: a workable idea only half the time for someone like me. I can allow myself to be bound prior to a shift, you understand, but I cannot do the binding. I am sure by now you have already figured this out. I had to learn it the hard way.

We met at a Holiday Inn in Libertyville the next Sunday immediately following eleven-thirty Mass, after I had changed into civilian garb.

The game we played was surpassingly arousing for both of us. I pretended to be inexperienced in what was to come and Susan Campanello pretended to have enough experience for us both. She knew more than she pretended; I knew less. I asked her to teach me, and she taught me much.

While Susan fussed unnecessarily with the bedclothes—folding back the blankets just so, rearranging the pillows—I went to the bathroom. There I found two versions of a leather device: a collar to which was attached a pair of inch-wide straps, each of which ended in a cuff. One of these devices, larger than the other, I took to be intended for wearing about the waist, with the cuffs secured around the ankles. The smaller of the two seemed sized appropriately for neck and wrists.

I scooped up the sinister contraptions. “Where in the world did you get—”

Susan had lain back upon the bed and draped herself with a sheet. “I have sinned,” she said to me. “And I am about to sin again. I must be punished.” She threw back the fabric to show me she was wearing nothing save a pair of tall, black spikes. A riding crop lay at her side.

Following her instructions, I buckled and snapped, running each strap of the arm restraint around a slat in the headboard, getting caught up thoroughly in the ceremonial aspect of it. The waist-and-ankle companion piece brought her feet up to within inches of her taut buttocks and constrained them there, with the barbs of her shoes threatening to slice through the mattress.

Prior to reserving the room, I had parked at a Kmart, where I had bought gift supplies, rope, duct tape and a utility knife. I had wrapped the rope, tape and knife up in a box topped with a bow. (“Did you bring a present for me?”

Susan had asked as would a child. I had replied, as would a parent, “We’ll see,” and added, “if you’re good.” To that Susan had responded, “Oh, I’m good.”)

That was thinking ahead. The experiment with packaging, you might say, of a sadomasochistic kind, however, was not.

The naked, spent body of the man lying between my aching legs appeared devoid of life until I felt its hot, labored cheek against my breath.

I strained at the straps of the lower harness. I tried with all my might to straighten my legs, intent on forcing the snaps to open, without success.

Using my thighs, I rolled the priest’s body over to the side. I worked my thighs and hips with what motion the lower harness allowed, ratcheting the body away from me and off the bed with a crash. As it fell, one of its arms made contact with the night stand and sent the telephone flying.

Within moments I heard the voice of a dutiful motel operator on the line. I cried out for a servant—female if possible—while trying to sound unperturbed.

You cannot fathom my embarrassment when help arrived. I blamed my condition on the perverted kidnapper in my room, but the maid was not duped into thinking I had been an unwilling participant.

She unbuckled the harnesses, muttering to herself as she did so, “Jesus, Mary and Joseph; Jesus, Mary and Joseph.” Meanwhile, I tried to convince her that the man on the floor was only drunk and management need not be called.

Just then the body of Jerome O’Neill flopped over from prone to supine, exposing its face.

The housekeeper exclaimed, “Father!”

What ensued was a tussle between two women of roughly equal, diminutive, size.

From behind her I struggled to cover her mouth with the palm of my hand, at the same time trying to pull in her flailing arms. She spun out of my embrace. I swung a fist no bigger than a walnut at her jaw and connected. The effect was trivial. She fell back, not yelling but hissing and spitting, cursing me in a language that was not English, looking for something with which to attack. She found only the crop.

I was amazed to see that throughout all this I was still in possession of my shoes.

A woman’s spike heel can be a most deadly weapon. Held by the toe like a hammer, heel forward, and brought down quickly with a whipping wrist of the...that should be “flick of the wrist.” Brought down quickly with a whipping flick of the wrist, its small-diameter tip can penetrate human flesh—at the

throat in particular—to a depth of more than an inch. It can even puncture a skull at the temple.

(It would have helped if I had always been male when trying this.)

Now, however, I was within arm's length of a tool that would surely prove more effective.

I find it humorous to think I had to unwrap a jolly-looking box in order to fetch it.

I remember how the housekeeper dropped everything to watch.

Presently I am visualizing what might have happened had knowledge of the item inside the pretty paper not made the shift. I might have stared at the package, as puzzled as the maid, and not bothered to tear it open.

In four tries, I was able to drag the blade of the utility knife across her windpipe, then jugular vein. She collapsed, blushing...gushing blood rhythmically and profusely, onto the bed. Watching her die, I came to the realization that "packing" a weapon in preparation for each future shift would be prudent. I would have to be the first to get to it.

Turnabout being fair play, I bound the spasmodic, naked body of the priest hand and foot with the rope which had been so thoughtfully provided.

All clergymen babble inanely, but this one babbled more and louder than most. I sealed its mouth shut with tape.

I went over my Sunday-best clothing for signs of distress, showered, tidied up the room as well as I could and made ready to stroll across the street to the shopping center where the Campanello Jaguar was waiting.

Have you heard anyone scream through his or her nose? It can be gratingly annoying, like the braying of a mad donkey. Fortunately, I had plenty of tape left.

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Did I not take a big chance in leaving things as they were in the motel room? Would it not have been more wise for me to have let the priest live, in some limited capacity, and make it look as though he had done the murdering? How did Susan Campanello get away with it?

I hope you are asking these questions, for they are good ones.

In hindsight, perhaps I should have covered my tracks, as they say, better than I did before leaving the Holiday Inn that afternoon—the motel manager and any number of motorists might well have seen a flaming redhead cross the road against fishtailing vehicular traffic and accelerate off in a flashy European automobile, and would have been able to describe both said redhead and her car to the police in laudable detail. But think about it: Who could have been a less-likely suspect than Susan Donna Campanello? The police might have questioned me as a possible witness, but they would have never considered taking me into custody. What could they have established as a motive for the commission of so heinous a crime by so respectable a personage as Susan? Why would—how could—*anyone*, for that matter, enter a motel room without sign of force, slash a maid to death, tie up a man, a priest, yet—again without sign of force...and then kill him, through suffocation? *Sacré bleu!*—I have trouble imagining law-enforcement authorities pursuing any “leads” which might have suggested Susan Campanello’s involvement in any way.

What I do, you see, does not make sense.

THAT’S FOR SURE.

Not even to me.

“UNSOLVED,” ACCORDING TO THE RECORDS. “CASE CLOSED.”

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I would not have been able to acknowledge Eugene Monte Campanello as my husband had I not shoveled through my handbag on my way home. There I found a wallet-size photograph of him, torn in two.

He appeared diffident, indifferent as I entered the house by way of the front door that Sunday afternoon. I had had no choice, for I had not been able to locate the garage door remote control anywhere in the Jag. Gene had also come in recently, wearing sparkling tennis togs. He spoke not a word as he bounded the stairs. I thought as I watched him go that he could have been returning from a tryst of his own, and I would never shed a tear over his unfaithfulness.

Susan Campanello, I knew, was a “trophy” wife to this man, who appeared to be in his early, admirably fit, sixties. He had won Susan with his money and elevated palaver and had used her chiefly as a showpiece over the past decade or so. The kids, too, I decided as I snooped for liquor, had been conceived and raised for the looks of it—at least from Gene’s point of view.

I had come upon a photo of the children in my purse also, but I had not been able to call up their names. Assuming they would soon be returning from a birthday picnic, I went looking in the den and their rooms for tips. Gene Junior and Tracy. Fine-featured—having inherited their mother’s nose rather than their father’s—pip-squeaks with curly brown hair sprouting. Potential irritants, mostly.

I did not recognize either one when they burst into the house for dinner: The portrait must have been five years old.

A distant, self-absorbed, quite possibly drunken mom did not strike them as anything out of the ordinary.

I decided my new, oversized, garishly ostentatious home would be a commodious launching pad for a variety of small adventures in preparation for another shift. I could do what I wanted, when I wanted, until something longer...not longer, necessarily, but better. Until something better came along.

One thing I would not do, I told myself sternly, was allow Gene to manhandle me into bed. I would kill him before I would let that happen, though I knew there was no way he could bring me to orgasm.

The thought seemed not to cross his mind.

We seldom interacted on any level. When we did converse, the talk was usually forced upon us by some minor calamity (a car needing repair, our son's sprained ankle) or preparations for a party. These were my chores, and I did not protest. I had virtually nothing else to do that could have been termed such: A prissy butler cleaned house and cooked for the children and for me; Gene always dined elsewhere.

I spent my abundant spare time with sports including golf (I won a tournament), socializing with others of my echelon as we organized charitable events and working out regularly at a spa. I met many notable men and women along the way, checking off those whom I might possibly want to meet again.

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The backyard of the lakefront Highland Park Campanello manor contained an Olympic-size in-ground pool, which was secluded from all but low-flying “traffi-copter” pilots by a twelve-foot redwood fence. Inside its confines I regularly sunbathed, with rock-and-roll music blaring from a battery-operated radio, acquiring a deep, all-over tan.

This was before the threat of skin cancer began sending people running for cover. Had I known then what I know now...I still would have baked myself.

Yet in most ways I take great care of the body I possess. I nurture it, pamper it as though it were a beloved pet. Any body that ceases pleasing me for a health-related reason is expendable. But I am motivated by upward progress. No downward slide...unless nothing else will work. I have been less daring geographically and physically than you might have expected and than I might have liked because illness and injury are to be avoided. So too are intoxicants in excess.

I will assume that you have at one time or another imbibed too much alcohol, have driven yourself home in a greatly inebriated state, and the next morning have had no memory of the trip. So too have I awakened the morning after a binge, in the bed of a stranger, in the body of that stranger, without recollection of how I got there.

Gene engaged me in a stilted, thoroughly demeaning conversation one weekend midday as I say in the shun...as I lay in the sun on a chaise. Before proceeding to make demands of my time for the sake of an upcoming fundraiser which we were to host, he asked—no, he ordered—me to put something on. It was not prudishness but jealousy that controlled him: He saw my youth and beauty as abrasive reminders of his own advancing age. Although I would not have had to, I clutched a straw hat to my belly and a plastic placemat to my chest like a performer in a burleycue. Only then did he face me squarely. His exhaustions were instructive.

The extravagant get-together at our estate would involve socialites, business associates and more than a few local luminaries, including several professional sports figures who had recently surmounted all obstacles laid in their path by

village bigots and purchased homes within a throne's, a stone's throw of ours—"nouveau riche niggers," Gene called them, so eloquent. I marked each step in the planning as he verbalized it, conveying my comprehension with a sharp nod. When he finished, I told him I would look forward to the event. This seemed to upset him, as though he would have preferred me to take no pleasure. Then he said, "Watch yourself," and jabbed a manicured fingernail into my upper arm. Sneering, I shrank away. "You heard me," he added, and stalked off through the gate.

"Oh, Gene," I called out, "one question." I stood and tossed hat and mat aside with an ecdysiast's flourish. "How about 'Come as you are'?"

"REAL-ESTATE DEVELOPER EUGENE M. CAMPANELLO (FOOT ON SPADE), PREPARES TO BREAK GROUND FOR A NEW INDUSTRIAL PARK TO BE CONSTRUCTED..."

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Our lushly landscaped lot, the clinking, the lapping, the stars, the moon, the reflection of the women's glittery gowns in the azure blue and the elegant understatement of the geometric tuxedos juxtaposed into an incredibly stimulating gathering. I mingled well, chatting with everyone in turn, including the otherworldly, incomprehensible black men, whom I found most appreciative of my attention.

The band I had hired played superbly. I was asked to dance by a large, good-looking, divorced psychiatrist from Evanston named Phil Overbaugh. He reacted to my acceptance with a start and an exaggeratedly furtive roll of the eyeballs. I waltzed with him, closely but not well. He laughed at my lack of skill; I laughed at myself and his laughter. When the number came to an end, he was mine...or could have been.

At two the next morning, Gene Campanello tore my door off its hinges storming in. He was drunk, still dragging around most of his tux, and so cabernet-colored above the neck that I might have been audience to coronary arrest.

He grabbed me by the hair and nearly pulled me out of the filigreed chair I sat in applying Oil of Olay. He sputtered something about the end of flirting for once and for all and delivered a well-practiced backhand to my face. The blow was severe. My nose began to bleed, and I began to sob.

I wore the contusion with pride. Although I made up a story about slipping at the pool, I fully expected my friends and neighbors to see through that and recognize my injury for what it was.

Did I have my revenge?

Have you come to know me in the least?

I pressed Gene Campanello's fingerprints into Gene Junior's aluminum baseball bat, the very night of Gene's attack, as he stored...snored. I stored it under my bed.

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We finished our second and third daiquiris poolside, the lean and chiseled Mark Carson Asplund and I. Setting down his glass, Mark nuzzled me...no, he nuzzled me, as horses nuzzle. I heard myself go, "Mmm, mmm, mmm." Gently he touched his lips to mine, his hands now resting on my hips. We strolled arm in arm to the house.

In the bedroom he spun me around so he could toss up my hair and kiss the blades of my bare shoulders. I took my tresses up into my hands in assistance, freeing his to slide to my sides, to my waist and around to my belly. From there they slid downward farther, and I moaned. Again at my neck, his fingers converged on the zipper of my mini-dress. Mark ran the tab down. He clutched the fabric and swept it up over my head. I attempted to face him, but his strong hands firmly disallowed this. Kneeling, he steadied me with his left hand while using his right to grasp the heel of my espadrille. He slipped it off, then removed the other. Rising to his feet he kissed my bottom and my back. From behind, he unclasped my brassiere. I hugged it to myself for a moment—only a moment—until he wriggled it away. His fingers played upon my breasts adoringly. He crouched to draw down my panties. From that position he pushed one side of me and pulled the other, rotating me, kissing me all the while. I inched my feet apart as he pressed his warm palms into my goose-pimpled buttocks, burying his face in me. He rose to his feet, along the way running his tongue to my navel, a nipple, my mouth. With utmost tenderness he bruised my...kissed my bruises.

Mark lifted me up in his arms without sign of strain and carried me the five feet or so from where we had been standing to my bed.

"You have way too many clothes on," I told him. With his eyes sprinting along my body, he stripped for me.

On that sunny weekday afternoon I satisfied three goals: I left Susan Campanello's battered body, I replaced it with that of a professional fitness trainer to the upper class, and I set Eugene Monte Campanello up like a tee on a ball—ball on a tee—for a turbulent flight into the rough.

Having wrapped my hands in the dress, I retrieved the bat and employed all of Mark Asplund's strength to crack the skull of Susan Campanello's dormant body open like a cantaloupe with a single, grand-slam swing.

I placed a call to Gene's office, introducing myself as Susan's lawyer and demanding a meeting at the Campanello residence in minutes. I assumed this would send Gene into a rage, and it did: He shouted his intent to drive home within the hour. I also phoned the police and told them I thought I had heard screams emanating from the Campanello residence.

Originally, I had planned to run and shift. I knew Susan's body would be examined for indications of recent sexual activity and that the semen of Mark Carson Asplund would be found in it. But I saw great opportunity in the physique and abilities I currently possessed. What to do?

While still unclothed in Susan's bedroom, with one knee resting on the filigreed chair, I made yet another quick call.

"Hey, you stupid shit, are you a Turtle?"

"You bet your sweet ass I am, you piss face." Stogy's reply was shaky but correct. "What do you look like now?" he asked me. "How come you never call when you got a sexy woman voice?"

"I'll do that," I said. I described myself by saying, "Everything is tight, Adonis-like, you know—"

"A *what* like?"

"Never mind. I'm in kind of a jam here, Stogy." I hurriedly took him through the news of the day. "I'm thinking I'd better get going and find another body—"

"What's the rush? If you look like you say you do, you'll have twats lined up around the block. The wops got a pool in the back, you say? Ya know what I'd do if I was you? Leave my clothes right there with the dead bitch and go for a swim. Great day for it. Just be sure the mister don't see you before he sees the wife or before the cops come. Hell, with any luck, they'll nab him in the bedroom, staring down at her. Sounds like the perfect crime to me. Real 'Alfred Hitchcock Show.'"

HIS FAVORITE.

In fact, it worked out better than that.

On my way out of the house, I draped dress over bat and left them leaning in a corner midway up the two-tier staircase.

Gene, the fool, answered the front door with gory cudgel in hand. He had inspected the corpse upstairs and thus had collected blood, as a bee collects pollen, on the monogrammed cuff of his shirt.

While the police loitered in the vestibule awaiting backup, I allowed them to see me swagger from the rear of the house, naked and toweling, then abruptly stop. “My God!” I exclaimed to them, prompting Gene to spin around and stare at me malignantly. He raised the bat most aggressively but was speedily restrained.

I learned a great deal from my experience with the Campanellos. One, I wanted a place to settle down into, to think of as home. Two, I wanted money—money I could save, store up somewhere—with which I could begin to purchase the trappings of accomplishment that my efforts over the past decades should have won me. Three, I loved hosting parties.

“EUGENE M. CAMPANELLO, 62, PRESIDENT OF CHICAGO-BASED E.M. CAMPANELLO DEVELOPMENT INC., WAS TODAY SENTENCED TO LIFE IN PRISON FOR THE MURDER OF HIS WIFE...”

I’M HALF EXPECTING TO HEAR THAT ONE OF THE COPS WAS A BABE, AND...YOU SEE WHERE I’M HEADED. SOME OTHER USEFUL SKILLS TO ADD TO THE REPERTOIRE.

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Oh, man, it's a three-pointer of a spring day and I feel outasight. Last night I traded in the body of a tasty twenty-year-old brunette "escort," as they say, named Barbara Marie Wolfe for something so much better I can't believe it. This is my first time being black and the first time I've come anywhere near this height. I done bumped my head a bunch moving around the city, and it hurts good. Children and adults crowd around me like deer in one of those petting zoos. Jelly-kneed women (and some men, the pre-verts) seem ready to go, right here in front of everybody. I feel like I should give the ladies something one at a time, like letting them have a taste of an All-Day sucker, you know? Kind of like Communion. Randel Tarpley is the name. Maybe you heard of me. With the Chicago Bulls. Yeah, "The" Randel Tarpley. Don't make the papers much 'cause I keep to myself. But I do all right. One solid performance after another and then straight home is how the writers say it.

I don't feel at all like a freak, although I was afraid I might.

As petite Barbara Wolfe, in the Hilton lounge, elevator and room, I felt I was in the company of a being from mythology. All the furnishings looked doll house-like whenever Randell Tarpley stood. Something about the scene seemed wholly unnatural, as would the prospective mating of cat with mouse. I had to dare myself to go on.

The penis this brown giant carried so proudly inside his gabardine pants proved to be—I must not exaggerate, for no exaggeration is needed—almost as long as Barbara Wolfe's inner forearm. I know this for, as I positioned myself in front of him with my hands laid flat upon his unyielding abdomen, it rose until its head came to rest near the crook of my elbow. (Far less than average in circumference.) I took it all in—visually, that is—with some trepidation.

Randell Tarpley floated an octopus of a hand down upon my head—the tip of his thumb and the tip of his middle finger reached the tops of my ears—and pulled me inward. I accepted the glans, but no more, blocking it with a curled-down tongue. He pushed until I coughed. He retreated. "Sorry, Lady," he said. "I forgot you don't do that. You should practice. Women dig it once they get over the gagging shit. Give 'em an inch and they'll take...the whole thing." He

smiled. “Do you want some advice? Start practicing with a Ball Park. Move up to a foot-long. Then you’ll be ready for me.”

I chose to ride the Bull, affording myself control over how much of him would come in, and how quickly. Again, I admitted the head of his penis only. And it exploded like a trick cigar.

“God damn it!” I exclaimed.

“Sorry,” he told me. “You’re so beautiful, and I got too...”

“Try again.”

“Now?”

“Yes.”

“Can’t.”

“Oh, yes you can.”

I did not let him lose his erection. I knelt down fully and thought I could feel a broom handle poking up from my crotch into my throat. I threw back my head and threw open my mouth, like a cowgirl, Yee-hah!

The body of the call girl/cowgirl flew off me as if it had been fucked...I mean “bucked,” with a “B”—we both know it had been fucked—against the headboard, where it slumped. In fact it had been bucked, too. Spittle flew from its lips as it blinked and twitched like that girl in *The Exorcist*. It wouldn’t stop. I twisted its head around, like in that movie, and pushed its face into the pillows. The sharp crack I heard as I did this made me jump back and go, “Whoa!”

Everybody’s going to be talking about the broken neck of the white chick who should have known better than to hang with someone like me. Where to now? There are precious few places a seven-foot brother can hide.

Damn!—I didn’t even get onto the court! What kind of body’s going to be better than this one?

I’m tapping buttons in a certain order. Whose number it is I don’t know, but I figure it’s a friend’s. Stogy’s? No. A woman with a husky voice and thick accent answers. She sounds thrilled to hear from me. I’ll get a good right’s nest...good night’s rest right where I am and meet her in New York City at noon tomorrow. I’ll be shifting by one.

THERE’S A WHOLE BOOK ON TARPLEY, *CENTER OF THE STORM*, BY GLENN OWEN SNYDER. STILL IN PRINT, 20 YEARS AFTER THE NBA WAS DISBANDED.

Sashaying, frolicking through the Newark International terminal in a wispy, *tres joli* dress and strappy heels, swinging my miniature handbag, still wondering who, exactly, the hell *je suis*.

The body I left back at the Waldorf would have been a laughingstock at a shoot-around today: Though it walked and talked—and relatively well—it had lost all its hand-eye coordination. (I tested this by tossing to it one of its canoe-size shoes, which bounced off its collarbone uncaught.)

Before nightfall back in Chicago I might change into sweats and find a hoop, just to see what moves of a sporting sort I've got in me.

There is much to be learned about this body. Although I am a foot shorter than I was before lunch, men and women toting briefcases skid to a halt on the terrazzo as I pass. I know I am special, but *pardonnez moi*, people—you'll piss...perhaps you will. You'll miss your plane.

A partial explanation for their awe hangs on the wall of a roll-around newsstand. I am the cover girl on this week's edition of *Time*, done up in a multicolored, turban-like headdress, gaudy, dangly earrings and a necklace made of shells and bones, cradling a lighted candle and peering out at the world from under fastidiously plucked eyebrows. The largest of the cover "blurbs" reads, "Rise of the Occult."

My green card says my name is Ajaya Monique Dufauchard, which sounds to me like an incantation. The *Time* cover caption calls me only "Ajah." I must purchase a copy. The proprietor accepts my ten; reaches into her register without looking away; hands over a puzzling thirty-six dollars and change. "Would you like a b-bag?"

I find a seat in a waiting area. The publication falls open on my lap to a center-spread feature story which includes another two photographs of this Ajah. In the first of them she is lounging in a neon maillot, between "takes" of a fashion shoot; in the second, she is posed in front of an altar piled high with a dazzling assortment of ornate objects of all hues, partaking in what appears to be a religious rite.

I am not only a budding "super model" but a Haitian-born priestess of voodoo as well.

Zombies. The living dead. Spirits on the move. Molecules of my expertise in this area waft back to me in a cloud of spicy steam.

The headline above the story reads, “Black Magic Woman.” *Oh-la-la*, I like this very much! Perhaps voodoo will make clear what Catholicism could not.

GOT THE ISSUE OF TIME RIGHT IN MY EYEPiece. OH, MAMA! SHE LOOKS LIKE A CHEETAH OR SOMETHING. WENT ON TO APPEAR IN THE NEXT SWIMSUIT ISSUE OF SPORTS ILLUSTRATED.

AJAYA MONIQUE DUFAUCHARD. THIS IS GOING TO BE GOOD—GOT “UNIQUE” IN IT.

NOTHING. SOFTWARE SAYS THERE'S NO ANAGRAM OF THREE WORDS OR LESS FOR THAT NAME.

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Do I not fail? Am I never rejected? Is this beginning to seem all too easy—too good to be true?

I choose not to dwell on failure, for your sake: My guess is you have a sufficient amount of it in your life already.

In fact I seldom fail. Most always, all I have to do is look interested. No, not even that. Merely *look*. Let me try to elaborate.

I began to notice a change in my eyes while I occupied the body of Patricia Lorraine Mattingly, after my very first shift. Her eyes had been blue, so pale a blue that in certain light their irises had seemed to disappear. After Larry Hibbs shifted into Patty Mattingly, I saw that the color of my eyes had become a bleep, a deeper blue, imperceptibly so to anyone other than myself. I took little interest, theorizing that this was nothing more than another way in which my body was maturing. When I shifted out of Patty Mattingly, I noticed that the eyes in her dead or dying body had gone back to their original color.

David Anthony Sciubba had brown eyes. I observed a change in them as well: They grew more brown. Margaret Newcombe was Swedish, maiden name Alberg, a natural blonde. Her eyes grew a shade bluer the moment the consciousness of David Sciubba shifted into her.

After perhaps ten years, the eye color of whichever body I lived in was so dark that I could not see pupils as separate from irises. I had nothing but pupils, half an inch across. It was as though the colors of all the eyes I had possessed had been overlaid, one atop the other, like tinted contact lenses, until the composite was all it could be.

Subsequently, the whites of my eyes became less and less white; the contrast between them and my irises/pupils grew less and less pronounced. Now they too are black.

Many of my acquaintances commented on my eyes over the years, using terms like “arresting,” and, naturally enough, the old cliché, “hypnotic.” Beyond that, they could not go. Words failed them.

I once observed Eugene Campanello, Susan’s husband—my husband at the time—staring from across a country club buffet table at my eyes with uncharacteristic attentiveness. (They had once been hazel, as a wedding photo illus-

trated, and now they were not.) As was much more typical, in the end Gene frowned and oinked. I remember that Mark Asplund, before my shift into his body, refused to make love until he could find a photograph of Susan Campanello—not the wedding one—and compare the eyes in it with those looking up at him from the bed. He held the snapshot alongside my face and probed all four. And then I had to chuckle, because he said, “No, I guess not,” and sent the photo flying like a Frisbee.

It was as if my acquaintances talked themselves out of perceiving this most obvious and irrefutable fact. The effect was that of a slight-of-hand trick: The onlooker was convinced he did not see what he was not supposed to see.

The larger the pupils, the greater the interest. I have nothing but pupils. Therefore my interest must be infinite. People are appreciative.

My eyes are black holes, able to draw out curiosity, then absorb free will. I can see it happen; I can feel it happen. If I do not want it to happen, I must strive to prohibit it.

Regardez moi dans les yeux. Notice anything? Look closer. You see, yet you deny. Perhaps you would be reacting differently if I were a woman at this time and I were there with you. Do you wish this were so?

Would you, fully aware of the consequences, make love to me? Oh, not the disgusting me you see now, but the audacious me that was Beverly Ellenwood, the pubescent me that was Lori Griffin, the glamorous me that was Susan Campanello, the mystical me that was Ajah? You say no. I say yes. Should we joust, who would win? We shall never know for certain, but my confidence remains bountiful.

All right, that out of the way, I do not have to bore you with endlessly repeated statements such as “He peered deeply into the tunnels of my eyes,” and so on. You can be certain he or she always did so, no matter who he or she was, shift or no shift.

I DON'T SEE ANYTHING ALL THAT FRIGGING “HYPNOTIC” ABOUT HIS EYES...BUT I HAVE TO TELL YOU I CAN'T TAKE MINE OFF THEM. IT'S AMAZING TO THINK I'M SEEING SOMETHING I DON'T KNOW I'M SEEING...IF I AM.

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For reasons you now understand nearly as well as I, I have almost never had to vie for the attention, the adoration of fails, of males when female, females when male. More often than not, the individual selected for the body into which I would next shift came to me willingly, eagerly, selflessly. I have had virtually no complaints and felt no frustration, and have had no reason other than an interest in sociology, you might say, to engage anyone in a discussion of the “dating scene,” as it is called. On one occasion or two, I did so, and for that reason only.

To you and others like yourself, others unlike myself, I must say this: You have my pity.

Once in the mid-Nineties I was Joel Morris Silverman, a fashion photographer’s representative, into whose body I had shifted for its rough-hewn good looks and the opportunities presented by the field with which it was associated. Making sullen conversation with me at the end of a lengthy day of location work for *Chicago* magazine was Todd Bergau, a “shooter” of some regional repute, a natty, slightly built, almost—no, not almost—a thoroughly pretty man of approximately twenty-seven who looked years younger and deserved to be standing in front of the camera wearing Armani or Prada rather than behind it wearing Bugle Boy. Fun to look at, but not at that point my type.

Todd rubbed his hands together over the flame of the candle in the middle of our table. “A drop-dead-gorgeous woman is walking toward you on the street—”

“She is?” I whipped my head from side to side. “You’ll excuse me?”

“You smile at her, but she walks on by like you’re invisible. You know she knows you’re *there*, because you know how good women are at seeing things out of the corners of their eyes. But she won’t look at you. Women put on that face like a gas mask to run through the trenches. Christ! Know what I say? *Loosen up!*” With that, Todd opened a bag of Beer Nuts too fast: Its contents bounded away like miniature mice. I helped him bat the nuts toward the center. He popped four of them into his mouth and said, “Women got the M&M’s. A beautiful woman knows she’s got the M&M’s and knows the men around

her are slobbering for one nibble. The world won't let her forget she has the M&M's, and she doesn't want to forget she's got 'em because they're her..."

"Legal tender?"

"Exactly." Two Yuppie women flitted into the bar. "Look," said Todd, "a visual aid! Their shoes. You know they don't wear 'em because they feel good. Hell, the whole key to wearing them is packing your feet in so tight they howl. I've got personal experience, hey? The party, the grape-Jell-O party? You okay? You seem out of it. I'm glad you squished my...me. My feet wouldn't have lasted much longer."

A party with grape Jell-O? Squished him? What was he talking about? Some kind of mud wrestling?

I chose not to ask. I was not sure I wanted to know.

His feet wouldn't have lasted? He wears high heels?

"Chicks wear 'em because they know it makes 'em walk like a hula. And like that hula, it's a dance that tells a story...but this one's pure fiction."

"They make me feel tall."

"What?"

"When I put on—*short*. Women wearing high heels make men feel short, because they look so tall."

"Okay, that's another way they put us down. Ask a babe why she wears shoes like those, and she'll say something like, 'I guess it's just the style.' But down deep inside she knows: They're M&M's. Same's true of skirts. Look at 'em!"

"I am."

"What good are *they*? They don't protect anything, don't keep anything warm, take my word for it—that was one chilly night. And nylons! What the hell are those supposed to do in the area of practicality? I know what they do otherwise, 'cause I...but. Any workday up and down the Magnificent Mile you can see one after another 'career girl' waiting for a cab in the snow on her tip-toes in a miniskirt, risking *twatcicles*—for what? So we'll take *notice*. And then when we do, we're *animals*. It's entrapment. Don't you feel like you're being *toyed* with? *Manipulated*?" Todd slammed his fist down onto the sticky wood with force sufficient to bring a new bed, to bring a new head to his beer.

"What should women like those two do?" I ventured, "dress in black sacks like the poor dismal babes in Iran?"

"Hmm. Hmm. Ever see Moms Mabley?—the old black woman comic? Wanna get outa here? It's time. I heard her tell a joke once on a rerun of the 'Ed Sullivan Show' about what a guy said to her on the bus. He said, 'Woman, you *sho* is ugly.' And she says, 'What'm I spose ta do about it?' And he says, 'Well, you *could* stay home.' I say, Have your beauty, baby, but if all you're going to do with it is bait and switch, then baby, stay the Jesus creeping shit home!"

"JACKIE 'MOMS' MABLEY (B. MARCH 19, 1897; D. MAY 23, 1975), KNOWN FOR HER RASPY, DENTURELESS DELIVERY..."

YEAH, YEAH. ALL RIGHT ALREADY.

GETTING INTO SOME KINKY WEIRDNESS HERE, METHINKS.

I flagged down a cab. I got in. Todd got in behind me with his jingling gadget bag. I slid over to make room. "Are you going my way?" I asked him.

"Yeah. I think so. Tonight *is* the night, isn't it?"

"The night?"

"Dinner? Jennifer's?"

Jennifer's. Jennifer. Something about the name. An address sprang into my mind. I announced it. We were headed to Jennifer's—whatever that was.

More grape Jell-O?

It was Todd who told the cab driver to stop. It was Todd who pressed the elevator button. It was Todd who first reached the door of an apartment.

But then he waited. He did not knock on it. Neither did I.

"What are we doing?" he said to me.

The door opened. There stood an alluring auburn-haired woman. She struck me as a perfectionist whose greatest accomplishment was her own physical appearance. She was wearing a modest yet becoming teal blouse, a hip-hugging, above-the-knee apricot skirt and a pair of tall bone pumps. "I thought I heard you guys," she said.

"Hello, Laura," Todd said to her.

"Laura?" I said.

"Laura?" repeated the woman.

"Rob and Laura," Todd said in explanation. "The Petries of New Rochelle."

Laura and I made baffled faces at each other.

"Come in, Todd," she said, "and hello to you, whatever your name is." She gave me a kiss on the lips with the hint of a tongue. "I wish you'd called. Lose this." She tugged at my necktie.

"This is the night, isn't it?" Todd said.

"Oh, yes," said Laura. "But—what did you call this guy?"

"Rob."

"Rob' here let a whole week go by without so much as a ringy-dingy. I thought maybe you both had forgotten. I just went ahead and made dinner for three, half expecting to put two-thirds of it in Tupperware a couple of hours from now."

"I'm sorry," I said.

"Fix us drinks?" she said.

"Me?" said I.

"I'll do it," said Todd. "Don't you ever watch the 'Dick Van Dyke Show'? Do you get 'Nick at Night' on cable? Lanky, klutzy guy with rubber face and a big honker and a cute-as-a-button wife? Spike heels in the kitchen? Those legs? Jen, you're a dead-ringer for Mary Tyler Moore in her prime. Ya gotta tune in sometime and see what a smooch-worthy compliment that is. Now Joel, I hope you don't take that the wrong way. Rob was cute, too, in a schnozzy way. A guy like Jew would have been good in the part, if Jew know what I'm talkin' about. I think originally Rob Petrie was supposed to be Jewish in the show."

Rob and Laura Petrie. Dick Van Dyke. Mary Tyler Moore. Laura. No, Jennifer. Jennifer Keck.

Jennifer moved to Todd and said, "I'll accept your assessment." She kissed him on the lips too. Whose woman was she?

"Darling," she said to me, "dump that tie before I cut it off. For that matter, why don't the both of you go get ready?" She swung away, adding, "I'll be there in a minute."

"'Darling'! See?—it's *perfect*, isn't it?" Todd exclaimed to me as he threw an arm over my shoulder. "She called you 'darling'! And you are, especially when you're loaded."

"Is anybody else coming?" I asked.

"How about Sally?" said Todd.

Sally. Sally? Not Sally Trainor.

"Rose Marie. Morey Amsterdam as 'Buddy.' Carl Reiner as 'Alan Brady.' Most everybody's a Heeb except Dick and Mary."

"Rose Marie. Right, right." I said. "Who played 'Mel'?"

"Stumped me."

RICHARD DEACON.

"And...what's my name again?"

"Rob."

"No."

"Dick?"

"No."

"Joel?"

"That's it," I said. "Yeah, that's it. What are we doing now?"

"The hubba-hubbas. We may as well get going."

The "hubba-hubbas" proved to be rapid-fire photographs of Jennifer Keck and Joel Silverman unclothed, taken by Todd Bergau, also unclothed. At first our poses, arranged by Todd, were conservative, with Jen and me kneeling face-to-face, body-to-body, hugging and mugging. But before long our passion

for each other became unstoppable. With a shrug of resignation, Todd urged us to “Go ahead and get down.”

Though apprehensive, I quickly grew rigid enough to penetrate Jennifer in a manner that from all outward signs agreed with her...and Todd, who also grew impressively rigid. But I was unable to ejaculate with a man watching, taking pictures. Had I come, Todd Bergau would have witnessed—and probably recorded on film—a shift, and that might have had to be the end of him.

“Do you want to take some pictures now?” said Jennifer Keck to me as I rolled off her. “No? Next time? Is everything okay? Go start the water then, nice and hot.”

Todd set his camera aside and took my place upon the bed. “I’ll be right in,” he said.

“Yeah,” said Jennifer, pretending to stifle a laugh, “and right out—give us a minute.”

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By spring nineteen-ninety-six I had shifted into the body of Eileen Annabelle Overbaugh, publisher of the leading trade magazine covering the restaurant industry and the thirty-ish third wife of Doctor Philip G. Overbaugh, my dancing partner of nearly two decades before. His blossom...his career had blossomed in the interim: His practice had grown extremely lucrative, he had been elected to the board of directors of Northwestern Memorial Hospital, and he was the author of three nonfiction books which had become *New York Times* best-sellers. I had selected him for my next shift because he was handsome and wealthy and because I had hoped to use his broad...Hah! His broad. I was his broad. I had hoped to use both his broad and his broad and deep knowledge of the mind to answer some questions for myself. "How do I do this?" headed the list.

Philip and Eileen had separated—a controversy involving long work hours and diminishing desire. Which had come first and who was most hurt was to me, as it would not be to you, immaterial.

What a performance I put on that night—the night I saw as my "first date" with Philip—nimble steering through an obstacle course of topics which would have revealed how little I knew about "our" past life together. I ordered much wine. And as often as I could, I redirected the talk to sex. Philip grew receptive.

Amicably, six months earlier Philip had left the couple's Wilmette residence for the city and had begun renting month-by-month a furnished brownstone at State Parkway and Goethe—pronounced by Chicagoans, as you know, "Go-thee." Eileen had remained in Wilmette. After our meal that night at Charlie Trotter's, he drove me home, to the manse which "we" had decorated with an extensive array of contemporary art. There we spent what I felt was an agonizingly pointless amount of time moving from work to work, talking about where we had been and how much in love we had been when we had purchased it.

Our lovemaking was delicious.

After the shift, I lay back and waited for indications of how much of my new body's mentality had survived. I found I knew something of Freud and Klee and Jung and Rothko. But I could not conjure up my middle name, Social

Security number or office address. With some help, I thought, the voluptuous female body across the room from me, now standing still as the work of—you know, that super-realist sculptor whose medium was fiberglass, I forget his name—back against wall, shoulders slumping, might be of assistance.

I see all degrees of dementia overtake my acquaintances once shapes have shifted and shards of memory have been shot out in all directions. Not all old bodies end up empty: Some, like Randell Tarpley's, go on containing minds capable of conversation to varied extent. Expressions of glamour...that is, anger, gleam. Stop. Anger, gloom, glee—these are not uncommon outcomes.

When I do not feel hurried or threatened, I find this entertaining. I interview the more cogent ones, using skills much like your own, for I believe their residual thoughts to be rightfully mine. Their observations and rationalizations are often touchingly or uproariously childlike in an Art Linkletter's "Kids Say the Darndest Things!" kind of way.

The body of Eileen Overbaugh spoke. "I'm afraid," it said.

I replied, "The damage was not permanent."

"Damage?"

Sensing that it was growing uneasy and might panic, loudly, I stood up authoritatively. "Honey," I said softly, "I'm so glad you're better."

"Better?"

"Your illness has left you disoriented, but I've seen a dramatic improvement over the past couple of weeks."

"Weeks?" it asked beseechingly. "Illness? Who are you?"

"I'm your doctor."

"Did you—?" She covered her crotch with one hand and her breasts with the other arm. "Did you *examine* me?"

"Yes."

"Like that? Why are you...why aren't you..."

"I'm your husband, too. And I love you very much."

"I don't like this. I want..."

"Philip?" I said. "See here." I held up a photograph of a joyful-looking couple on holiday. "This is us. *I'm* Philip."

"I can't..." She shook her head.

"But you will." I wanted to laugh. "Don't you dare cry, now," I said, a finger at my lips, "we have work to do. Let's get dressed."

With my hands clasping its forearms from behind, holding it out at arm's length, occasionally asking a question or two, I followed the tottering body of

Eileen Overbaugh patiently about the residence as if being led by a divining rod, a Seeing-Eye dog. In this way I located a safe and had it opened. Inside the safe I found a small notebook which, I was told, contained the names and phone numbers of realtors, brokers, buyers for galleries. Some of the documents stored in the safe required not one but two signatures, of which Eileen's would be more readily forthcoming than my own.

Taking the body into my arms, I expressed my gratitude with a kissing search...a searching kiss, which went unreturned. An empty socket.

Stocks, bonds, real estate—all were liquidated. Jewelry and a select few tired artworks were auctioned. The total proceeds: more than eleven million dollars, minus the cost of committing what was left of the Overbaugh “wife” to one of California's finest facilities.

“8 P.M. 11. NOVA. THE SCIENCE SERIES LOOKS INTO MULTIPLE PERSONALITY DISORDER, WITH HELP FROM CHICAGO PSYCHIATRIST AND BEST-SELLING AUTHOR PHILIP OVERBAUGH...”

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That summer, the summer of nineteen-ninety-six, three years short of my half-century mark, the United States Congress enacted Democrat-endorsed legislation hiking the minimum wage. Attached to that bill was a largely unpublicized Republican provision making the private charitable foundation a tax break of increased appeal. Rather than contribute their wealth to existing charities, the rich could choose to create their own eleemosynary foundations and fund them. Each founder could exert nearly limitless control over his or her charity's operations and enjoy large deductions. Only a pittance of a foundation's assets were required to be distributed outwardly in any given year.

One of few such distributions from mine would go to the rest home and later the hospice where Stogy lived—lived?—in the interminable months before he died.

When I last spoke with Stogy on the telephone, by the way, I asked him, “Hey, you stupid shit, are you a Turtle?” He was barely able to answer.

Having hired Schied, Osler and Gloomis, a company specializing in such things, I prepared a will that would turn over my estate to a death upon my trust. Thereafter, in perpetuity, until further notice, the firm was to honor unquestioningly all requests made by anyone—*anyone*—who could recite a ten cents, who could recite a nonsensical ten-syllable password. No matter who he or she was, where he or she came from or what he or she sounded like on the phone, his or her name—even an overtly assumed name, “Joe Momma” included—and the password would open all doors and financial accounts via randomly generated numerical codes.

I had four two-bedroom Lake Point Tower units gutted and combined so the space could serve as my home, my office and a venue for social events including recitals, readings and *avant-garde* happenings. I now owned an area that felt like one entire lobe of the cloverleaf, second top from the floor—you know what I mean. This became the headquarters of what would come to be known as the Patricia Lorraine Mattingly Memorial Foundation.

Do you understand why I chose that name? Ethnically inert. That of a fascinating child/woman twice raped: the long-dead and long-mourned victim of

one unsurprising and one highly surprising sex offender in a then-quaintly small town's distant, innocent past.

Legendary.

Crafty? I thought so.

Via the foundation, for the first time in my already long life I was able to exit the endless cycle of hotel rooms, appropriated apartments and other temporary addresses. My hermit-crab days were behind me.

I could not and did not remain in the Overbaugh identity much longer. My body was a paunchy fifty-year-old's, and I was determined to be young and svelte again.

Preparing for my next shift, I interviewed respondents to the help-wanted advertisement I had placed in the *Chicago Tribune* classified section, meeting each of the candidates for the temporary job of foundation director, community affairs, at my Evanston practice, twelve-thirteen North Sherman Street, suite eight-one-five, after six in the evening.

Chip-on-the-shoulder Marcia Lynne Gaydos, a recent and early MBA graduate with long-term show-business cravings and big claims of having "been around," as she put it to me—a "tough little cookie," as I remember putting it to her—proved ideal. She said she would not mind filling a position such as the one I offered, for it would provide her a "cooling-off period" during which she could become "anonymous" for a time and catch her breath. Though curious, I did not pump her...for more information, that is.

"MARCIA L. GAYDOS, LEFT, OF EVANSTON, REHEARSES FOR THE UPCOMING NORTHWESTERN UNIVERSITY PRODUCTION OF..."

GET A LOAD OF THOSE, WILL YA? SORRY. I WISH YOU COULD SEE WHAT I SEE.

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I am *young* again, *svelte* again, *female* again...and *how*. I am Marci, thank you very much. Twenty-three going on thirty-three, with this makeup. The good doctor had had to resort to considerable physical force to make the shift. I'm lavender and chartreuse in spots and must therefore lay the Clinique on thick.

The Overbaugh body looks worse, I am happy to say, considering the amount of flesh Marcia Lynne carved from its face with talon-like fingernails during the tumultuous coupling...not to mention the broken cranial bones it suffered as a result of its fall into an alley from eighty feet up. I know, for I conducted an inspection after leaving the office building through a service door.

I will describe myself to you in detail. I believe this to be the best shape I have acquired in years.

Five-foot seven, one-eleven, I guess: I have not measured myself vertically, but I like the sound of it. Maybe taller. And maybe one-twelve. My slender but strong legs are long—particularly from the knee down—and graceful in motion. The ankles of a thoroughbred. My every gesture flows out as if rehearsed, for I am well-rehearsed—an accomplished dancer. My neck is Audrey Hepburn's. My cheeks are rosy and—except for the bruises—blemishless. My upper lip seems to have been folded back and glued there; the lower one is clubby...chubby, and it is cleft, as is my chin. The tip of my nose bobs down a millimeter or more whenever my lips come together—a telltale sign of elective orthodontia. Even so, my two front teeth, larger than most, protrude somewhat—not too far. An overbite which I find enticing. Possibly some work done on the nose for what was diagnosed as a “deviated septum” but which went beyond that alone. Small back and arms—girlishly small. Boyishly round hips and uplifted Negroid bottom—I must have started dancing young. My waist? You will not believe it: two inches fewer around than years that I am old. What am I leaving out?

One complaint: the hair. It has been chopped up asymmetrically and dyed indigo-black. And another: There are three punched holes in either of my earlobes and one above my navel. Oh, well—all I need is Mario Tricoci and time. No tatoos, thank goodness.

Anything else? Um, I don't think...

What? My *breasts*?

Shame on you.

All right: Although they appear to me to be unaffected by gravity and more than acceptable for every social setting, I remember being told by an instructor that they had become an unfortunate distraction, a handicap, in classical ballet. (I guess they do seem to sort of lead me around wherever I go—as they do the eyes of everyone else.) At this size and weight, others I have known have sagged like water balloons hanging from a dormitory windowsill; these do not: They stand out from my ribcage with virtually no crease underneath, as if I am always carrying my hands high up in the air. Would you find me guilty of self-aggrandizement if I told you that their diameter (and that is truly the appropriate word, diameter) is nearly equal to the distance from the chin of my tip to the middle of my forehead?—the distance from nail of thumb to that of middle finger when fully outstretched?

Suffice to say, I am having my gown for the foundation's gala grand opening the month after next custom-made to rare specifications. The seamstress suggested something "flowing and drapy"; but I demanded something tight, then tighter. It will be a "coming out" party to top all my others.

I love the way this body moves me. I never walk: I prance; I float. At home in the penthouse, my audio system thumping out the Kronos Quartet's *Pieces of Africa*, I devise steps which in homemade videotapes look as artful as Twyla Tharp's. Sometimes I dance in leotards of glorious primary colors—a three-D Matisse—sometimes not. I crank up the bass till my innards vibrate and let myself go, in a trance, voodoo-like, till I drop, shiny all over with salty-sour girl sweat.

One day window washers come to clean the glass. For their safety I should either clothe myself or draw the blinds. I do neither. They take great pains with the foundation's panes, then flash me the "okay" sign and applaud while unhappily descending.

The road company of *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat* is stocking up on a fresh crop of understudies for its ongoing national tour. I fire off a letter of introduction noting experience garnered as an amateur (found in programs filed away at my old Marci apartment), along with one of thirty-six self-timer snapshots. In it, my body is positioned at a forty-five-degree angle to the camera, with ribbons of natural light streaming through at ninety degrees from the foundation's vertical blinds, casting serpentine shadows on my Lycra-clad torso and legs. Though crude, it proves effective: A letter arrives

at Marcia Gaydos's Post Office box by certified mail, informing me of a possible audition.

The position I covet would call for me to portray no fewer than six diverse characters. I would be cast primarily as "Simeon's Wife," which would dazzle me not in the least and give me little to do but strut around in pseudo Old Testament-era getups. I also would be a member of an ensemble which brings the unfocused show to an overdue finale with a tacked-on afterthought of a disco/aerobics "Mega-mix" number, in which one and all cast members are dressed in tight white tees and jeans. And so on. But in between, one of the better male dancers and I would take center-stage for a carnal *pas de deux*, and that alone would be worth the blisters and liniment.

CASTING CALL NOTED IN HARVEY & CALLAHAN "INC." COLUMN, CHICAGO TRIBUNE, 7/7/96.

LOOKING FOR PICTURES OF GAYDOS IN "JOSEPH." GOT TO FIND SOME. GOT TO, MAN. GOT TO. GOT TO.

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“How’s my Uncle Walt doing?”

UNCLE? NO WAY.

Monona, Wisconsin, population six thousand, was still home to Stogy. The woman at the front desk of the hospice replied to my question with words sung in a minor key. “Please make it short,” she added.

“This will be my last chance to see him, I’m afraid. Can you be sure we have complete privacy for a few minutes?” Assured that we would be granted it, I crept gingerly toward the door of Stogy’s private room.

IF I’D EVER HAD A COUSIN LIKE HER, I’D REMEMBER. I’M THINKING OF RICK AND PATTY.

While planning my trip I had given much thought to wardrobe. I had wanted to be sure Stogy would take a memory of my—of Marci’s—visit with him to his grave, yet I had not wanted to attract undue attention. A suit would have been best, but I had not thought to pick one up at Marci’s—my—rental unit, from which I had moved almost nothing else of value or interest. I chose snug but not excessively snug Levi’s and a billowy chambray shirt, man’s size Large. I wore no brassiere.

Weight-haired and white-less, the toothless invalid lay motionless on his mattress. So many tubes ran into and out of his parchment skin that he looked like a failed experiment in hydroponics.

His eyes were closed.

“Stogy,” I whispered. Then more loudly I said, “Hey, you stupid shit...” His eyelids rose halfway, but he did not look at me. “It’s Larry Hibbs.” Stogy’s feeble eyes roamed blindly toward the window, away from me, then back. I could see him struggling to focus, both visually and mentally. No doubt the difficulty of this task was exacerbated by the fact that the voice he had heard was a woman’s. Only once before had I spoken to Stogy as anything but a male—remember?—and that had been many lifetimes ago. “I have something for you.”

I unbuttoned my shirt and leaned far over the bed, presenting my breasts to him like overripe, oversized grapefruit longing to be plucked from a low-hanging branch. Using all the strength he could muster, Stogy reached up with trembling hands and grasped one of them reverently, in much the same way

that Father Jerome O'Neill had held a chalice of mass aloft at...of wine aloft at Mass. Tears welled up in Stogy's eyes as if my breast were a handle on heaven and could lift him skyward. I crouched down farther until its nipple met his thin, cracked lips. He suckled noisily. I wished for juice—for milk—to give him, imagining it would provide all the nourishment needed to bring him back to full, vibrant, conniving health. But of course I had none available.

I REMEMBER A BABE AT THAT HOSPICE. SHE ALMOST RAN ME OVER COMING AROUND A CORNER TOO FAST. I DON'T REMEMBER THE TITS. HOW COULD I FORGET?

With one hand I snaked my way down through the sheets until I reached his shriveled penis. I grasped it; gave it a squeeze. In a few seconds it grew rigid. He might have come had I let him: Some things die more slowly than others.

HE TRIED TO TELL ME THIS STORY. I TOLD HIM HE HAD TO HAVE BEEN DREAM

I kissed Stogy's brow and buttoned myself up. "Good-bye, you Turtle, you," I said as I let his door swing shut behind me.

NO LUCK WITH THE PICTURE SEARCH SO FAR, EXCEPT FOR ONE THAT DIDN'T SHOW MUCH OF ANYTHING, IF YOU GET ME. SHE'S CHANGED, BIG TIME. SORRY, I SAID I'D TRY TO STAY OUT OF IT.

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SHE MUST HAVE HAD IMP

Teary-eyed and bleary-eyed, I make the trip back to Chicago, arriving at the Loop by midday. The prospect of returning immediately to the empty foundation is an unpleasant one. I must first immerse myself in the grand promenade that is Michigan Avenue in order to dilute my melancholia.

I decide to go shopping for clothes. This proves to be a terrifically defeating experience. No business ensemble off the racks Fifth Avenue sack seems likely to fit both my waist and my bust.

A tall, pretty, personable saleswoman with a haircut not unlike my own is quick to see what I am driving at when I inform her of my concern. “I wish it was me,” she says. “My hunch,” she continues with a grin, “is you might be able to go with a four on the bottom and an eight-or-so Petite on top. You’d have to pay for both outfits, but at least we can see if I’m anywhere close. And then I bet we’d have to take in the waist. I’ll get a measuring tape. This is going to be fun!” I sense she feels she has discovered a five-foot-seven Barbie doll.

She is not far off. In Marci’s apartment I had found a Barbie, which someone had altered by trimming rather expertly its brown hair to the shoulders and reducing the length of its legs by approximately two centimeters—one at thigh and one at calf—with an X-Acto. Whoever it was who had done this had also glued tiny hemispheres of pink rubber—carved from a pencil eraser?—to the breasts, forming nipples, and a triangular patch of Velcro “loops” to the crotch. From the frame of a wall-mounted shadowbox lined with red satin into which the plastic figurine had been positioned hung a laminated card upon which was written the following: “Eleven inches tall (with the get-real chop-chop adjustment) equals five-seven; bust five point five inches equals thirty-three; waist three inches equals eighteen (working on that?); hips five inches equals thirty. You’re almost there. Problem: She weighs about eighty-eight pounds. Are you still dieting? Also, shoe, children’s size five. Can you do something about your feet?” It was signed “J.”

“We have a tailor right here. I’m sure he’d be happy to help.” Oh, I think so.

Fetching skirts and jackets she has mixed and matched, she escorts me to a dressing room. “Could I also have something to go under?” I say to her. “All I’ve got is this shirt, and—”

“No problem,” she says with the hint of a giggle in her throat.

Tirelessly she brings me variations on the sizing theme. One of two long-sleeved blouses I can button completely has cuffs that fall past my palms; the other, from the “Full Figured” department, fits my middle like a muumuu. Repeatedly I find that the lines of the suits would be ruined by all the required tipping, the nipping and tucking. I tell her so as she leaves.

I am down to my panties, preparing to crawl back into denim and chambray, when I hear the saleswoman’s voice. “How about a shift?” she asks.

“Pardon me?”

“There’s lots of stretch in this one. A scarf, a belt, and it could be very dressy. Maybe not exactly the best color for a tight-ass workplace, but let’s see.” She opens the door. She does not say “Excuse me!” Rather, she stares. And stares. “Wow!” is what she finally exclaims.

“What, wow?”

“I don’t think in all my days I’ve seen such a killer set of boobs.”

They are, I would have to say...yes, “killer”; but the clerk is going too far, I believe. She gawks as a man would gawk...no, worse. She talks as a man would talk...on a third date.

“Are they,” she says, “you know?”

“What?”

“Real.”

“Well I...”

Is this not like saying, “Your hair looks nice—is it a wig?” “What a tan!—did it come from a bottle?”

I have chosen to take for granted that my Marci Gaydos breasts were undoc-tored (except by Overbaugh). I have not noticed scars, but I have not spent much time looking. If this clerk, who has no doubt seen quite a few “sets” in her day, has never seen a set quite like mine, perhaps these are not genuine...not entirely. “Real as they come,” I tell her, “when they come at six thousand bucks the pair.”

“How do they feel?”

“Fine.”

“Would you mind if I touched them?”

Is this right? Do women speak to one another in this way? Do they regularly ask to touch one another’s breasts? Then what?—do they touch them? How am I to reply? I have no idea.

“Go ahead,” I say, having decided that any other answer would be impolite. She *has* been attentive.

Five of her fingertips are upon me. “Ahh,” says the woman. “Ahh,” she says again. And again she says, “Ahh.”

I join her in her next breathy exclamation as she moves to a nipple.

Now both her hands are active. I long for pockets, for I do not know what to do with mine.

I should not be clasping my hands so passively, so consentingly, so indulgently behind me, but I am. I should not be permitting my eyes to close, but I am. I should not be allowing my hands to slide inside the back of my panties, but they do. I should not be letting the saleswoman slip her hand inside the front, but it happens. Our lipstick should not be blending, but it is. My tongue should be staying in my mouth, but it is not. I should not be biting her tongue, but that is what I am doing.

This is getting me nowhere. I must not let her bring me to climax.

Nowhere and everywhere.

Why not?

Why the hell not?

I come.

The saleswoman lays a fingertip upon my lips. “Shh,” she whispers, “you’ll get me fired. We’d better stop.” She licks the fingers that had been inside my pants. “You are a yummy one,” she says. “Can I see you tonight? No pressure. Just think about it. Take the dress. It’s my gift, no matter what you decide. If you like it, wear it for me. If you don’t, wear something else. Short, with heels. You have the legs of a Rockette.”

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Leaving Water Tower Place, flipping the saleswoman's business card over in my hands—reading her name and title, her home phone number, her name, her number—my arm is nearly amputated by the propeller-like blades of a revolving door. I step back and wait.

Women know what women want. They are gentle. They are givers, not takers. They do not violate one another. They are clean and they are safe. I snicker to myself as I think, *Penises are in big trouble if this ever gets out*. I am pleased to know I do not have to worry about that.

I look up. Through the whirling glass I see a chic woman in her mid-twenties waving at me from the sidewalk. Amid the ruckus, I cannot hear what she shouts. I assume she is warning me to pay attention, to watch what I am doing. I spin out; simultaneously, she spins in. She spins back out again.

"Slumming it, girlfriend? Have you got the day off? Casual, huh? How's it goin'?"

"I'm sorry, I—"

"Don't tell me you don't recognize your partner in crime from good ol' Amoco. Aletha, Aletha Bradshaw. C'mon, girl, Sales—I never forget a face, or a name. Marci, right? Marci...Gordon. Grayson. No, that's Batman. Don't tell me. Guh, guh, guh..."

"Gaydos."

"Correct. So?"

All I can think is I once held down a summertime position as an executive secretary at the enormous petroleum company. I seem to remember a parent telling me I would never regret having acquired clerical skills. I wish I could remember what I wore when I worked there and where I had found it.

"Sorry, Aletha. I'm in kind of a haze right now. I just had a very...strange experience."

"Like what?"

Oh, nothing...I just got a hand job, as it might be called, from a beautiful woman who asked me out and I liked it and I'm still humming from it like a tuning fork, is all.

“I, I went through a horrible hassle trying to find something nice for business. I thought I liked shopping, but I’m not so sure any more.”

“Is that so strange? Wanna go rest your feet? I hiked about a hundred blocks myself getting here. Hungry? We deserve a treat.”

My knee-jerk reaction is, No, go home. What would the two of us discuss? Most certainly not the fitting-room escapade. Then again...

I must interpret this as a rare opportunity to get to know a woman as a woman—that is, on a just-friends basis—for the first time. Girl talk, whatever that might be, could very well prove to be good for me. “Yes, sure. Where to?”

“How about the Drake lobby lounge? It’s almost tea time. They’ve got the harpist. Finger sandwiches and dainty pastries and such. We’ll feel all fancy. Cut it out!—it’s a hotel! People come in there dressed all kinds of ways. Let’s go.”

I WAS HOPING TO FIND A PIC OF MARCI IN THE COMPANY HOUSE ORGAN, BUT THAT OIL COMPANY WENT PHHT ALONG WITH THE REST OF THEM AND ALL RECORDS WERE DUMPED.

I DON’T LIKE THE IDEA OF HER BEING A LESBO.

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“What did you tell her?”

“I told her they were... ‘embellished.’”

“The embellisher did a great job.”

“Why, thank you. Do you think they look like they are? That is, would you have suspected they were, if...?”

“To tell you the truth, when I first saw you in tights, something in my head kinda went ‘Boing!’ I smacked my eyes back into my head and let it be. I’m not like the gal in the store, going around asking women if their boobs are real or not.”

“Did you want to touch them?”

“Are you feeling all right?”

“Sort of.”

“Did I want to touch them? I did. And then I *did*. I haven’t thought about it much since then because it was just a touch, y’know, but I’m surprised you’ve forg—”

“When was this? Was it when I was in tights and your head went ‘Boing’? Where was I in tights?”

“Women’s Workout World. We started going there almost every day at lunch. I couldn’t help but look, and then I couldn’t help but.... Who *could*, right? And then when the magazine came out, of course the whole building got a look at them. Sorry that was enough to get you dismissed. It wasn’t like you came to work that way.”

“Which magazine?”

“Your memory is really not the greatest, is it, sister?”

“Did we have...did we have...?”

“Hey! What the hell? What is this?—amnesia?”

“A car wreck. Hit my head. Getting better.”

“Shee-it! I’m really sorry about that. No, we didn’t. Not ever. Do I look the type? I’m kind of flattered, actually, that you’d...but I don’t swing that way. Don’t you remember Dennis?”

“No.”

“Dennis Smith? From Accounting? How could you forget *him*? I wish I had a picture. Think Denzel Washington.”

“Who?”

“Jesus, child! Only the most beautiful black man in show business. I don’t know why I said ‘black.’ Think about that. Now think better-looking. I know, it’s hard. *Lots* better-looking. More. More. Now you got it? Last Friday night I went out with him, straight from work. We’d been giving each other the elevator eyes almost ever since I got hired. He’s been going through the planning stages of a divorce—so he says—the whole time, so I’ve been playing hard-to-get—which is exactly what I am, so it’s not playing, y’know. But he kept workin’ on me and workin’ on me. Black men have this way, see?—they come right out and tell a woman what they want. Dennis tells me exactly what he wants. It doesn’t come as a surprise, but it sounds better coming from him last Friday than ever before. I’m still holding out. He leans in close over the water cooler and says, ‘What’s worse?—to wake up in the morning after doing something you wish you hadn’t done or wake up after not doing something you wish you had?’ That does it. Finally I say what I gotta say to be able to live with myself: I say, ‘I’ll go out with you.’

“On our date we have a nice time eating and drinking and talking. He’s got a great personality and—you don’t remember?—body to match. I know *he* remembers *you*. I heard him say once to a guy at work when he had no way of knowing I was within range, ‘Oh, *that* one,’ he says, ‘you could see her boobs from *behind*...you know?’”

“‘From behind’—what did he mean?”

“You need me to tell you this? Get naked. Stand with two mirrors so you can see your back. Raise your arms out to the sides. You’re so small this way”—she holds her hands about a foot apart—“they bulge way out here and here like the way a boy would draw a stick-figure woman. Say, are we going to talk about your boobs all afternoon?”

“No. Sorry. You were saying...”

“I invite Dennis to my place after. We do the kissy-huggy-feely thing. And then he says he wants to get to know me better, without my clothes, sometime. Right after he says that, he kisses me again, hard, and before I know it I’m standing in front of him with nothing on but my earrings. We make love, and it’s okay.” She nudges a crumb around her plate with the tip of a pinkie.

“What’s okay?—the sex, or the way you feel about it now?”

“The sex. I feel like crap now. But the sex, it was okay.”

“Just okay?”

“Have you known it to be better than okay?”

“Always...mostly.”

“Lucky you. Really? All right, if you say so. But see, I’m starting to think that, like most of the other men I’ve slept with, Dennis sweet-talked me into bed

when I didn't want to go there. I guess it's not as bad as how I'd be feeling if I'd said no to him, but it's not good, either. It's not like I want my virginity back, got me: That's so far gone I wouldn't know what to do with it if I had it. But he has a wife, and he'll go to her. That's where he's going to be this Saturday night while I'm plunking myself down at home in front of the old VCR. There I'll sit, another notch in some jerk's gun. Just another notch." She laughs weakly.

"And so what are you thinking?"

"I'm thinking I'm a push-over. I'm thinking I'm gullible. I'm thinking I'm needy, and I don't like being needy. I'm thinking I was used. I'm thinking if I had it to do over and he pressured me into sex again I'd let him know he'd better shut up, or else I'd tell my supervisor. I don't like being pressured."

"I don't think he pressured you. He was nice about it. He hinted. That was kind of a cute way to put it, don't you think: 'Get to know you better'...and not 'now' but 'sometime.' He gave you a choice, and you kissed him your decision. That way, you didn't have to say okay, which would have been difficult to do, and you didn't have to say no way, which would have been harder. But you and he both understood what that kiss meant. I'll bet he didn't force that kiss on you. It takes two. That's what I'm thinking at the moment."

"Takin' the *man's* side?" Aletha's demeanor, like my undrunk tea, has lost all its warmth. She snaps up the bill. "Wanna split this down the middle? Let's see, the tip should be..."

"Would you be thinking of having been pressured if the sex had been out of this world? What if he'd called last Saturday morning and thanked you, told you he liked knowing you 'better,' told you in that black man's way exactly why? What if he was here with you now, sipping coffee and asking you out for next weekend, hinting about maybe moving in with you? Then?"

"There's my share." Aletha looks me over, more closely than a sober man would dare, leering ludicrously. "Sister, you can do what you want with your body. Shake your money-maker all you care to. Sell tickets. Give maniacs another reason to jack off—it don't bother me. But I'll tell you what: If I didn't know better—and I do know better, because, whether you remember it or not because of your bump on the head, I've seen you naked, up close and personal, with your jumbo, jam-packed, helium-goddam-inflated friggin' knockers sticking out all over the place like Mickey Mouse ears—with that kind of talk I'd think you were a guy."

WELL! I GUESS SHE TOLD HER!

NOW WHAT'S THIS ABOUT A MAGAZINE AND WHY CAN'T I FIND IT?

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Remember Todd Bergau? I decided on the cusp of an empty weekend to call him and set up a meeting. I had not been able to leave his lugubrious lamentations behind. I had not forgotten his pledge, in the presence of his rep Joel Silverman, to forever refrain from emotional involvement with excessively self-sure women. It was my hope to be for him a woman unlike any other he had met: a visually extraordinary but nonetheless affable one whom he could trust and with whom he could relax and talk openly. In this way I would acquire a friend—one who might teach me photography.

Identifying myself not as Marcia Lynne Gaydos but as Nicole Christine Baker (the name adapted from a previous acquaintance or two), I arranged an appointment with Todd for the purpose of discussing what I said was my wish to build a world in the career of modeling, late in life, from the ground up. “This Miss Dolittle needs a Professor Higgins,” I said.

Todd suggested the Gold Bar—. The Gold Star Sardine Bar, which was located, interestingly, in the same building as *Playboy*. But I told him I was thoroughly opposed to the club owner’s outdated and obnoxiously convention-flouting policy of providing free cigarettes to his patrons. We settled on Yvette.

“How will I know you?” I asked him, although I knew. He described himself accurately and self-effacingly. “Me? Try fish lips and buck teeth; hair, something like Elvis in his ‘Comeback Special,’ nineteen-sixty-eight.” I heard him chuckle. “Without the mutton-chop sideburns—can’t grow ’em.” I added, “No black leather jumpsuit; I’ll wear something bright.”

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Although I made my entrance punctually, I arrived at Todd's side several minutes late.

Detained by the bulging eyes and panting-dog tongues of men who ogled me as if unobserved, I thrust my face forward like a snowplow. The men puddled...well, perhaps so. They huddled and pointed.

Then quickly the gawking came to a halt, for from the viewpoint of the multitudes I had selected someone with whom to raise a family. The men spurned me and redirected their collective attention to others of the female persuasion who had not yet made up their mind.

"Nicole? Glad you could make it," Todd said dryly. "Have we met?"

"Me too. No, I don't think so." I slipped out of a shimmering raincoat, exposing the belted, succinct crimson dress which the Saks saleswoman had chosen. Distant libidos roasted in its rays. Todd, as if imagining a stampede, motioned for me to sit. "Gosh! Is it hot in here or is it just me?"

"It's you. That dress sure is..."

Words that came to my mind included "short," "tight" and "too revealing." Had I actually needed it for office work, I might have had to exchange it for one a size larger. Or leave it beltless.

"...uh, *red*," Todd said, either cleverly, stupidly or drunkenly—I could not tell.

"That it is."

"And well-made, it appears."

"Now *that* is subject to debate." I toyed with a crystal pendant which had a tendency to get stuck in my décolletage. "For what it cost it should be well-made, but I've seen better at half the price. See, when a woman is looking for a dress like this, because she wants to do what a dress like this will help her do, she buys it. Quality and lasting style don't come into the picture. After all, how many times can a woman wear a dress like this before everyone starts to think it's the only dress she ever wears—the only dress she owns?"

Todd missed signaling the waitress, so I did it for him. "Interesting," he said distantly. "Some people say that about film. If you make a movie sexual enough or violent enough, you don't have to worry about plot. And forget dialogue—nobody listens. Take *Reservoir Dogs*."

“Haven’t seen it.”

“Cotton candy without the sugar. Wonder Bread without the twelve body-building ways. Whipped up and puffed up piece of nothing. Two hours of guys mostly walking around yelling ‘Fuck!’ at each other. Edit out the F-word and the walking around and you’d have a nice, tight, mildly entertaining thirty minutes. But it got rave reviews. Something similar is true of these people.” I shot my eyes around the lounge, craftily outmaneuvering those of every man who tried to capture them. “If a person is showy enough, they don’t have to have anything resembling a personality in order to get lots of attention. No character development needed.”

“Cotton candy without the sugar. I like that.”

“It’s been especially true of every mod...” Todd stopped.

“Go ahead. You can say it. I agree. Model-types are mostly...vacant.” Even I had had some trouble with them. I told Todd I had come to resent their excessive standoffishness and had found them when they deigned to speak to be stupid as cows in a field, standing, chewing, mooing.

The waitress dropped off my cocktail. Todd reached for his wallet, but before he could extract it I swam a ten-dollar bill toward her. Although I had bought myself a drink, Todd said, “Preciate it.” He continued, “Not you. I can tell already. I wish you success, but I hope it doesn’t change you. There’s an edge to you. It cuts through the crap. But it’s only crap it cuts. I feel like I know you—like we’ve talked this way before. How do guys react when you tell them you want to be a model?”

“You’re the first.”

“Don’t do it. They’d drift away. They’d assume that since you thought you had what it took to be a model you would, sooner or later, reveal yourself to be understocked in the Nice Department. They’d be wrong, but by then it would be too late.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.”

“It’s almost as though the human being comes into the world with a limited amount of material for building cells. If you use up all your material building ‘beautiful’ cells, you don’t have enough left over for ‘pleasant’ ones. The brain gets wired into a permanent ‘I’m fabulous’ state, and there are no synapses left for thinking, ‘But that doesn’t mean I can be cruel.’”

Todd went on, “Look at those three *Elle*-quality women over there—the ones with all the undrunk glasses of Chablis lined up in front. It must be coming close to a quart apiece. Men have tripped all over themselves and each other to buy those drinks. Is that going to be enough to make the women turn around and smile and say, ‘You did it, you got me, I’m yours?’”

"They know they got the booze purely because the men thought they, the women, were physically attractive."

"So?"

"It puts them in a difficult position, I think."

"Turn around and say thanks. Such a big fucking deal?"

"Yes. You said it. That's what it is. Word for word."

"Let me get this straight: By buying those drinks, the men have branded themselves as superficial, all caught up in the looks thing. If the women turned around, they'd set themselves up as liking it. And that's why they can't."

"I suppose."

"A man can't tell a woman he finds her physically attractive?"

"Sure, but with finesse."

"Make it sound as though her looks, wonderful as they are, pale in comparison to everything else that's probably more wonderful about her? It ain't gonna happen. So there sits the wine."

"Would you like some?"

"Well, I—"

I rose and walked over to the *Elle* women. "Hi, kids," I said to them. "Are you going to be using these?" I pointed to the array of full glasses. "Mind if I take a couple?" One of the women, the pride's alpha female, I surmised, frowned and shrugged. I grabbed up the drinks and strutted away. As I did so, I heard her say to the others something about someone's having a lot of gall. I sang back, "Waste not, want not."

"Did the guys see you?" Todd asked as I returned to him.

"What do you think? I'll bet they don't spend their money that way again."

"I'll bet they do," he replied. "They're not thinking about how stupid they were with the wine; they're mostly thinking about coming over here to tell you off. More likely, they're probably trying to decide whether to pick a fight with me, like I'm the instigator. They're mad, but they have no idea who or what to be mad at."

"Do you know what I say? Cheers." I raised my glass high to the men in salute. Then I mouthed, "We thank you."

"Now that, see, was something I would have expect—"

"Relax."

"They tried. It took some guts. It was dumb, but you don't have to rub their faces in it. Look at them snorting and stomping their feet. It's like they're stallions tied up in a stall next to a herd of fillies in heat. They want to kick something."

"Maybe they should kick themselves."

"They will. And then they'll be back. They'll do it again. Damned if they do and damned if they don't. I know all about it, but don't understand it—what's going on around us. It's not just this place; it's everywhere. There's a whole club in town for miserable beautiful people."

"Really? Do they call it 'Pretty Sad Inc.'?"

"Good. I wish I could peek in one night during a recruitment meeting and see all the hopefuls posing, trying to prove they belong there. After you join, you have to be sure everyone constantly knows how you got in—you're *damned* attractive. And the more you do whatever it takes to prove you're worthy, the more potential dates you scare off. I'm thinking about the Groucho Marx line that goes something like, 'I wouldn't belong to a club that would have me.'"

"In a couple of weeks I could put a place like that *right* out of business." I snapped my fingers.

"How?"

I ignored his question.

"Do you think it's a matter of excessively high expectations? I go after beautiful women and they prove to be O'Doul's."

"I don't know what that means."

"Looks like fun but isn't."

"I guess it's not easy being beautiful."

"What do you mean, 'guess'?"

"I'm not beautiful."

"What are you, then? Don't tell me you think you're ugly. What a phony that would make you out to be."

"Unusual-looking?"

"All right, euphemistically speaking. Have men bought you drinks like what we saw?"

"Take a guess."

"Thousands of times. What did you do?"

"Take a guess."

"You always turned around."

"What's on your mind? Speak! I don't have to ask your opinion, but I will. Let's say it's me at the bar. You take a look, you send over a drink. Do you want me to turn around for you or not?"

"I dunno," Todd said into his glass. "I suppose it depends on what you think is in it for you."

"What would be in it for me?"

"A conversation."

“Well, if it’s going to be *this* conversation, I most definitely am not turning around.”

“Point taken.”

“Can we get out of this circus?”

Todd allowed me to walk ahead of him as we made our exit. My bosom parted the masses as Moses had parted the sea.

“MOSES, LEADER OF HEBREWS FROM SLAVERY IN EGYPT (SEE EXODUS), CIRCA 13TH CENTURY B.C....”

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I took in a big breath of air filled with the aroma of impending rain and said, "It feels good to be outside. But it felt good to sit down, too."

"Have you been doing a lot of walking?"

"No, *standing*—in *these*." I directed Todd's attention to a pair of shoes which he had most assuredly already assessed. They were fashioned, like jewelry, from delicate silver bands.

"What for?"

"A shoot for my employer. I work for the company that bottles Birst, the fizzy water? That's the reason for the dress."

Todd winced as though he had stubbed his toe and walked for some time, looking down. "You're wearing an ankle bracelet."

"Part of my character, I thought. The scene was a cocktail party. We shot it at my boss's house with his son as the photog—real low-budget. All I had to do was hold a drink in my hand and pretend to be making merry—for *four hours*. That's not easy, as we saw back there in the bar. I wasn't very good at it. What else do you find of interest?"

"There's...I've got this thing...ankle bracelets...I dunno."

"What?"

"Well..."

"You don't like them. Too showy, I'll bet. Stop." I crouched down in the middle of the sidewalk as modestly as I could and unhooked the miniature chain. I stood and held it out away from myself as though it were a night-crawler, dropped it, and moved on. "A dollar ninety-nine at Walgreen's," I said, extending an elbow. "Let's get in step." I brought my stride into synchrony with Todd's. My gait was strong; I could pull him, even in those shoes, and I did so.

"Where are you taking me?" he said with mock fear, "This isn't the way home."

"Food. Me eat," I said. "I'll buy you some meat. Let me take you to a good place for carnivores. It's off the beaten path. Just opened. In a warehouse. Near your studio, if I've got the address right."

"Where did you come from?" said Todd as if drugged.

"Where have I been all your life?"

“I took the el.”

“Oh. Taxi.”

“It’d be a heck of a cab ride from here all the way to Oak Park. Do you mind?”

Boarding the train, Todd and I positioned ourselves as far away as possible from a ragged teenager protecting a “boom box” the size of a small valise. He had not yet turned it on, but did so, ignoring the prohibition, when the el left the station. Thumping like that of an industrial-strength clothes drier running on three feet blasted through the car.

The track was rough; the ride like a buckboard’s. Passengers who were seated were tossed backward and forward; those standing repeatedly lifted up one foot and set it back down.

My studious review of the vehicle and its contents led Todd to likewise look around him. Everyone seemed to be rocking in rhythm.

Todd allowed his body to go slack, letting the motion of the car push his head about his neck in circles like Stevie Wonder’s, like a gyroscope running out of spin. I started to clap along with the beat of the teenager’s, quote, music. I rose to slick off my stripper and grab one of the steel posts near the doors, feet apart, knees unlocked. I too let the machinery take control. The effect was a lascivious but light-hearted kind of grump...bump and grind. This extracted cautious laughter from other passengers who saw the exuberant sexuality, the humor and the danger in the situation. I could not help but make lewd, heavy-lidded faces at the boy, who scowled back angrily.

Todd reached out to put an end to my exhibitionism, aiming for my hand; at that instant he was propelled forward by a segment of unstable rail and clutched my hip bone, with his fingertips landing rather close to my groin.

“What’s so fuckin’ funny you fuckin’ bitch?” the boy screamed. He punched the “off” button and exited at the next stop.

Todd watched him go and said to me as I fetched my coat and sat down, “You are, to use your term, unusual, without a doubt.”

“Do you know what we should do?” Todd said over his steak. He licked his lips. “Someday before it closes we should go see the exhibit of American photography at the Terra Museum. If you really care about what I do for a living—or what I would *like* to do for a living—that would be the place to go. You know, it’s right on Michigan, mixed in with all the stores. It’s bigger than it looks from the outside and the shows have always been great. Then maybe we’ll get one of those awesome baked cloves of garlic, a loaf of French bread and some wine at Bistro One-Ten. How about it, Nickie?”

Nickie? “Will you be my tour guide and tell me what I’m supposed to be seeing?”

Philip Overbaugh had argued, whenever the opportunity arose, that photography consisted of not much more than one’s accumulating the needed mechanisms, carrying them around and hoping to find oneself in the right place at the right time in order to observe an object or incident which would have existed or occurred with one or without one. “Has the person who was in the forest with a camera when the tree fell created ‘art’ because he alone recorded the crash?” he would ask. “I think not,” he would answer. I mentioned this to Todd, adding I had held that opinion for a time but recently something inside me had begun telling me I could be wrong.

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At the Terra, hand in hand, Todd and I toured the entire array of prints—through all decades of photography’s existence—seldom straying far from the black-and-sex...black-and-white sections. I found artistry in all of them. I was not initially cognizant of the technology upon which the artform was so dependent, but Todd was quick to point this out.

Light from an enlarger could be “burned in” to a sheet of photographic paper in the darkroom, thus darkening small areas of the print. Light could be “held back” for purposes of the opposite effect. (Todd told me he and other photographers typically fashioned bouquets of tools out of coat-hanger wire and cardboard and tape and scraps of old nylon stockings with this in mind. They looked like hand-made fly-swatters, spatulas and paddles.) Todd discussed “toning” as a method of “warming up” what might otherwise have been a “cold” image. And then he directed me to a number of prints which he said he knew had been bleached in spots by a master of the technique. Eugene the first name. Another Eugene. The last name escapes me. Something too commonplace to stick in the mind.

W. EUGENE SMITH IS WHO THAT WOULD BE, IS MY GUESS.

“A single tooth, the whites of the eyes, a button, the barrel of the gun the guy’s holding—see how there’s more light than there would be if the photographer had just ‘been there at the right time’?”

I did. “It’s like painting,” I said.

“If you say so.”

“And every ‘school’ is represented. You’ve got Expressionism—I guess all photography is to some extent expressionistic—and Abstract, of course. You’ve got Surrealism over there with Man Ray. And if the ‘found object’ is art by your definition—the tree in the woods—and can be given a name, I guess Dada is here, too. I’m going through a real conversion.”

I had been talking to myself; Todd was no longer with me. He was anchored in front of a large image of a nude female body, shaking his head. “I don’t know if this belongs here,” he mumbled as I drew near. “I don’t know if *I* belong here. But *you* sure do.”

“Pardon?” He said nothing, but his eyeballs were glib. “Oh,” I said, “do you think you could turn me into a work of art?”

“No. But I could show you you already are one.”

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Hovering over a light box, Todd positioned long lines of transparencies upon it. The seventy of them—"red dots," or the best of each pose and exposure—filled the entire viewing area. (There were outtakes—many, many of them—packed up in hinged plastic boxes.)

For this visit I wore jeans from Gianfranco Ferre which fit me like a dusting of periwinkle talcum (except in the waist), a white long-sleeved T-neck from Emanuel Ungaro, ankle-high boots with three-inch heels from Fendi and elastic clip-on suspenders from my first and last visit to Marci's apartment.

As requested, I began examining each of the slides on display in sequence with a magnifying glass. I said, "She's pretty."

"She?" Todd laughed. "You know that's *you*!"

"I know, but she...me...I—I don't look like me. These make my face look like it's carved out of a bar of Camay. No burning and dodging at work here, right?"

"Right. It can't be done with slides. Thank Mother Nature."

"And you."

"I just pushed a couple umbrellas around."

Moving to the first of the slides in the second row, which had been taken after a break scheduled to allow my brassiere lines to fade, I inhaled quickly. "No top already. This chick doesn't mess around. I hope this sounds right: Her boobs—*my* boobs—seem to *glow* or something, don't they?"

"I do see the glow, now that you mention it. It looks as though the light is coming from *inside* of them—you. Like porcelain lamps. It's an optical—"

Another abrupt inhalation. "Oh, my!" I had reached the point at which my panty lines too had faded. My buttocks were in full view and they also seemed luminous. "Gosh," I said, "I don't know if I'm ready..." and kept going. Arriving at the first full-frontal nude, I gasped and exclaimed, "Jeepers!" I put the magnifying glass down.

"What?"

"I'm not sure what I think about seeing my own, *down there*, you know, out in the open in pictures." I heard myself talking like a teenager. "Sort of too much like Hygiene class, I think. Yes, I think so."

"I think it's adorable. But—a suggestion? For this kind of work, don't shave it or Nair it or whatever you do."

I blushed, and Todd did likewise as I retrieved the loupe and went back to the slides. To me, too, my "down there," hairless as nine-year-old Patty Mattingly's, looked as adorable, in quotes, as could be.

YOU GETTIN' A HARD-ON?

Todd made up a plastic sleeve holding twenty of the slides—the *creme de la creme* in his words—for my further inspection at home.

"None of those were dirty, were they?" Todd and I had relocated to his studio's kitchen and food-styling area, where, upon my request, he poured us glasses of Guinness Stout. I had savored the dark-brown brew before, but not with the palate of Marci Gaydos; I was eager to see whether I had retained a taste for it.

"Are you sure you like Guinness?" Todd asked me. I said I would let him know. He described the stout as flavored like and being as filling as liquid pumpernickel bread. He said it was not the sort of beverage he would have guessed a woman—even a big, fat, unfiltered-Camel-smoking, truck-driving one—would ever try, let alone enjoy. Then he said he hadn't intended that comment to come out as it had. I told him it was not an issue and that my preferences in tobacco ran to Red Man.

"Back to your question: It would have been easy to take *dirty* pictures," he said. "Remember how I kept telling you not to smile, not to make eye contact, but maybe since you were nervous you kept looking at me and smiling? The eyes and the smiles made it look as though, instead of being beautiful and naked, you were beautiful, naked and having a ball. This is no laughing matter. Now, if this had been *Playboy*, you could have tried a pout or a look of being sort of swept away by the whole idea, but it would have had to be subtle. Open mouth like you're being Frenched by the Invisible Man, and suddenly you've got pornography. If you had no expression on your face at all, they would be closer to art than they are. Posing for art, pretend you don't have a face. Pretend you don't have those boobs. Get lost."

"Excuse me?"

"Lose yourself. Forget about yourself. Become a thing without a mind and let the photographer manipulate you like you're a puppet."

"This is all very informative," I said, concluding my review of the Polaroid prints which Todd had made while testing the length of his lens and position of his strobes. There was no sarcasm in my tone. "There *is* a fine line, isn't there?"

"There is definitely a *very* fine line."

“Maybe with your help I could learn how not to cross it.”

The line I had promised myself not to cross had nothing to do with modeling or photography.

We left the kitchen. “I tried hard to downplay parts of you—I think you know what parts I’m talking about—for those shots,” Todd said. “You’re too much for *haute couture*. You don’t look near enough like a wire coat hanger. Two big reasons.”

“I’m going to go out on a limb here and say ‘Thank you.’”

I traipsed off, feigning interest in a framed snapshot. It showed a laughing woman wearing a false mustache and a man’s suit—a costume—standing beside a rather tall, top-heavy, humorously anguished-looking brunette in large eyeglasses, white blouse with tie, navy blazer and pleated tartan miniskirt. Another costume. A Patty Mattingly costume. On the skirted woman’s legs, not knee socks but hose; on her feet, not Mary Janes but flamboyant high heels and lacy anklets. Good legs. To be truthful, I must say I was not *feigning* interest. Not good legs; *great* legs.

Setting the picture down, I continued, “You probably won’t be able to relate to this, but since junior high I’ve felt self-conscious. See...when I was in ninth grade, I started thinking *they* were going to be a problem.”

“*They*.’ You say it as though *they* aren’t *you*.”

“We’re very close. Todd Bergau, I’d like you to meet Tina and Trixie, the Amazing Tit Sisters.”

Where that regrettably brazen comment or the anecdotal monologue I could feel churning in me originated I knew not. A personality with which I was insufficiently familiar was begging to step from the wings of my subconscious into the spotlight. I decided to let the next few paragraphs stream out unedited, certain Todd would forgivingly attribute my candor to the Guinness.

“At my school we had a supply room—a place where the kids could buy pencils and pads of paper. It was set up with a door cut in half”—I swept my hands through the air, parallel with the floor—“and on top of the bottom half of the door was a shelf, only about as wide as a notebook. I worked there for an hour or so a couple of times a week. One day a boy came up to buy some things and stretched his arms across the counter and wrapped his fingers over the edge closest to the inside—you know?”

“Maybe we need a prop?” Todd swung the door of a chest-high cabinet between us. “Like this?”

“Pretty much. He was a little guy—seventh grader. Cute, but oh so shy. And I wasn’t very sure of myself either. These boobs of mine seemed to have sprouted all at once without warning. I went to bed flat-chested, and, some-

time while I was asleep during the summer between eighth and ninth, something went ‘Bloop-bloop!’ in the night and I woke up with the things sticking out all over the place.”

Todd’s eyes narrowed as they ran along the sinuous curves of the suspenders, which, as they stretched from my shoulders to my waist, gave Tina and Trixie a hug. Do you remember the outline of the old Coca-Cola glass? That was the shape my suspenders made.

“I almost didn’t want to go back to school. I didn’t know what to do with them. I found out fast what kind of effect they had on people. My girlfriends, for instance...I’m getting sidetracked here. The boy. He had his hands on the edge of the counter. I came in too close to ask him what he wanted and”—for an instant I had second thoughts but held them back—“I came in, and...” I took half a step toward the cabinet door and pressed the resilient points of my nipples into Todd’s waiting knuckles.

“Uh-huh,” Todd managed. To me he seemed suddenly worried his penis would punch through the crow like a...through the door like a crowbar.

“See,” I said, tilting away, “since he was so bashful, he couldn’t move. He just left them there! And I couldn’t think of what to do, so I left *mine* there—my—”

“Afraid to make friction.”

“I suppose.”

“Uh-huh.”

“And so, after his face turned about a million shades of red—and mine too, I guess—he mumbled something about a pen and I went to get it. When I got back to the door, he was gone.”

“Poor guy. He blew it. That was his chance to change his image. Think about how your opinion of him—maybe the *whole school’s* opinion of him as being shy and backward and small—would have changed for the better and for his whole life if he’d just...”

Slowly Todd raised his fingers off the door and grasped the straps of my suspenders. He used them to pull my fish lips toward him.

I proffered my cheek. He let go. The straps snapped back and slapped me.

“Oops,” he said.

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Sauntering south from Borders Books and Music with sacks full of compact discs, Todd and I passed an especially well-put-together young woman carrying a Victoria's Secret bag, rejoicing, like the rest of us, in the late-summer sunshine. She was wearing a T-shirt emblazoned on the front with the following: "Easy come..." The back of her shirt was hidden from me by the sweater whose arms she had tied around her neck.

"Excuse me," I said to her. She spun around. "May I see the...?" I wiggled a finger at her belly.

"Oh, sure." She removed the sweater and pivoted. "...Easy go."

"Funny," I said. She returned my smile and walked on, casting a glance-ward, a backward glance through her hair.

Todd had not waited. Five yards ahead he stood tearing a wristwatch from his arm. He threw it to the pavement, cursing. "Show-off!" he shouted in my direction—no, at the young woman's back—while smashing what remained of his timepiece with the heel of his shoe.

"What in the world is the problem with you?"

"She's probably wearing a fucking Wonder Bra under it, too! Fuck *her*!" he growled.

"Would you like to have that drink alone, Todd? I don't need this."

"Look, I'm sorry. I let things like that get to me, and I shouldn't. I'll be all right."

"Your watch won't."

"No biggie. I got it free from Nikon. C'mon."

"You have to promise to settle down."

"Promise." We walked. "Can you tell me why women do that?"

"Do what?"

"Wear padded bras."

"Think she was?"

"I know it. There's no bounce to 'em. Big-looking but not heavy-enough-looking. I wonder if every woman I see who's got great knockers—except you—has stuffed her underwear with fiber fill."

"Does she or doesn't she?" Maybe that's why they call it the 'wonder' bra."

"Yeah. Isn't it dishonest? Aren't all women who wear padded bras liars? I think I can talk to you about this. There's no way you'd want to own one. Can I?"

"Yes, you can. And you're right—I don't." I did not tell him that I had, that the volume of the breasts of some female bodies I had shifted into had been rounded up, as it might be said, in such a way and I had felt it most efficacious to go on rounding. "Question: What's your opinion of implants?"

"That's different. Wear something outside, strapped on or pasted on, and you have to take it off sooner or later—it's not part of you. Put something inside you and it becomes you. It's not the same with padding, or those inserts I see all over the Home Shopping Network, complete with built-in nipples. 'Hollywood's Best-Kept Secret,' the ads say. Watch an episode of 'The Bold and the Beautiful.' It should be called 'The Boobed and the Boobiest.' They're all wearing those rubber thingies. Show business, where everything is fakery...Michael Keaton made to look taller than Gina Davis, for Pete's sake. Forced perspective. And in my line of work, you've got the false eyelashes, the clothespins, the duct tape—"

"Duct tape?"

"You don't have to worry. They'd never use it on you. It creates cleavage where there isn't any—the same principle as the Wonder Bra. Broomsticks—"

"Broomsticks?"

"You're in for a real ride if you want to make it in the modeling business."

"On a broomstick? Like at Halloween?" I was thinking also of riding Randell Tarpley.

"Up the back of your dress. To pull things in, tighten things up. All fake. But real life is different. A man falls for a woman, takes her to bed. The guy isn't blind, right? But a blind man could tell—he'd be *real* good at it. One minute with her clothes on she's got big tits; the next, naked, she doesn't. Foam. Would you be shocked if he began questioning everything the woman had said to him? If she'll lie about her boobs, what else will she lie about? Maybe she's white and she said she was black, or she's black and she said she was white."

"Would you think me a liar if I told you I made up the 'Bloop-bloop' story?—these—"

"No. You told an itty-bitty fib. Or should it be a *pair of large* ones?"

"There's that girl again—the one with the big fibs."

"Ha! With all the lighting and the searching for the correct angle and all the just plain old gaga staring I did at the studio, I would have to say they probably did bloop, but it was not a very big bloop until after your eighteenth birthday. Am I right? You were asleep, as you said, but not at home: You were on an operating-room table, correct?"

“Is all your work interior work?”

“Huh?”

“I’m getting tired of mammary glands. The subject is in need of change, and I can change it, so I am. Do you take your camera with you when you go bopping around the city? Seems as though there’d be a lot to take pictures of.”

“Can’t say as I do. Usually when I’m done shooting for a client, I’m so sick of the whole process I want to forget I own a camera.”

“Is it all drudgery?”

“No. Once in awhile it’s still fun.”

“Such as?”

Several months back, having cooked his brains while two young fluttering flamingos strutted to and fro in costly designer evening wear for hour upon hour along the mosaic surround of a Florida pool, Todd told me, he had grown addled and reckless. “Okay, ladies,” he had said to them, “jump!” Although the rest of the crew had together rushed poolward and shouted “Don’t!” the models had sprung ahead, and Todd had kept his motor running.

The client had purchased three times as many consecutive right-hand pages in *Chicago* as planned: one for the dignified poolside parading, one for the wide eyes that followed Todd’s order, and one for the childlike leaps into the blue.

“I have to admit,” he continued, “there have been times I wish I’d had a camera with me. Around the Art Institute about a year ago, I saw a pair of beat-up old crutches chained with a new chain and lock to a bus-stop sign. Now, if you can slip out of your crutches, chain them up and get on the bus, what were you doing with the damned things to begin with?”

“I can see this guy springing off the bus at his stop, whistling happily as he unlocks them, and then hobbling away pathetically.”

“He’s probably the one in the patched fatigues I give a quarter to every other week, thieving bastard! I bet a pic of the crutches and the chain could have made the inside back cover of the *Tribune* Sunday magazine. But the more I think about it, the more I don’t like it. Somethin’s fishy.”

“Uh-huh. What else?”

“It wasn’t Chicago, but San Francisco. I was lollygagging along Market Street on a misty day not long ago and a car slammed on the brakes. Out of the car jumped an altogether naked lady. She wasn’t what I’d call young, but she was really built, with a pretty if haggard kind of face and just about the *whitest* complexion I’d seen—it was like she’d never been outside before. She had this Mona Lisa non-smile on her face. She came running straight at me, with her big flopsy boobies—”

“We were going to try to stay off that subject.”

"When did we last discuss big *flopsy* boobies? She kept going, right on past me, past a tailor shop, which might have been a good place to get something to put on."

"Had she been driving the car? Naked?"

"No. An old-ish man got out and started to spew: 'She got in with me at a stoplight, laughing! I dunno what kinda lingo came outa her! I dunno who she is! I never saw her before!' I looked in the paper the next day but didn't see anything about it. I could have captured the whole thing: her naked, running; the guy spewing. It would have made a nifty spread in one of the tabloids. Maybe she was some kind of celebrity. There's a lot of money in that. In any case, she got the kind of attention women seem to feel they need."

"How tall was she?"

"Five-five, maybe."

"What color hair did she have?"

"Brown, I guess. Why?"

"Nothing, nothing."

ANNABELLE?

"Have you eaten at Heaven on Seven?" Todd asked me. "Do you like hot food?"

"I don't know. I have in the past. I'm up for trying."

We rode the escalator to the congested eatery and stood in a short line.

"More cool photog stories? Do you take a lot of nudes? Any men?"

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"I'd be curious. It's a different thing altogether, I imagine. The lighting for a man wouldn't be the same as for a woman, correct? No soft focus, either. And what if you wanted to shoot a man and a woman naked at the same time?"

"Actually..."

"Yes?"

"One of my most prized possessions suddenly is a photographic album I made for two friends of mine. The woman wanted me to record her and...her male friends...I guess I don't want to talk about it."

"Naked? Can I see the book sometime?"

"I don't think so. It's pretty personal. I've got a cabin a couple hours north of here. Maybe we could go."

"Is that where you keep the book?"

"No. The cabin and the book are unrelated. It's my turn to change the subject. If you like this food, I'd make you some chili up there. I go there to make chili so I don't stink up my whole condo building. Atomic. Peppers so hot I have watch out when I pee."

"I'm not following you."

“You’re a man...”

“Think so?”

“No. Pretend. You chop the peppers, get the juice all over your hands, go to take a leak. See?”

“Yeow!”

“Right. You’d have to be careful, too, if you helped—”

“Helped you take a leak? Your fingers are dripping with pepper juice, so you ask me to give you a hand.”

“Helped me make chili. And we’d both have to be careful if...I can’t finish that sentence. Oh, boy.”

“‘Honey, I’m getting hot.’ ‘Heh-heh.’ ‘I mean it!’ ‘Far out.’ ‘No, stop!—I’m *burning up!*’”

“Yeah.” Todd smiled at me asymmetrically. “It’s the oil. It’s hard to wash off, even with turpentine. You have to keep your hands away from your eyes. Some people use rubber gloves. But back to the cabin...and getting hot...and another photog story. It’s smack-dab on the lake. It’s nice. So quiet you can hear the leaves turning color. I seldom see neighbors when I’m there, but I have some. The cabin to the right of mine, actually, is pretty close. The people who own it are getting old and don’t make the journey very often anymore. One Friday afternoon last summer, I noticed a racing-green Miata parked out front. I figured it couldn’t belong to the elderly couple, and I was right.

“From the bedroom of my cabin,” Todd continued, “I can see through a window in the cabin next door. Turns out to be a bathroom window. When I went to lower the shade that night—I lower my shades at night—I saw what looked like a European TV commercial for soap. There in the bathroom was a beautiful girl—like you...well, not quite a match for you physically, but your age—taking a shower with the curtain drawn back and the window wide open. The bulb was probably only a twenty-five-watter, but I could see *everything*. I could *hear* everything—the water running, a radio, and her singing softly to herself. She was loving her shower so much she was doing a sort of slo-mo dance, massaging her tight, tanned body, paying special attention to her snatch.”

The restaurant hostess said, “Two? This way.”

“She didn’t see you?”

“She must have. By then I was sitting on the floor, looking out through one corner, in the dark. But I’d left a light on in the room behind me, so my guess is she could tell my shade was being held part-way open. What a great shot it was!”

“‘Was’? You got it?”

"Yeah, I got it. I ran around setting up a tripod. I used tungsten film, telephoto lens, very long exposures. Compositionally, the pix are outstanding, with the girl centered right in the middle of the window frame, lighted in part by the bulb and in part by the moon; some blur for a sense of motion. A bit of color correction—less orange here, less blue there—would have made them worth including in my portfolio."

"Did you talk to her afterwards?"

"I wasn't about to ask her to sign a release. But I made sure to be outside the next day as she went to her car. She drove away without so much as a 'Good morning.' Never came back."

"Maybe she hadn't intended her shower to be a show for you after all."

"It's possible. But she sure could have drawn her curtain. She had to have seen my truck. She had to have heard and seen me chopping wood. She knew I was there and she knew I was a guy. And she knew my window shade was up when she started running the water."

"But maybe..."

An openly homosexual waiter swished up and said, "Can I get you guys something to drink?" Todd asked for two glasses of Guinness.

"If you're going to put up a fight, I'm gonna have to ask you a question. Stop me if I get too personal. When you shower, how much attention do you pay to your own...derriere?—you don't have to answer. This babe turned away and knelt down. I had to raise the tripod to still see her. She hung on to the edge of the tub with one hand and bent over, bottom pointed my way. Then she took the handle of a bath brush—about twice the diameter of my finger—and got it all soapy, and..."

"We'll need another minute," I told the waiter. He seemed less than fully willing to fetch our drinks.

"She got it all soapy and then slowly, really slowly, pushed it up her butt. She arched her back as she moved it in and out, moaning. She said, loud enough for me to hear over the radio, 'In the ass, in the ass!'"

"My heavens!" said the waiter and I at precisely the same time.

"It was the wildest thing I had ever seen in my whole life," Todd said to us. "Now, tell me women get off that way by themselves—anywhere outside of *Hustler*—and I'll be...plenty surprised. This was a performance, I'm telling you, and I know some guys who would have paid to see it. And some of them would be seeing it, if I'd gotten the release."

Todd sighed deeply.

"What is it now?"

"She drove off...without a word."

The waiter clicked his tongue once, sneered something unintelligible and left us. Todd watched him go.

“Moves like a woman trying to walk like a man.” He turned to me. “Please don’t play games with me, Nicole, okay? I don’t have time for them.”

Todd rubbed the pale stripe of skin where his watch once had been. “By the way,” I said, “what time *have* you got there?”

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The denims I had planned to ride in proved wrong: “I have to wear high heels with these.” I chose a pair of shorter-seamed, wider-legged jeans, then called out, “Hey, pardners,” as I lassoed my lizard Luccheses.

Despite Todd’s warning that the daily high temperature at our destination was likely to be lower than Chicagoland’s by ten or more degrees, I had not dismissed the idea of going wading. And maybe Randie would want some shots with shoot sops, toot shops, the suit tops under the shirts. Having been unable to select just one two-piece from three finalists, I packed all of them, realizing that when compressed the set took up no more space in my case than a pair of heavy socks.

I needed two sweatshirts, a couple of dressy cotton sweaters, a pair of night-gowns (one cotton, one silk), two robes (one cotton, one silk), sneakers, hiking boots and more socks to match, and some fun stuff to party in, should that opportunity present itself. On top went underthings: a wide range of brand-new brassieres and panties (some plain, some patterned), two teddies, pantyhose and leggings. Cosmetics, blow dryer, travel iron—yes.

“There,” I said as I snapped the final two clasps without any effort at all, “understated.”

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Like autumn leaves the Polaroid prints spun down. Bob Landiak, the Kalmer Sporting Goods account executive, kicked his metal attaché shut with the heel of a brogue and exclaimed, “Real winners! Good job, Todd! Randie, you were the greatest! Nicole?—what can I say? I never would have guessed someone with your...credentials could be so down-to-earth and easy to work with.” My “credentials.” I like a woman with big credentials. “And ‘bye, Danny...um...wherever you are.”

This was in reference to one Danny Stimage, Todd’s nephew, a talentless, sleepy, creepy reptile of a teenager who was now trying to dribble an old basketball, “Plat, plat, plat,” somewhere out back behind Todd’s north-woods hideaway.

“Thanks again, everybody!” Landiak started up his Oldsmobile and switched on its headlights. The tires sent gravel skipping.

“Yahoo!” shouted trimly taut Randie Westerdahl, stylist and keeper of the pins, throwing her arms around Todd. She began bouncing on her tiptoes in a way I did not find amusing; Todd did not join in. He broke away and ran a paisley bandanna across his scalp. Randie said, “Don’t be a poop—you know you got some terrific ones.” She gently rapped the lid of his red-and-white plastic picnic cooler, in which thirty rolls of Ektachrome were nestled like fertilized eggs waiting to hatch. “What say we stop on the way back down for pizza and beer? Nicole?”

As a favor to me, without my permission but with my later understanding, Todd had shown some of the studio nudes to Landiak. Reportedly, Landiak, feeling certain he had seen me somewhere—seen me naked somewhere—had asked whether my likeness had ever appeared in a publication which might still have me on exclusive. I had told Todd no, adding that, by the way, all of the Birst pictures had been hopelessly, unsalvageably overexposed by my boss’s goon of a son.

The thirty rolls of Ektachrome contained pictures of me, posed in outdoorsy khaki togs in front of a pup tent, with and without special-effect campfire, with and without manufactured sunrise/sunset. Centered in all of them, I

would come to find out, were the bellows pockets of my shirts, which bulged to the point of bursting as though I had loaded them with butts, with nuts and berries for the whole long winter to come. (This effect had caused Danny, who seemed to survive on nothing but Cheetos, to spend the day with mouth more often open than closed, displaying to me glob after glob of Day-Glo-orange paste.)

"I still have to get the lights and crap," Todd said, "and I have to take the tent down, but if Danny helps—for once—we should be done about eight. When you see him, tell him about the potential eats, and then let him know without mincing words I want him to get his lazy ass over here *pronto*."

The final shot of the day had thrown Danny into a tizzy. It had been Jill's impromptu idea. She had asked Todd to position a strobe fitted with an amber filter in front of me and a conical spotlight with an azure one behind, alongside the camera. I was, with her help, to put my arms through the sleeves of a crisp beige shirt. I was to hold it as though I was just then either putting it on or taking it off. The light from behind me was to illuminate my upper back and neck, and my face in profile, only enough to offer a hint of reflective skin. The light Todd "pumped" in from the front was to cast the silhouette of my right breast, also in profile, onto the shirt. From Danny's vantage point behind the strobe, in the beam of a small "modeling" lamp, my gleaming white brassiere and bare midriff had been fully viewable. Initially he had looked askance at me and then more directly as I turned my face away. Between the first and second shots I had made eye contact with him and he had taken flight, emitting noises like those of a rabbit hanging from a noose. Randie, Todd and I had all begun laughing so hard we could no longer work and Todd called it the "martini shot"—a "wrap."

I followed Randie into the cabin. She went to the back door, opened it and yelled, "Go help Todd." Then to me she said, "Here's something for you to think about: We don't have to drive to Chicago tonight if we don't want to. Danny'll go get the pizza, bring it back and we'll eat it here. Todd's got beer, I'm sure. He and Danny can sleep out on the porch—Todd *likes* to sleep on the porch, even when it's cold—and us girls will have a slumber party!"

Oh he does, does he? And how would you know? "Thanks. Sounds fun. But I must ask Todd to take me home. Before we leave, though, I've got to do one more thing or I believe I'll die: take a shower. What with all the hair spray and B.O. and smoke from the smoke machine, I smell like a worn-out mothball. And"—I pressed my fingertips to my forearm and dramatically peeled them away—"I'm *sticky*. Horrible, horrible, *horrible*. I'm turning my own stomach."

"It's not bad, really," said Randie. She pinched her nose and added, "Oddest."

The bathroom door squeaked "Hey there!" and I exited. My legs were clad in jeans like those worn by Monroe in *The Misfits*. The tails of my fresh, oversized, safari-like top were tied, Monroe-like, in a knot above my outie. No shoes, no makeup. "Hi," I said.

"Hi. Something to...something to...to..."

"Snap out of it."

Todd slapped himself in the face. "Drink?"

"Sure. What you're having."

"Jack Daniel's." He took a glass from the cupboard and blew into it. Reconsidering, he rinsed it, dried it. "Randie and Danny hit the road."

"Are they coming back?"

"No."

"Why's that?"

"She's on a rag. Crabby as hell. I told her so. That made her crabbiest. She collected her crap and split. But why don't we stay?"

"I see."

"I've got all I need to whip up a makeshift dinner with. Leftover chili frozen."

"No."

"It's way better than Heaven on Seven's."

"No."

"Tuna sandwiches? I have a big can of tuna." He began to sing—to the tune of "Guantanamera"—"One canna tuna, yes I have one canna tuna..."

"Uh-uh."

"Don't like tuna. Okay—"

"It's not the menu."

"We'll build a fire. Burn logs, sleep—separately, of course—like logs. Let the forest as it wakes up wake us up."

"Uh-uh."

"Watch the golden sunlight start sneaking in, make coffee, make pancakes—"

"Uh-uh."

"Oatmeal?"

"It's not the menu."

"Go for a walk down by the lake, row around in the boat. Breathe. Think. Remember. Or forget. Go fishing!"

“Uh-uh. I’d refuse to catch anything.” Stogy and I had done much angling, but I had seldom touched a pole since and now felt the pastime repulsive.

“I wouldn’t make you bait your own hook with a poor wormie-worm and I wouldn’t make you take the poor fishie-fish off the hook and I sure as heck wouldn’t make you watch me clean the poor dead fishies. But you *would* have to dangle a line in the water.”

“Why?”

“It’s the principle.”

“Does this line have a hook on it?”

“Yup.”

“But no worm.”

“There has to be a worm.”

“No way.”

“Then lunch meat.”

“Will that work?”

“Probably not. Maybe.”

“Then no.”

“I’ll give you a rubber band, then.”

“Will *that* work?”

“Absolutely not. No fish is stupid enough to go for that. I swear on the name of the Big Fisherman: Saint Peter himself couldn’t catch a fish with a rubber band.”

“So I have a line with a hook and a rubber band on it. What about yours? Are you going to catch some fish?”

“Well, sure. Oh, hell. No, I guess not.”

“Accommodations?”

“Not much—it’s a rowboat.”

“Overnight.”

“Strictly on the up and up: Me out there, you in here. Lock me out. Put chairs up under the doorknobs if you want. I’ll knock in the morning. Cross my heart and hope to die.”

“Stick a needle?”

“Yup.”

“Fix me a sandwich with lots of mayo and I’ll think about it.”

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“Brisk out there?”

Todd Bergau had come in rubbing his shoulders. I had a pot of hot coffee and two unmatched mugs waiting. He spun a wicked, a rickety wooden chicken, kitchen chair around and sat on it backwards. I filled the mugs. One was emblazoned “Gramps”; the other, “Sault Sainte Marie, Mich.”

“I’ve been thinking,” Todd said. “Going to Denmark. Getting an operation. If you can’t *beat* em...a *joke*. But to tell you the truth, I can see why it happens. It’s envy. I’m envious. Of you. I’m envious of *women*. The way you’re put *together*. Breasts and waists and butts and legs...it goes on forever.”

“Uh-huh?” I made an ooh mouth and took a sip.

“Well, it’s *great*. Every now and then I do think about what it would be like to wake up one morning and be a woman, just for a day.”

“One day? That wouldn’t give you a very good idea. You’d probably spend it at home, watching yourself masturbate, which is not what women do very often—watching themselves, that is. What is it, in your opinion, that makes what women have so enviable?” (Of course I knew.) “Do you think owning breasts is—in the greater scheme of things—”

“Must be! Maybe you’ve gotten used to them, but if I had ’em for a day it would be like I was my own Disneyland. I’d go for a walk with my sex appeal busting right out there—busting—get stared at and flirted with and stare and flirt right back. Everything women do is for the sake of sex appeal.”

“I’m not drinking this coffee for the sake of sex appeal.”

“No, maybe not. But that doesn’t mean what you’re doing isn’t full of it. Why have you got lipstick on, first thing in the morning?”

“Habit, I guess.”

“A damned sexy habit. Lipstick *works*. You babes are so lucky. Man, oh man. Women say they dislike being sex objects, but every man I know would gladly give his right arm to be one.”

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“Would you like to hear a secret?” Todd reached into a weathered plywood box and fumbled with a stained and faded life vest. “Can you swim?”

“I don’t know.”

“Then you can’t. So you’re going to wear this. I don’t like men. I like women.”

“That was my assumption.”

“A lot. I don’t want you to think I’m gay, or bi, or anything out of the ordinary. I am not a fag.”

“Be careful, or you’ll start to sound like Tricky Dick: ‘I am not a crook.’ The lady—the fellow—doth protest too much.”

Todd hunched over, lowered his eyebrows and did an adequate impersonation of Richard Nixon: “I am not a fag,” he repeated, his hands forming “victory” signs or quotation marks at either side of his head. “I’ve got the build and the job that might lead people to think so, and I have to admit I’ve been hit on a few times by men—obscene phone calls, whispered, offering blowjobs. I’m hetero through and through, though.”

“Is that the secret? It’s not a very good one.”

“No. The time was a couple of years ago. I was dating, I guess you could say, this nervy Marshall Field’s buyer named Jen.”

“Jennifer? Jennifer Keck.”

“How would you know?”

“You told me about her. The pictures you took of her with Joel Silverman. I’d still like to see them. Did you ever make it a threesome? Is that the secret?”

“I don’t remember telling you. I told you? And no, not a threesome. I said: I’m not—”

“You took turns.” I grabbed his hand. “I’m all ears.”

“No you’re not—nothing could be further from the truth. We did take turns: Joel one weekend; me the next.”

I could only half-listen, for I was suddenly consumed by the effort of searching for a memory of this. None made its existence known. I possessed virtually no mental images of Joel Silverman’s life except for the Dick Van Dyke, “hubba-hubba” episode. How I wanted to possess them!

“We both knew,” Todd said. “Jen liked us both very much. She wanted us both, and we made ourselves available to her and stayed friends. Joel and I compared notes. She knew we did. It became a game of ‘Can you top this?’ We sometimes complained to each other and to her, but we didn’t want to stop seeing her and she knew it. She had us by the balls...two in each hand.”

“I like this girl.”

“I suppose it does sound neat to you—being a female star that male planets revolve around. Is that what it’s like?—having what every man wants, having a—”

“Pussy?”

“I wasn’t going to say that. Is that your word for it?”

“Does it bother you?”

“Coming from a woman, kind of. I never heard a babe use that word before.”

“Sorry. I’ll never use it again around you, you fuddy-duddy. So, is this a story about Jennifer’s?”

“Jennifer’s what?”

“Pussy.”

Todd laughed. “Yeah, I suppose. She started having us both over at the same time. That’s when I started to lose interest. Any man would. Know your female companion went to bed with another guy last weekend, you can deal with it for tonight; know she’s in bed with another guy down the hall while you wait, you can’t. Sloppy seconds are not most men’s cup of tea. I want to be someone’s one and only. A woman’s.”

“Never a triad?” I did not know the answer.

“It was never all three of us at the same time in bed. And never Joel and me in bed without Jen. Swear.”

“‘In bed,’ you say. What about that shower?”

“What shower?”

“The...there must have been a shower for the three of you after the three of you...got together...on those times you got together to...get together. How was that handled? Is that the secret?”

“No. We three did use to shower together afterward, but Joel and I kept our hands to ourselves—uh, that is, we never touched each other.”

The truth? I had no way of knowing. I remembered starting the water, running it nice and hot, while Todd and Jen remained behind, but nothing more.

I shouted, for all the wildlife in the county to hear, “And now the big secret!”

“It’s gonna be a big letdown, I think, after all this. Joel had arranged a masquerade party for his clients, their clients and friends at Scoozy. Jen wanted to surprise Joel by going as him and having me go as her. A real gender-bender is

what she had in mind. She begged and pleaded and threatened me and finally I gave in. She put me up to stealing some clothes for her from Joel's house and got some from Field's for me.

"The night of the shindig she got ready in maybe thirty minutes—a new record for her—even though she had to spend some extra time binding her boobs down with an Ace bandage and messing with a stick-on mustache. I used to have a mustache of sorts. But for me? I'll bet it was an hour and a half, easy—more like two. I asked her to let me wear opaque tights, so I wouldn't have to shave my legs. No way. So I shaved 'em, even though they don't get very hairy. I have to say they felt pretty cool. I wasted some time because I couldn't stop touching them. It was like I was touching a woman's legs and feeling my legs being touched...feeling the touch from both sides at once."

"Yes."

"I asked to wear a calf-length dress instead of the short skirt she got me. She wouldn't have it; told me I would look like a schoolmarm. I said I would wear rolled-up socks somehow in my shirt, but she insisted on a bra. And I said I'd put on lipstick but that was that. Nope. She had mascara, blush, eyeliner—the whole shebang. She did most of my face first, then left me alone to do the clothing. She made me go put it all on in her kitchen. She didn't want me to see myself until everything was complete.

"The brassiere was a puzzle. Climb in like getting into a vest backwards, I figured, then reach around and hook the clasp. But the ends weren't easy to reach. It could have been a straight-jacket. Then I got an idea. I pulled off the contraption and put it on around my waist like a belt, with the hooks in front. Once it was hooked, I hauled it around and hoisted it up. Smart?"

"It's been done. What did you put inside it? Sandbag ashtrays—"

"Would you believe she had filled Baggies with grape Jell-O? She used the recipe for Jigglers."

Grape Jell-O. Aha! "And?"

"Oh, yeah. They jiggled good. She used one of her own swimsuit tops as a mold. And the wire twister things looked like nips poking out."

"Uncommon attention to detail. Why grape?"

"That's all she had, I guess. Lemon would have been better. Wait till you hear the rest.

"The panty hose were a problem. The first time I tried, I got them all twisted. The second time, I didn't stretch them out equally all the way and ended up with stripes of dark and light. The third time—it would have been the *last* time—they looked good.

“The blouse was fairly straightforward once I figured out the reversed buttons. And the skirt I put on the same way as the bra—get everything set up in front, slide it around.

“Then the shoes. Jen had brought me a half-dozen pairs in various sizes off the clearance rack at Payless—spikes—way out of fashion but only five bucks a box. I pushed my feet into a pair and stayed still for a second, trying to predict whether I could move without spraining an ankle. That was the easy part. I might not look it, but I’m pretty strong. I’ve taken a few lessons in aikido.”

“What’s that?”

“A martial-arts thing. It’s got a lot of Eastern-religion garbage in it, but the physical training part is good. Practitioners are called ‘aikidoka.’”

“Okie-dokie.” I did not smile then.

“I could show you a few moves.”

“And I, you.”

“Yeah, I’ll bet you could. You’ll have to show me your walk in heels. I could get around, but nothing like the way you do. I have to think I have pretty hefty ankle muscles, because I found no trouble at all in handling those shoesies. It’s a matter of realizing there’s more leverage than usual, being always aware of it, and not trying to do much of anything.”

“Uh-huh—that’s the idea.”

“They’re not for walking. They’re for standing. They’re not very good for that, either. They’re for sitting. I found, at least at first, being on tiptoe like that wasn’t excruciating.”

“Not for long, though.”

“Right. How do you do it? Do women love pain?”

“We understand it. We endure. It makes us strong, keeps us alert. Think about labor. Like shitting a bowling ball, I’ve heard. Yet women want to do it, again and again. Continue.”

“From high heels to childbirth?”

“Part of the process. You were saying?”

“Next, an expensive wig. I stepped out of the bedroom and there sat Jen, dumbstruck. She couldn’t say anything. All she did while she brushed out the wig and stuck on my fake nails was go, ‘Um, um, um.’ When she took me to a mirror, I freaked. I looked so good I didn’t know what to do with myself. Here’s why I know I’m straight: I didn’t want to be the woman in the mirror; I wanted to undress the woman in the mirror and ball her brains out. She wasn’t Jen, of course; she was somebody new. And she was me. Do you have any idea what I’m talking about?”

“Yes, I do. I think.”

“Jen got turned on and wanted a quickie, but I told her I wasn’t about to get undressed and dressed again. All of a sudden, I wanted to go to the party right away, to see if I could fool everybody.”

“Did you get hit on?”

“No! I just stood in a corner trying not to look around and not saying a word. No one but Jen talked to me the whole time. Then I had to take a cab to her place after an hour so I could wash and change.”

“Why so soon?”

“Joel, who wasn’t fooled, grabbed my tit and squeezed too hard. The Baggie came open. I looked like I’d been shot.”

“Grape! I get it! Have you wanted to do it again?”

“That’s the secret. Yes. Yes, I have wanted to. I’d like to get really good at it and be able relax enough so I could stop thinking about myself and watch people watching me. It would be a rush.”

“For me, too. To watch you. I believe it would be.”

“For real?”

“Uh-huh. The transformation of man to woman can be a really cool thing, depending on the man. I’ve got some articles in my closet you might like to experiment with. The tips I could give you about makeup! Wouldn’t it be a trip for the two of us to go out that way? You could borrow one of my bras and we’d make it a foursome.”

“I don’t think I’m ready...with you.”

“You could take pictures...and...” I stopped. “Todd, I was at that party,” I said. And I had been. “I hadn’t remembered until you mentioned the girl who had been ‘shot.’ I remember hearing the excitement...and wondering why people weren’t more upset. That’s where I first met Joel and got your card. I was with the Berberoglu and Doig ad agency—account side—at the time. In a costume also.”

“What did you do?—slap on a red rubber nose and go as Jugs the Clown? I can’t think of any way you could disguise—”

“Two years ago I looked nothing like the way I look now.”

“Is this *your* secret?”

“Yes. I did not come into the world as Nicole Christine Baker. I used to be a boy named Larry Hibbs. But I too was dressed as a girl at the party. A work in progress.”

That stopped him, as the idiom goes, dead in his tracks. He gave me the once-over. “No way.” He gave me the twice-over. “No.”

I grinned smugly and continued on. “Maybe we should go to Denmark together. I could use some touch-up work here and there.”

Todd said to me as he caught up, “You’re the mashed potatoes.”

My lopsided jaw hinted at a need for explanation. “Sure it’s not ‘the cat’s pajamas?’”

“On Neary’s plate. Richard Dryfus and Teri Garr. At the dinner table, with the boy who made tears come so—”

“Got it. Devils Tower.”

“Neary had something going on inside his head that was tearing him apart. The information the dudes from outer space had stuck there was growing like a seed, branching out—see?” Todd raised his hands toward a majestic maple. “He didn’t know what it meant, didn’t know what to do with it. I feel like that, like somebody shoved an acorn in my ear. I’ve got an oak tree growing inside my skull. Pretty soon twigs are gonna start coming out. And then...well, *look*.” His Vibram lug bounced off a rock with an inch-wide crack down the middle. “My head’s gonna split open like so.”

“This acorn—it is I?”

“Yes. You’re in my head now, and you’re growing, taking over. I want you. More than anything. You’re a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity I can’t ignore. But you’re out of my league. I can touch you”—he did so—“but I don’t know if I will ever *touch* you. In order to cope, I tell myself if I finally had you all to myself, you’d turn out to be something a hundred-eighty degrees different from what I expected. You’d make promises and break them—say you loved me and then cheat on me—and I’d be stuck with a woman I didn’t like but couldn’t live without.”

“I respect a man who thinks ahead.”

“I’m falling in love with you, you know.”

“Uh-oh. That’s it. Good bye. *Hasta la vista*. I’m going home. I’ll wait right here for the bus. See ya.”

“Hold it.”

“Hold it yourself. Maybe we should bring this to a halt. Maybe this is wrong. Maybe our being together is a disaster waiting to happen. It *is* wrong. Our being together *is* a disaster waiting to happen. I dislike myself for not seeing that earlier.”

“Women either *don’t* see that or *won’t* see that. ‘Here we are, men,’ they say, ‘all soft and ripe and silky and slippery—ohnies and ibbies—just the way you like us.’ And then they say, ‘Let’s be buddies.’”

“What?—‘ohnies’ and what?”

“Ibbies.”

Todd told me he had coined those words when he was two years old.

“Ohnie” was the result of his attempt to approximate the then-unpronounceable “olive.” Soon the term had subsumed other either sweet or salty but always soft, little round things that were to be put in the mouth. Although

some types of processed snacks could be called ohnies, the tendency of candies and cookies to quickly dissolve made them much less ohnie-like than green grapes and similar organic treats encased in thin skins, for the tactile thrill an ohnie provided while one held it between one's tongue and cheek, exploring its smooth and fragile exterior, was as important to the experience as the juiciness waiting inside. Part of the joy of having an ohnie, Todd said, was the way in which one could tease oneself with it, fighting off the temptation to bite down hard.

"Ibbie" was the closest Todd had theretofore been able to come to "ribbon." The original ibbie was his blanket, or in his parlance of the period, "Bank." Friend Bank *per se* eventually disintegrated into lint—the result of weekly trips through the washing machine—but Todd seemed not to care, for he had retained its satin-trim essence to wrap around his left hand and to stroke with his right. Whenever he had misplaced this ibbie, he had averted emotional catastrophe with a strip of Christmas ribbon or a layer of raw onion skin. Later, growing through puberty, his need to run his fingertips along similarly smooth and slippery surfaces had increased. Silk slips, satin bra straps and patent-leather heels were ibbies of a very highly satisfying kind.

"So women are made up entirely of ohnies and ibbies," Todd said, "which they keep just out of reach of their 'buddies.' Can you imagine how frustrating? Whichever way—you and I keep seeing each other as buddies or we don't see each other at all—I'm gonna have trouble coping." A flat stone which Todd had whipped out into the lake skipped eight times before going under.

I tried the stone trick. My missile went "Glup!" once, never to be seen again—I threw like a girl.

"Have you ever noticed what happens to barefoot two-year-olds on a real scorcher of a beach?"

"I'm not sure—"

"After sitting on the towel with Mommy, they get brave and decide to go off on their own. Mommy tries to grab them and hold them back, but they get away, squealing so happy. Then their feet hit the sand. It must be like a red-hot iron to that skin! They start running around in circles crying—they don't know enough to head on back to the towel. Finally they stop and stand in one spot and scream."

"Yes?"

"I have to do it. Plug your ears."

"It's best to get it out of your system," I said.

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Drifting in Todd's boat brought to me a less-than-fully formed memory from a childhood—most likely Patty Mattingly's or Lori Griffin's. I grinned as I poured coffee from a Thermos bottle. "I have to tell you a story," I said to him as he creaked, as he worked the creaky oars. "I haven't thought about this in years. I believe it was the only other time in my life I ever came close to being a girl fishing. I was three or four. It was nighttime. My father stood me on the end of a dock with a big life jacket on me—about the size of this one"—I punched my kapok-filled vest—"and put a pole in my hands. He and his brother sat on the shore, a few steps away, talking and drinking beer. I was a sleepy person. And so, I guess, I took a nap."

"Standing up?"

"Uh-huh. I went 'Foop!'—right off the end of the dock."

The bottom of the boat scraped against sand. We had reached a fog-shrouded outcropping in what appeared to be the exact center of the circular lake. It was not big enough to support a grove of more than fifty trees. I felt as though Todd and I were to be the only two human beings to set foot upon its gnat, its mat of needles and leaves since time began. Todd jumped out of the boat and hauled it with me in it up onto the shore. Gallantly he took my hand as I wobbled out. Early morning mist remained suspended over the lake's surface.

"Todd," I continued, "I can still remember the color of the water: It was pea-soup green." I crouched to examine a lump of lichen that looked like a wilted Chia Pet. "As I recall it, I was under for a whole minute. But in reality, it must have been just a few seconds—maybe not *one*. I'm pretty sure I would have bobbed back up to the surface all by myself, but I didn't get the chance, because Uncle...Uncle...*Frank* hoisted me up and out with one arm. He and Daddy took me inside the car to warm me up. On the way home they bought me hot chocolate. They pampered me and apologized and promised my mom I'd never have to go fishing again. But here I am. They lied."

I waited for a reply. None came. "So," I said, "good story? Close call, yes? Todd?"

Todd had turned himself into a tripod by pressing his back into a tree. One of the smaller of his cameras was pointed my way. Its motor drive sounded like some kind of locust.

“Look here and smile,” he said. “Get rid of the vest. Open your jacket.”

“Want me to freeze?”

“No. I want you to steam. Start to unbutton your shirt, real slow. Keep looking. Good. Next I want you to grab the top edges of your bra cups and pull them down hard, over your tits, like you’re flashing. If that wrecks it, I’ll buy you a new one.”

“I’m not wearing a bra.”

“You’re not wearing...”

“See?”

“Yes. Right. *Ahem*. Hold that, there,” he said. “Let’s have a face like this really turns you on.”

“It does, kind of.”

The smells of the moist earth—grassy, mossy, musty—brought an evil curl to my lips. I imagined adding to the pungent aromatic mix a dash of my own musky seasoning, for, if human females, like their sisters from other species, emitted pheromones—olfactory beacons which guide males to docking—invisible clouds of my readiness scent were wafting through the frogs, through the trees like fog.

“Good. Look at me. Big smile. Super. Now I want a face like a kid who got caught doing something bad. Yes. Finger at your lips. Bite your fingernail. Show me those teeth. Put your finger in a bit. Suck on it. Excellent.”

Todd sat to change lenses. I stretched my shirt and jacket around myself and inched over to the edge of tiny stream which cut through the island. “Look,” I said as I jumped back, “Guppies!”

Said Todd, still at work with his camera, recording my every move, “You’ve lived in the city too long, li’l darlin’. They’re *minnows*.”

“Right. Of *course* they’re minnows.” I squatted down and said, “Come look at this. Do you see what they’re doing?”

“Swimming?” Todd’s motor whirled. “Let your jacket and shirt fall open. More. Chin up.”

“Yes, silly, but do you see how?”

“With their fins?” It whirled again.

“No. Well, yes. But, they’re swimming against the current. And the water is moving as fast as they are, so they’re staying in the same place.”

“That’s me all over,” Todd said. “I get caught up in the current. I fight it because I think I owe it to myself to fight it and because going with the flow would take me who knows where. But I don’t fight it enough to get ahead. And

I don't even know what it is to get ahead. I guess I don't care about getting anywhere." He sat down beside me. "Except with you." He kissed the cold tip of my nose. "How'm I doin'?"

Squinting one eye, I said, "Ehhh."

"Now we *are* talking *Playboy*," Todd said. "Those are gonna be *mwah*, if I do say so myself. I'm going to love the ones of you here by the stream—a real nature girl. They'll be like the ones they run along the bottom of the 'Data Sheet.' You've got a knack, for sure. I'll see what I can do to get them shown around, if you want me to. The pictures."

"I don't know. I'll have to think about that. Can we go back soon? I'm getting really chilly. What about my goosebumps?"

"What about 'em?"

"Aren't they going to show?"

"I used a soft-focus filter. They'll blend in nicely."

My teeth clacked together, woodpecker-like. Todd wrapped me in a blanket.

I began telling another meandering tale from the life of a teenage boy. Larry Hibbs? No. David Sciubba? Maybe. It had something to do with a wintertime camp-out and frozen canteens. Shit on Shingles—ground beef and white flour gravy on toast—ice-cold and gaggingly inedible. A Boy Scout...Beverly Ellenwood's candy-selling rapid learner. I looked up to see Todd's camera sitting on the ground by the stream, but no Todd. Again he had wandered off. I shouted his name.

"I'm over here," came the ruffled, the muffled reply. Stealthily, like an Indian, I thought, I sneaked through the forest under my Navaho shawl, following a trail many other moccasins had trod. Todd was standing behind a mammoth, graffiti-covered boulder—some sort of totem—with his back to me. "Gimme a second," he pleaded, "a second."

I crept around to his side. He was wiggling a flaccid, meaty penis, shaking from it a few last drops of urine. I watched his member grow tumescent. My nearness was causing a tangible change in another being's physiology, redirecting the flow of blood. For the first time this struck me as psychokinesis: Next, I would change the course of sap in an evergreen.

"You're not helping," Todd said. He seemed to have forgotten that erect penises do not readily bend in the middle. "I'm never gonna get it back in if you—"

"Touch it?" I took the underside of his throbbing cock in one hand and stroked its head with the other as though it were a chipmunk I wished to tame.

"Oh, Christ!"

"The only thing to do at a time like this," I interjected, "is start all over." I unfastened his chinos and slid them past his groin. I slid down his bikini-style

briefs as well. Saying, "Settle down, Mister Happy," I then pressed his penis against his abdomen and held it there while pulling his briefs back up. I pulled up his chinos, buttoned them and zipped them. In conclusion I gave his little...no, it was not little. I gave his erection a little pat. "Best if you don't force the issue," I said. "Nice and easy does it all the time." I kissed his nose. It was cold. "Good things come to those who wait."

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“Some collection you have here.” I drew a heavy binder from a bowed pine shelf.

“The *Playboys*? All the way back to Volume One, Issue Seven. I buy and sell. I take any loss as a tax write-off. It’s a tough job, but...”

“The photography really has changed, hasn’t it? Hey, daddy-o, how hip is this?”

“Dig the new cigarette smoldering in the ashtray—so sexy. And the women, too. Look here, and here. What was hard-on inducing in the Fifties and Sixties looks flabby, dumpy and mostly unappealing these days. Here’s to technology.”

We clinked our beer bottles together. I set mine down so I could switch books.

“Three-and-a-half decades ago,” I said. “Man! Berlin Wall going up. Fallout shelters being built. Kids in school hiding under their desks, practicing what to do when the bombs came. Chimpanzees in space. Yuri Gagarin, too. Did you know he was only five-foot-two? Warhol paints his soup cans. ‘Soul’ music debuts. Skirts hovering around mid-knee, but no minis yet. Stretch pants with stirrup straps. Those ‘little nothings’ for evening. ‘Panti-hose’ introduced.”

“That last one was a big mistake.”

“‘The Twist.’ *West Side Story* hits the big screen. ‘Sing Along With Mitch’ is on the little one.”

“Are you finding that all in the magazines?”

“No. Remembering.”

“Can’t be.”

“They’re things my parents told me. Those were bad times. Everyone so scared of nuclear war. Race wars. Hangups of all kinds still ruling people. You could feel the tension building. The Hippies had to come and save us from it all. They were messiahs. They came and freed us. ‘Have fun,’ they insisted, and we did.”

“Who’s ‘we’? You talk like you were there.”

“It’s interesting how the world has changed. A short time ago, if you saw a guy talking to himself on the street, you figured he was insane; now you look for his cell phone. If you saw a guy running down the street, you figured he was a criminal; a girl, she was trying to get away from one. Call the cops. Now people everywhere are running up and down the street in what looks like their underwear with their phones and we wish we had their discipline and focus.”

“Here’s to physical fitness. I think women are getting more and more beautiful all the time. Tighter and firmer. It’s reached a point,” Todd continued, “where I don’t much care to look at boobs that aren’t like yours—ones that don’t droop. Since implants became available, I’ve seen so many big ones that aren’t droopy that I find the droopy ones depressing. That’s probably been the biggest change of all since *Playboy* started. Just a few years back...this book here.” He threw an arm around my waist to fetch nineteen-eighty-six. He flipped to November. Donna Edmondson. “Extra-cute face, deserving of the Playmate of the Year title, I guess, considering the era. But look at how squishy her tits are. When she’s standing up, the stylist has to give them support. In the centerfold pic, she’s pulling up on her bra to hold her boobs in place, see? When she’s lying down, the stylist has her move her arms in to squeeze her boobs together and up. If she doesn’t, they ooze into her armpits like Silly Putty.”

“I don’t ever want to have boobs like those.”

“I don’t think you will.”

“Hmm.”

“There are all kinds of things going on in *Playboy* shoots to make things look better than life.”

“Such as?”

“You’ll never see peach fuzz on a face, although a lot of women have it.”

“Not me. Not me?”

“Not you. Others get it airbrushed away. Back in the old days, people who thought it made a difference used to accuse *Playboy* of airbrushing the playmates to get rid of peach fuzz and zits, and Hefner kept saying ‘No!’ But I’m sure they did clean ’em up. Even the most beautiful women have some small defect they wouldn’t mind having erased.”

“Do I? Where? What is it?”

“Chill out. That mole on your tummy is the only one I can recall. It didn’t bother me and it doesn’t bother me, but reproduced at centerfold size it’d look like somebody used the magazine to kill a fly. Sorry. So I’m sure *Playboy* would want it deleted. No big deal. So what if a model in *Playboy* gets to be just a bit more perfect than she really is by having her teensy-weensy hint of a mustache bleached electronically?”

“I don’t have a mustache. I don’t have a mustache. Where’s a mirror?”

“I’m not saying you do. Shit! Chill, already! You don’t have a mustache! You *don’t*. I’m just trying to make the point that today there’s no limit to what can be done with computers. Eyebrows can be reshaped. Lipstick can be lightened or darkened. Hair color can be changed from auburn to blond to red and back with the click of a mouse. And it goes way beyond that. If a model is a bit thick-

waisted, her middle can be trimmed down a pixel at a time. Boobs can be stretched first this way, then that way. Necks and legs can be lengthened.”

“Does this happen?”

“To some degree, for covers of mags like *Playboy* and *Cosmo* and *Vogue*, but not inside and not much anywhere else. Taken too far, the results would be obviously fake.”

“And really insulting to the model, don’t you agree? I don’t think I’d feel like posing a second time for a magazine that filed down my muskrat-like incisors, because I think of them as kind of my trademark, like Cindy Crawford’s beauty mark.”

“Right.”

“Are they really muskrat-like?”

“No.”

“You didn’t say they weren’t.”

“God.”

“Finish—I’ll keep my fish lips shut.”

“Good.”

“Do I—?”

“You don’t have fish lips. Yours are big and fat and every man on the planet Earth including me wants to bite and chew on them all day long. And I don’t know any guy who thinks fish have lips he wants to bite and chew, so there’s the proof you don’t have lips like a fish. Can I have a bite?”

“Fat? You said ‘fat.’ How fat? *Too* fat? I have to go see.”

“No. Not fat. Luscious. Juicy.”

“Think so? Better. A lot better.”

“So now can I?” He did not wait for my permission.

I found kissing Todd while holding a heavy book to my breast to be unwieldy. I pulled away early.

“Cindy Crawford,” he said after a time. “Let’s go to the sofa.” I took a pair of books with me.

“The first magazine cover Cindy did, they erased her beauty mark. Since then she’s had a clause in every contract stopping everyone from messing with it. And that’s a good thing. What would happen if someone at a computer decided you needed to move up another two cup sizes—Double Es, for Christ’s sake—and down a few belt notches at the waist, to, say, where Pamela Anderson Lee got with her corset in that stupid movie *Barb Wire*. Sixteen or the like? I’m not saying you need that, you see? But let’s say they thought you did. Imagine if they decided to stretch your legs out longer than they are now—they’re not *too* long now, okay?—to make you appear six-foot-four. You’d look like a chick from another planet. You almost do as it is.”

“Another hum-dinger of a compliment. Do you have all the Playmates memorized?”

“Mammorized? Close, to the early Nineties. In the past few years there have been a bunch of issues I haven’t opened—I just get ’em and stack ’em up in the army trunk here. You could be in one of the newest ones and I wouldn’t know it. It’s not the turn-on it used to be. Seen two, seen ’em all, with a couple truly outstanding exceptions, the way I look at it.” Todd allowed me to observe him staring at my bosom with magnified intensity. “I’m jaded.”

“And annoyed, right?”

“Yeah. It’s annoying.”

“How about me? Do I annoy you?”

“Only when you get sensitive about your looks. And then you want to pose naked for me. I don’t get it.”

I put one volume on the floor and opened the other. “Hey, this McArthur sure is a cutie. January nineteen-eighty-two. Not one of the tightest, but itsy-bitsy body with those great big—”

“I’m not saying what you did at my studio and on the island—or the bra shot with Randie and Danny—was wrong or anything. I was there, egging you on. I’m only trying to understand why you got into it so much, so fast. If Landiak had asked for the silhouette with no bra, would you have done it?”

“Five-foot-three, one-hundred-one pounds. Thirty-seven, twenty-two, thirty-four. Boing!”

“My guess is, if you thought it was going to be in *Playboy*, you would have. Other women would have, too. Maybe Randie, for all I know, but she’s got all these freckles.” He stopped and waited.

I did not take the bait. “Uh-huh.”

“Posing for *Playboy* with the fame and the money and the offers from B-movie moguls that go along with it is one thing, but listen: A photographer friend of mine in Iowa had the ridiculous idea once of shooting enough pictures for a book he wanted to title *Des Best Breasts in Des Moines*. He put an ad in the paper saying so. He got more than a hundred positive calls in a week.”

“Nineteen years old when these were taken. Imagine the fun she had growing up. These are real, right?”

“I thought so. But I’ve seen pictures of her later where they look to have doubled in size. So maybe not. Would you put that away? Women in backwater Des Moines, Iowa...Please? Women were willing to line up to have Tom Veenschoten, a zero in the field, first look at their breasts, going, ‘Hmm, well I don’t know,’ and then, if they were lucky, have him shoot them for a project everyone knew would go nowhere. Why? I think it is to be pride.”

“Am I really beautiful?” I turned to face him.

“Oh, God! When does it stop?”

“I think that’s the question being asked.”

“Oh—by women in general. Are you saying you think it’s a *lack* of confidence at work? I’m a Playmate now: ‘People say I’m attractive, but I need proof, proof and more proof. The more beautiful people say I am, the more proof I need. Gimme, gimme, gimme your attention, I beg of you, all of you. Send me fan mail! Pin me up on your wall! Wish for me, pray for me! When millions of men are doing that, I’ll start feeling okay about myself...maybe.’”

“It’s possible.”

“Sounds like you’re really mixed up.”

“Me? I am not mixed up.”

“No?”

“I am not a part of this.”

“Of course not.”

“It does not involve me.”

“Uh-huh. Women. So confused.”

“*They’re* confused? And you dig wearing their clothes?”

“It’s hard being a man looking at women he’ll never have.”

“It isn’t hard. But it isn’t much fun, either.”

“And how would you know?”

“I have yet to meet a man who hasn’t said so—as soon as he thought he could. You do it all the time. And you know what? A man complaining about being a man is the least sexy thing a woman will ever hear.”

“Men have problems—”

“Shaddap about ’em! You’re supposed to know what to do.”

“And then we get accused of not talking.”

“Talk. Say things. Say *nice* things. But don’t ask me to coddle you. I’m not your mommy.”

“But sometimes I want one.”

“I take back what I said earlier. *That* is the least sexy thing a woman can hear. You know what it says, don’t you?—you expect to get laid and get nursed at the same time.”

“Hey, yeah. Perpetual motion.”

“What does that make you? A parasite.”

“Nah. You’re the queen and I’m your drone. I go off and get major things done. You stay put and be right here where I left you when I get back so you can have my zillions of children, or else—”

“Or else *what*? Look how big I am. All of them crowding around me, doing such great stuff for me. All my soldiers. You as an individual don’t stand a chance.”

“Or else...”

“Yeah?”

“Or else I forget why I exist.”

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Todd produced a wooden object that turned out to be a carving of a camera, complete with wooden lens barrel, wooden crank, wooden rewind knob and wooden shutter button. A length of rawhide served as its neck strap. He handed it over.

“Did you make it? Goshers, I don’t know how to work these things. You do it! Take a picture! Take some of me!” Todd held the carving to one eye and peered through a minute hole. He pointed the wooden lens my way, placed his right index finger on the wooden button and made a clicking sound with his tongue. I changed position slightly and he did it again, adding a trill. I scrambled backward. “How’s this?” I asked.

“Click, brr. Yes! Click, brr. Oh yes, yes! Click, brr.” Todd stood, fell to the floor, jumped to the sofa, and sprang from there to a seated position behind the World-War-Two-vintage army chest which served as a toffee cable, as a coffee table, all the while tripping the imaginary shutter and advancing the imaginary film as I whirled about the cabin at half speed. “Click, brr. Beautiful! Click, brr. You’re great! Sell it! Click, brr. More! Click, brr. Fantastic!”

I knelt next to him and took the camera. I pointed it at his sweaty face and said, “Click. Hey, it didn’t go ‘brr.’ Darn it, Todd, you wore out the batteries! Now I’m bored again.”

“I’ve got ‘Trivial Pursuit.’”

“I can barely remember my own name half the time.”

“You weren’t doing so bad a few minutes ago. Yuri *who*?”

“Let’s not just sit here all night. It’s not yet six. Take me out.”

“Darkness,” intoned Todd, mimicking the vocal mannerisms of the actor who played Frankenstein, or, rather, the monster whom Doctor Frankenstein created.

“But clear and pretty warm—one of the last nights much above freezing we’ll have for a while, I’ll bet. I need a date.”

“‘Date’?”

“I want to wear something besides these Captain Kangaroo suits. I packed some fun things. There must be places around here where a couple of girlfriends—kidding—a boy-toy can show off his gal-pal and vice-versa.”

“Take note of where you are.”

“No entertainment facilities whatsoever?”

“Bars. One with a juke.”

“Nothing else?”

“Well, there *is* a dance hall of some kind down the road a ways. Probably a good hour from here. It’s called Happy Jack’s, or used to be, at least. I have no idea what kind of music we’d find there.”

“Rock?”

“Could be. Or Country. Redneck. Foot stompin’. *Face* stompin’.”

“Let’s *vamoose, hombre*.”

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“Women drivers.”

“Oh, brother. That old thing? Get a life.”

“There are reasons men have been complaining about women drivers ever since the invention of the wheel. Why, for instance, when women drivers—like that one up ahead of us there—want to change lanes or back up, they don’t twist around to see what’s behind them?”

“Flirting.”

“What, flirting?”

“I twist around and what do I see?—a guy like you staring back making goo-goo eyes, and all I’m trying to do is get where I’m going.”

“That’s the reason?”

“Not necessarily. Maybe they just don’t understand machines. When I’m a woman...when I’m driving...never mind.”

“Why is it most women don’t hold elevator cars for men? You see us running with our briefcases or gadget bags, waving. And you let the doors close. So impolite.”

“Flirting: ‘Get in, I want to take a ride with you.’ It’s seen as forward by some. Now that we’re talking manners, why do men—like that one over there—spit on the sidewalk? Women don’t spit in public, or anywhere else. I have never spit. Spitted.”

“Spat.”

“I have never spat. Except toothpaste. Don’t tell me you *have* to—you’ve got some kind of overactive salivary glands or something.”

“Only when I’m near you. Why do women let their cars get so messy inside they look like rolling purses? And speaking of purses...”

“Why do men step back from a urinal *before* shaking their dripping doo-dads and putting them away? There’s always pee right where you have to put your feet.”

“How would you know?”

“Been told. And this nose-picking—”

“Just once I’d like to sneak up on a fancy woman and find her picking her nose. You don’t get boogers?”

"If I have one I'm sure as hell not going to pick at it."

"No. What you'll do is blow your nose into the tiniest scrap of Kleenex you can find, then put it in your big bag with thousands of other wads of festering tissues."

"And you carry a snot rag around all day cooking in your back pocket and use it over and over. What's worse?"

"Lipstick on a coffee cup or a wine glass. If I buy you a drink tonight—"

"If?"

"When I buy you a drink tonight, wipe the lipstick off the glass so I don't have to look at it."

"Nose hairs. Ear hairs. Clip them. Don't talk to me with a toothpick hanging out of your mouth, even if it's thought to be suave at Happy Jack's."

"Don't talk to me over a restroom wall. The last thing I want when I'm taking a dump is to have some woman tell me her life story."

"I won't. Wait a minute: Have women talked to you over a restroom wall? A *women's* restroom? Joel's party? That's where you went to take your 'dump'? Wasn't that carrying things too far?"

"Where would you have expected me to go? Like I was gonna boogie on into the mens' dressed the way I was and stand around tapping my foot waiting for a toilet. I wouldn't have come out alive. Jen checked out the ladies' for me and went in with me and took the stall next door, sort of as a buffer, I guess. That was nice of her. But then she talked. And talked. I'm struggling to get my pantyhose down with the fake nails and she's rattling on at me—yattatta, yattatta, blah, blah, blah. Her recipe for marinara sauce, the Ace bandage cutting off her circulation, her yeast infection—how interested I was in that yeast infection!"

"After you went to her place and came back dressed as yourself, did you go into the mens' room? Were the guys talking in there?"

"You wouldn't call it a conversation. Mostly, 'Hey, dude,' and 'What's up, man?' And rating some allegedly astounding chick. 'See those legs, man?' Probably meant yours."

"Doubtful. Nobody saw mine that night. They probably meant yours."

Todd snapped to. "Think so?"

"Did Jennifer leave you all by yourself?"

"At the party? No, thank God! She stayed pretty close, watching, laughing, shaking her head and her finger at me."

"Were you being naughty?"

"No, but wrong just the same. A few times she said, loud enough for others to hear, 'You can't do that! You can't do that!' There were some things I could-

n't get the hang of. Like bending at the knees instead of the waist to pick something up off the floor."

"That is a tough one. You should have kicked it under the table and walked away."

"It was one of Jen's earrings. In heels, with legs tight together, one hand on the back of my skirt, hugging it to my thighs, the other hand picking the thing up, I felt like I was performing a trick in the circus. I should have been holding a parasol. Later on, when I left the ladies' room, I had a piece of toilet paper stuck to my shoe, and—"

"I know. I know what you're going to say."

"I lifted my foot up in front of me—"

"I know. You can't do that. A chick lifts her foot up in back of her. Did you ever slip up and stand with your legs apart?"

"Now that I didn't do. I was so aware of *not* doing it my buns hurt like hell the next day. It was like I was subconsciously trying to stop anyone from goosing me, to the point that I kept my butt tensed all night, like a new kid in a prison."

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In Happy Jack's parking lot, Todd's Toyota Four-Runner appeared correct stylistically if incorrect politically among the domestic pickups. Our big-city gallery-hopping duds both blended in with and stood out from the club clientele's adolescent, eighties-style "punk" attire. I had chosen not the jeans and Luccheses but a black "catsuit" of the type that would be popularized by the character Seven of Nine in the television series "Star Trek: Voyager." The resemblance between myself at this time and "Trek" actress Jeri Ryan was strong in many ways, although my figure was a caricature of hers as hers was of that of most other women—large things increased in size and small things wrought smaller. I wore this catsuit with the Fendi boots from before and a black blazer. Todd looked like a ninja, an okie-dokie.

I raised my voice to be heard above the foundrylike racket emanating from inside the converted barn. "Quite a scene. Don't they all appear too young to drink?"

Todd shouted back, "I don't think they serve liquor here."

"Oh. Why are we waiting in line? And why isn't it moving?" Soon I was able to answer my own questions.

A young man—who, though seated, loomed larger than Todd and me combined—accepted ten-dollar bills and stamped the backs of the hands that had held them. Before doing so, he asked each anxious guest-to-be to breathe; and as each young person opened his or her mouth and exhaled, the burly employee leaned in for a whiff.

"I don't understand," I said to Todd, my hands forming a megaphone at his ear. Addressing one of the nubile sixteen-year-old girls hoping to get stamped, I yelled, "What's he looking, er, smelling for?"

"Booze," was the reply I read from her lips. She wore a black skirt made of elastic fabric and a tight black blouse which she had unbuttoned by one button too many to have left her parents' house looking that way. She had accessorized her outfit with a length of hardware store chain and a combination lock which together she wore as a belt and numerous rubber-and-plastic items that might have been called jewelry in some circles. On her feet were army-surplus boots or a reasonable facsimile. "They won't let you in if you have booze on your

breath,” she explained at great volume, spinning a gaudy bracelet on one finger. “It’s the pits. Are you two somebody? With a band?”

“Unbelievable!” I said to Todd.

“What a job!” said Todd to me.

“What a nose!” said I to the big attendant. He had drawn his nostrils away from my lips and told me I could not enter. “I had one wee glass of beer this big an hour ago, and you can still smell it! I am impressed! There’s a job waiting for you in the fragrance industry. In case you’re wondering, I am not in the least intoxicated.”

“Tough.”

“What are you pretending you’ve got here?—Studio Fifty-Four? Does this mean we can’t get in—all *night*?”

“You can try later.”

“Just a minute. Do you think I’m going to bust up the joint?...no pun intended.”

“I dunno. And I don’t care.”

“Do I look irresponsible?” The bouncer/doorman shrugged. “I’ll have you know I am the deserving recipient of a master’s from the prestigious Northwestern University and eminently capable of handling myself in an adult and ladylike fashion.”

“The owner would probably pay *you* to come in,” he said to my breasts. “It’d be good for business. But he makes the rules; not me.” To the couple standing behind Todd he said, “You wanna come around?”

“Damn it!” I slapped my hands to my thighs and drilled my heels into the gravel.

“Let’s just go someplace else,” Todd told me.

“No. I will not have some, some *boy* ruin my evening. Who *is* the owner? *Where* is he? I *demand* to speak to him!” I struck the plywood box behind which the huge attendant sat making faces.

“Come on.” Todd had sunk his fingertips into my shoulder and taken a step.

“I hope you get a disease!” I said as I allowed myself to be towed away. I heaved myself into Todd’s vehicle and sat stiffly, arms folded, noisily pushing out clouds of breath like a boiled, like a spoiled brat, a lathered mare. “Well, I’ll tell you one thing: I’m not going back to the stupid old cabin, that’s for *damned* sure.”

“We won’t. We won’t. Okay, okay, okay. I know!” he said. “Let’s go scoop the loop!”

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Upon reaching a junction in downtown Browntown, I scowled with annoyance as a never-ending daisy chain of highly polished trucks and aging but well-preserved large-engined pseudo-sports cars (which in years past would have been termed “muscle” cars) thundered past as if on Cheese Festival parade. “Now what have we here?”

“This is the ‘loop’—the four-block square from where we are down to the blinking light, then to the left two blocks, then a left for two blocks up the road that runs parallel to this one, and back. And any minute now, we’ll be scooping it.”

“I don’t get this, either.”

“The kids—look, every car is driven by a kid—they drive around and around, for hours and hours, every Friday and Saturday night.”

“Doing what?”

“This.” Todd tapped his horn twice, begging entrance, and at his right a boy traveling with two others touched the brake pedal of his father’s half-ton Ford. Todd saluted and merged in. “Now,” he said animatedly, “look over there, in the bank parking lot. See the girls?” I observed four of them in baggy jeans and sweatshirts gathered around a ninety-two Camaro, gazing judgmentally at our Toyota and every other vehicle as it passed. “They’re watching, waiting.”

“For what?”

“For boys. There’s some more girls, over there at the IGA, see?”

“Do any of the guys stop and talk to them?”

“I’ve never seen it. Usually they just keep scooping and looking. Isn’t it strange?”

“Yes. Say, some *boys* are parked over there by the Dairy Queen. What are *they* doing?”

“Making fun of the other guys and gawking at the girls, I suppose, saying things like, ‘Shit, man, what a hunk of junk,’ and ‘What’s that guy in the Jap-mobile doing here if he’s already got a babe?’ But mostly, I guess, they’re just waiting, the dumbheads, for a car full of girls to stop and talk to them. Waiting for Godot. Too bad Margaret Mead is dead—she’d love this. The dating game, the mating game. The preening, the posturing.”

“Pretty Sad Inc., country-style.”

“Our work here is done. Time to move on.”

“This might be an interesting location for your next masquerade. Makeup, bra and wig are all you’d need that you don’t already have. Tennies. Do they still make girl Keds? The incongruity would throw everyone off. Most transvestites—”

“I’m not a transvestite!” Todd said angrily.

“Look who’s sensitive.”

“I’m not. I’m just a guy who likes to mess around with women’s clothes.”

“All I was going to say is people wouldn’t expect a guy trying to look like a girl to wear anything but over-the-top girly things: half an inch of pancake, one-inch lashes, two-inch nails, five-inch heels, twelve-inch miniskirt. Have you ever seen ‘a guy who likes to mess around with women’s clothes’ wearing wig and bra and jeans and sneakers? People would look at you, look again closely, and say, ‘Yup, that’s a girl.’”

“Get it straight: I’m not a transvestite.”

“Would you accept ‘cross-dresser’?”

“No! Listen”—he grabbed my arm, and I shrank back—“It was a costume I wore as a costume at a costume party. If I did it again in public, it would be a costume again. I’d approach it the same way, for the same reason.”

“Let go. Say you’re sorry. That hurt.”

“I’m sorry. Now you say it—for joking around about this. I’m not a trans—”

“I’m sorry. I wouldn’t care if you were. But you’re not, and I don’t care about that, either. Okay? I was thinking about planning another costume party, just you and me, right away.”

“At the cabin?”

“We could start there. We’d have to start there. Then maybe we’d go bowling. Have you ever heard of a...of a guy dressed like a girl taking his girlfriend and going bowling?”

“The Putt-Putt is probably closed for the season.”

“You bring that up, I’m sure...why?”

“Because I’m still trying to think of something for us to do tonight, and I was thinking about you playing Putt-Putt. How far over do you have to bend to see the ball?”

“Don’t know.”

“Too far, is my guess. Can’t be done. Defies the laws of physics. Here’s a real riddle: People at the party were playing this parlor trick. Somebody places a wooden armchair with its back against a wall. A woman is asked to go to the chair, stand over it and lean her head against the wall behind it without grabbing the chair. She can. Three or four more women get to try, and they can do

it too. Then the person whose trick it is bets a man ten bucks he can't do the same thing. He tries, but he can't. Long before his head can rest against the wall, he has to reach down and grab the arms of the chair to support himself. Without help from the chair, his head goes crashing into the wall and, if he's been drinking, he falls over and takes the chair with him. Why?"

"You're not going to tell me it's because women have boobs, are you? Is it balance? A different center of gravity?"

"Nope. This is one crazy thing about the difference between men and women that boobs have nothing to do with. Think some more."

"No. I hate riddles. Tell me."

"It happens the way it does because women move their feet closer to the chair than men do. That's all there is to it. By the time a woman starts to lean over to rest her head against the wall, her feet are part-way under the seat of the chair. That puts her close enough to the wall so leaning over the rest of the way is no problem. A man approaching the chair stops when his feet are maybe six inches away from it. Then it's a long lean, too far. And nobody can figure it out. It happens so consistently and so naturally."

"I'll be darned."

"Me too. What's the reason women stand closer?"

"I have no idea."

"I don't either."

"Did you try this at the party?"

"No. And I'm glad. If I had, I might have been discovered. If I had, I probably would have lost my wig. I kept forgetting I was wearing one."

"And your skirt would have—"

"I probably would have forgotten I was wearing that, too!"

"Not good. A lady always has to keep in mind where she is, what she's wearing, who she's with and what they'd like to take a gander at if they could. If women seem preoccupied to you sometimes, it's probably because they're thinking about who's trying to look up their skirt or down their blouse and how to keep them from doing it."

"Pretty lame."

"Oh? Wear a low-cut gown in an elevator with a mirrored ceiling sometime and check back with me."

"I think that's highly unlikely. You mentioned bowling. I'll bet the alley is open. Do you bowl?"

"Don't know."

"This I gotta see."

I beat Todd two-thirty-seven to one-forty-one, using a ball as out of round as a meteorite. My smooth, nearly silent delivery and my increasingly uninhibited leaps, shouts of “Yeah!” and concluding shimmies of celebration following each clattering strike—all intensified by the then blazer-less catsuit—attracted mounting attention frame by frame from the Budweiser-guzzling gimme-caps and their overweight, stringy-haired bimbos...an excessive amount in Todd’s view. A Saturday-morning cartoon super-heroine at leisure. We left before the machinery had time to reset a second game.

I was good at ten-pins, of all things.

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The fireplace crackled merrily. Todd and I sat before it on a wadded down comforter. We had been kissing and petting for an hour.

“Feeling better?”

“Two-thirty-seven.” He pouted. “‘Don’t know’ my butt.”

“Get over it.”

“I’ll get over the score, but I’ll never get over how free-spirited you are. This, for instance.” He pretended to be trying to pull a pinch of catsuit fabric away from my skin and losing purchase. “What are you doing wearing something like this to Browntown, Wisconsin?”

“I hope you’re not looking for an apology—‘I’m sorry I can have a good time.’”

“No. But maybe you could be more...less...”

“I agree. I could be more less. I realize what I am. Mostly, I enjoy it. But there’s a downside. I am the center of attention, always, wherever I happen to be.”

“I noticed.”

I took this upon myself, so I have no one to blame but me. So did Elvis.”

“Took what upon yourself?”

“All dressed up and nowhere to go. Elvis had places to go, but it was too much damned trouble going there. He became a prisoner of his own success. Elvis shows up in Browntown to play a few holes of Putt-Putt, picks up a Large Pepperoni from Pizza Hut and a six-pack of Bud from the White Hen and checks into the Red Roof Inn to read *National Enquirer* stories about himself. Someone knocks. The whole town is lined up in the hallway. I know what I would have done if I had been him...and I almost was, come to think of it. I would have made myself as un-Elvis-like as possible—and didn’t he?—and hitchhiked to Anchorage.”

“What for?”

“So I could relax. I can’t relax in public. I can’t take me anywhere.”

“You *looked* relaxed.”

“It’s an act. Men’s eyes. I can’t get away from them.”

“You don’t try too hard. The bowling alley. You could have left the coat on.”

“See? That’s exactly what I’m talking about. It’s *my* coat. I should be able to leave it on or take it off as I please. I take it off and, well...you and I are the only two bowlers. It was the way they *stared*.”

“And you didn’t like it?”

“Did you get a look at those cretins? There was trouble brewing. I saw the slobby women staring at you, too, and—”

“You did?”

“You’re flattered?”

“Hey, a guy will take getting stared at from any woman.”

“You’re right. Forget it. It’s not the same thing at all.”

“Talk some more.”

“There was not one person in that whole place I would have in my wildest dreams considered shift—. Next time, I’m going to be plain. Done deal. Absolutely.”

“Next time?”

“I’m going to be plain so people I speak to will listen to what I say rather than watch me say it. Do you understand what I’m saying?”

“Huh? Oops, I drifted away there for a moment.”

I tapped him lightly on the cheek. “Either that or wear a big black bag like the poor dismal babes in Iran.”

“Joel said that once. The men there have a good thing going.”

“Do you think so?”

“Sure. I like to think the women inside those getups are knockouts, but only their husbands know. What guy is going to try to steal away a woman he can’t even see?”

“I’ll get one of those. We’ll go out to dinner. You’ll be seen dining with a big black sack. Some fun.”

“Ouch! Right. That wouldn’t be good. I like...”

“Say it.”

“I like...”

“Say it.”

“I like showing...you off.” Todd threw his hands up in front of his face.

“You’re okay. I know. In the past, I haven’t minded. But I’ve gone too far this time. I shot too high for un-effing-believable and landed so short of engaged I could be a slug.”

“Engaged?”

“Meaning connected. Meaning having developed affinities. You have to know what I’m talking about—it’s your pet theory. Good looks attract; great looks repel. I’m repellent. Attractively repellent. I’m an oxymoron.”

“Good God Almighty! You might be an oxy-thing—I don’t know what that is—but *repellant*? That’ll be the day. Listen: I wouldn’t have dared tell the Joel/Jen/me story or the masquerade-party story to any other woman I know, except Jen, and she was there. I told you, and you dug it. You went fishing with me; you went bowling with me. *You* listen to *me*, even though I do think out loud too much. The things you say, the things you do—it’s not the way incredibly attractive women behave. They act as though they think what most people call fun is a sign of immaturity. They keep their distance. They hold themselves apart. They won’t give a guy eye contact. They put on this face like a gas mask—”

“Again? These boots are made for walkin’.”

“Sorry. I hate stuck-up people, but I don’t like unpredictable, ‘let’s do everything’ people, either. Jeans one night, gown the next, same personality. What I’m looking for is a sure thing.”

“Consistency, dependability.”

“A nice, comfy rut to settle into.”

“I’m not fond of the idea of being any guy’s rut.”

“Bad choice of words, wasn’t it?”

“Yes, it was. Unbelievably bad. It couldn’t have been worse. But I think I know what you meant. And I think I can’t give it to you. I’m not sure I can be a sure thing. I’m somebody different every time I look. I have to be. Or, at least, I have had to be. Life is a smorgasbord. Life is metamorphosis. You have no clue as to how deeply that feeling runs in me. I think if I were condemned to being the same person for the rest of this life, I’d give up the ghost. One dead gupp—...minnow.”

“To me that’s kind of scary. But it doesn’t stop me from wanting you more and more in every way with every passing minute.”

“I like being wanted. But to be honest, I have a lot of trouble picturing us staying together long-term. I’m just too changeable.”

Todd sighed and seemed near to tears. “That’s why you reacted the way you did when I told you I thought I was falling in love with you? I wish you had been nicer about it. That’s not an easy thing for a man to say.”

“It’s the easiest thing of all for a man to say.”

“Love.”

“I don’t know what that is. I don’t care to know...not now. Maybe someday.”

“Have you never been loved?”

“I’m quite sure I have been loved. I most certainly have been clung to and told so by a variety of people.”

“But you don’t know what it is.”

“I have a feeling for what it’s like to be an object of desire. That’s not the same thing as knowing love.”

“Like a Playmate.”

“If you say so. I’ve had a lot of men over the years make Bambi eyes at me and tell me they were starting to love me. But it wasn’t love—I hope. They didn’t know shit about me, and neither do you. Men are like that. No one knows better than I. For most women, ‘I will go to bed with you’ is the means to an end, which, it is hoped, is love. For nearly all men, you included, ‘I’m falling in love with you’ is the means to an end, which is sex.”

“Gutter ball!”

“All of your questions about why both sexes do one thing and mean another altogether are answered in those previous two sentences. It comes down to this, and this will end our colloquium on human sexual response for today: Men can survive without love if they have enough sex; women can live without sex if they are loved. Men lie about everything, including love and sex; women perpetually suspend disbelief. Men want power because it gives them sex appeal; women want sex appeal because it gives them power. Who’s the winner in the last frame?”

“Can we?” he pleaded again.

“I told you yes. But by my rules.”

“Anything you say,” he answered desperately.

“No intercourse.”

“Too soon, I—”

“It isn’t going to happen.”

“Never?”

“Never is a long time.”

“Is there a problem?”

“Not what you think. But in this you have to let me have my way. No questions. If you can deal with that, we’ll be all right. It’s not the end of the world. There’s lots we can do.” I took hold of my breasts. “Get me out of this thing. Let me hold you in here.”

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"It was...different for me. How was it for you?"

"Don't you know you're not supposed to ask a woman that? Here's why: Mostly, it was gooey."

"Yeah. What's your *favorite*? I'm not hinting or anything, you know?"

"You'd better not be. I have occasionally liked doing it the other way around."

"The other..."

"Upturned ass. The shape of an inverted Valentine heart. A smidgen of clothing on, so much the better. A slip is nice. Shoes are good."

"That's what the man sees. You sound like the 'Advisor' column. Do you write erotic novels in your spare time?"

"No, but I think I could. It'd be sort of cross between *The Story of O* and *The Secret Life of Walter Mitty*."

Todd made a sound like a jet plane streaking overhead and shrugged.

"Best of all, though, the man can see himself. And watching himself doing so well what he was created to do is, well, beyond words."

"How do you know so much about the way guys think about sex?"

"They talk."

"About this? To your face?"

"No; behind my back."

A cold front moved in.

"I'm teasing. Don't get all huffy."

"Do women like it that way? I always thought they *put up* with it."

"Sometimes they agree to it to get the task over with quickly. But it can be great. The woman can't see the guy. He could be anybody. So, if she's good at fantasizing—and women are—it can be...mmm. She can pretend she's been kidnapped by some big mean knave of a guy who's going to ravage her. The stuff bodice-rippers are made of."

"Women like that? They like the idea of a stranger, of being kidnapped and ravaged? The other way around?"

"Women can grow impatient with nice, careful, understanding guys who are in touch with their feminine side. They start to dream about a he-man who

plays rough. ‘Skip over the honey-baby mushy stuff and do what you came here to do.’ To a point.”

“For real?”

“It’s not making love; it’s not love; it’s fucking, pure and simple. And women like fucking pure and simple as much as men do—every now and then. The problem for you as a man is, you never can tell when.”

“Sometimes, your language—”

“How would you phrase it? What other words are there? Balling? Screwing?”

“Sheesh. Women talk this way.”

“I do.”

“But *I* have to be careful. I’m interested in the other way around. How do I say it to you? ‘Like doggies?’”

“You don’t say it to me. But ‘doggies’ works. Or you can breathe, ‘Flip over, Baby.’”

“That’s it?”

“Not always. I have to be ready to accept that you don’t want to be or can’t be lovey-dovey. If I flip over for you, you have to know I’ve put lovey-dovey on hold. I’m not going to stick my rump in the air and ask you for poetry. But you’ll owe me.”

“You’re something else.”

“Thanks. I try.”

“You’ve done it that way with other men. But *we* can’t—”

“Shut up, Todd.”

I poured myself another glass of wine, awaiting a rejoinder. None followed. I leaned on an elbow, making ready to reopen another one of his *Playboy* volumes.

“Babes generally, though, prefer it missionary,” he said at last.

“Uh-huh. Usually, when I’m a wo—”

“And the face starts the process. And that’s why a woman is always so worried about her face. Makeup and hair and earrings all come from that. Then the boobs. Gotta shape ’em, gotta lift ’em, gotta pad ’em. Gotta make ’em do this.” He wiggled an index finger in a come-hither gesture. “Like Suzie Simpson’s.”

“Pray, tell.”

“Another Playmate.”

“What issue?”

“Not now.”

“Okay. What issue?”

"February. No, January, nineteen ninety-two. She's been in later, special editions and you can find her all over the 'net now. In ninety-two she still looked like—there's a French word...an *ingénue*. It didn't last."

"How do you mean?"

"A weird thing happens to a woman when she spends too much time posing nude. Or working in a carnival. Or a strip joint. She takes on a coarse, hardened look. I don't know why it happens, but it does. I've seen it right before my eyes."

"Are you sure it isn't age?"

"Age, and—. She goes from coed to floozy in a blink. Some big thinker said you change things by looking at them. When it comes to women, it's definitely true."

"Think that would happen to me?"

"If you made a life of it. I would recommend you keep your clothes on as often as possible."

"I'd never have guessed what a conservative curmudgeon you are inside."

"Conservative, hey? Curmudgeon? I'll show you conservative. Come on."

"Where are we going?"

"To shave my legs."

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Todd lighted on the edge of the tub with his burgundy. I soaped him up. “What was the cab ride like?”

“Cab ride?”

“The one taking you and Jennifer to the party at Scoozi, when you were Suzi ‘The Ingénue’ Simpson.”

“Oh. Neat. The cabbie asked, ‘Where to, ladies?’ seeing right through Jen’s costume but not mine.”

“So he was your first indication things might work.”

“You can say that again. I was afraid we’d get into an accident. The driver couldn’t keep his eyes off me in his rear-view mirror. They were the way my eyes look when I look at you, I have to think. I’d never been on the receiving end. I reacted the way any man would react: I looked right back, as if to say, ‘What are you gawking at, friend?’ And that made him want to ogle me all the more.”

“He’ll remember you for the rest of his days.”

“Him and the other cabbie. Something funny happened when I left the party to change. I hailed a taxi and went to Jen’s. When I was done changing and scrubbing the lipstick off—scrubbing and scrubbing till my lips were raw—I dressed in my regular clothes and stood outside for another cab. I got picked up by the same driver who’d dropped me off. He says, ‘I think I brought your sister here an hour ago.’ I didn’t know what he was talking about, really, so I told him I didn’t have a sister.”

“Next leg.”

“‘You sure?’ he says. ‘I guess you’d know,’ he says, ‘but you could have been separated at birth, right? Then end up living in the same condo building years later. Have sex with her and not know who you were having sex with. It’d be the kind of thing you’d see on Jerry Springer.’ I say, catching on, ‘What did she look like?’ He says, ‘Tall. Shiny dark brown hair. Real hottie.’ He stopped. I think he realized by telling me my sister was beautiful he was commenting on *my* looks. ‘What was she wearing?’ He remembers Jen’s short, skinny trench-coat and the Payless shoes, and the anklets. He says, ‘I’m glad for you you’re not related. Try to find her, for my sake. If I was you I’d get right back in there now.’

If you find her and talk to her and get it on with her, you can buy me a beer.' He passes a business card over the front seat and adds, 'She didn't say a word. She gave me a note with her address on it. She smiled and nodded and shook her head, but she didn't say nothin.'"

"Of course!" I said to Todd. For a man so slightly built, he had an unusually deep voice. "No nicks. Good work, if I do say so myself. Better than I can do on mine. Stand up for the backs. There's not going to be too much to do there."

"The cab driver goes on, 'Maybe she's dumb. I don't mean *dumb*. She looked bright. I mean mute. That's what I mean.' I wondered whether he was going to have something unfunny about the advantages of having a girlfriend who can't talk. How come there's no such thing as leg-pit hair?"

"Rinse off. You're done. Me shaving you was fun. Me shaving me isn't, after awhile. Strapping on the straps and slapping on the makeup and having to shave your legs before you can go to the laundromat...sometimes it's a drag."

"Pun?"

"I enjoy being a girl about fifty percent of the time."

Well, I'm one-hundred percent glad you're one-hundred-percent girl one-hundred percent of the time. If I were any more glad, I'd spill a tuna shake."

"What?"

"Nothing. Man stuff. Forget it."

"I sense it was some gross attempt at a joke?"

"And a compliment. Sorry."

"Tuna shake. Tuna shake..."

"It means come in my pants. Make a mess like I spilled a shake on myself...one that smells like fish."

"Lordy! Did you make that up?"

"No, a college buddy of mine did. We thought it was hilarious."

"Did you ever try that one out on a girl before? I didn't think so. Maybe you're too relaxed around me. I like being easy to talk to, but I have my limits."

"Okay, then I won't tell you the one about why women don't like anchovies on their pizza."

"Better not, or tonight you'll sleep with the anchovies."

"Instead of..."

I dried his legs for him. "Look at you. Now *I'm* envious," I said. "My shoes won't fit you. Do you have any?"

"Not here."

"Darn."

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“Hurry up, Todd—I’m freezing.”

“Me too—I can tell the hair is gone.” Todd grabbed a second blanket. With the drama of a bullfighter he shook it out. The fabric floated down. A pair of fancy panties flew out from it and landed upon his shoulder. “What’s this?” he said. “Hey! Yass, yass: Get more cotton in an aspirin bottle.”

“Let me see those. These are not mine. Whose?”

A third blanket covered me completely. “Nickie? Where’d ya go?” he said. “What’s this?” He placed his hands on the mound that was my hip and dug in his thumbs until I could not help but squirm. “And this?” He clutched with both hands the lump of my right shoulder. “And *this* almost looks like somebody’s noggin.” He beat my head like a conga drum. “But wait! What the hell?” He sank his fingers into the portion of the cloth covering my bosom.

“Help! Police! Sexual harassment!”

Todd scrambled in under the sheet and blankets. He kissed my cheek and asked me to remain on my left side. I asked him why. He told me he would show me and set to work on the pillow under my head. He pushed it and squeezed it and molded it.

Assaulting his own pillow now, Todd said, “This has to be exactly right.” He lay his head down. With his left arm he dug a tunnel; with his right he drew me toward him until my spine was snug against his chest and the front of his silky-smooth thighs touched the back of mine. Next, with his left hand he grasped my right shoulder. And finally he wove his right hand down to my left breast. “There!” he said. “Don’t move. This is perfect!”

“Can I have a glass of water?”

“Oh, *fine*!” Todd extracted his right hand.

“Put that back! Very nice.” I felt Todd’s smile on my neck. “But do you really expect us to be able to stay this way till morning?”

“Morning, *schmorning*. Who cares? I only want to drift off into dreamland like this.”

I felt his penis growing hard, insinuating itself between my buttocks. “*Now* what are you doing?”

"I'm not doing anything. Mister Happy has a mind of his own. I guess he's thinking about the girl next door."

"What a nice thing to say. Would Mister Happy rather be with her? Want me to help set something up? I'll go see if she's home."

"He's dreaming about being a bath brush. Can he be one for you sometime?"

"Uh-uh."

"How else then?"

I pretended to have fallen asleep.

Todd did not buy into it. He began humming a tune I did not initially recognize. He rolled me toward him and burst into song, his lips curling down at one side as if a nerve had been severed.

"Za moon belongs to averrrryone—ahh, yes!—za best seengs in life are frrree!"

His impression of a French cabaret star was so bad and yet so lively I both groaned and laughed. "Too bad we don't have a *chapeau* for you," I said, looking up at him, "and a cane."

MAURICE CHEVALIER.

"Ahh, *oui*. Zat would be neece. And now I would like to do forrr you aynozare of my beeg heets—not to be confused with beeg teets." He fashioned legs from his first and second fingers and strutted them along my abdomen. He sang, "Sonk ehven forrr leetel gerrrls, forrr leetel gerrrls get beeger averrrry day..." The legs of the little man reached my ribs. "Sonk ehven for leetel gerrrls, zay grrrow up in zee most delightful way..." And with that, he reached the summit of my breast and flung himself upon it.

I emitted an eek, then relaxed. Through Todd's kisses I softly screamed, for now the little man was at play below, plucking—plucking, with a "P," as in pizzicato, the string of a violin. What he was plucking was my clit, sending me into convulsions reminiscent of Patty Mattingly's lioness.

"Let me in," Todd said, and before I could summon up an antonym for "okay," he entered me.

"No," I said. "Jesus, yes! No. No! No, Todd! Get off!" I back-pedaled out from under.

Rolled up in a ball—the fetal position—I cried, "You almost blew it altogether then! You almost fucking blew it all to hell! *Damn* you. Don't touch me. Do *not* touch me. What did I tell you? What did I *tell* you?"

Refusing to speak further, knuckles arrayed at my chin, I stormed off to the bathroom.

Through its door, Todd repented, convincingly contrite, highly skilled in the art of apology. "I'm not going to stop saying 'please' until you tell me you'll snuggle again," he announced.

One "please" alone was enough to crack my resolve. Todd continued to pick away at it until, some minutes later, the door again said, "Hey there!"

He retained a posture which he could have dropped had he not wished to be caught: kneeling, leaning inward, with one eye squeezed shut and the other wide open, as if he had been peering through a keyhole the entire time. I nearly flew over him as muff met forehead.

His offer to buy me a guppy, then a pony, was superfluous.

CRUISIN' FOR A BRUISIN' THERE, FUNNY BOY.

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I am romantically involved with a gorilla. Unlike others of his species, he is not stooped over: He stands with spine vertical, tall.

He and I cruise around in his Miata convertible. I look over at him as he drives and see the wind blowing back his hair—the hair all around his face—and I fill up with puppy love, *monkey* love. He is wearing a white silk shirt which fits his great barrel of a chest snugly.

We park the car and get out. I must get my frizzies trimmed, and my gorilla wants to watch. All the employees and patrons stop what they are doing or having done and stare at us with mouth ajar. There might be trouble—we have happened upon a Ku Klux Klan Auxiliary-type convocation of anti-simian bigots. No. They all want a gorilla like mine.

We leave the salon and go shopping for records. I select for him an album by the Bee Gees.

I am a mermaid. My long blond hair floats around me as I make graceful turns in the water. I swim to my gorilla and press my crotch against his trunks. He displays for me a small but colorful penis. I must have it, but, being half fish, I have nowhere to put it. Yet somehow, I'm coming. I'm coming out of the water, gasping, grasping...

Todd's hand was between my legs, his middle finger at my "on" button.

"Hi," he said to me. "I would like some breakfast." He slid down and began licking me masterfully.

Moments later, still coming, mindlessly, in a flash I was atop him. I sucked on him and sucked on him, not receiving but taking, extracting, pulling and gulping till he dried up and cried out for me to stop.

"Coffee," I said, falling away.

"Yes, coffee. But you're not supposed to suck when you do that," he replied loudly. "You almost gave it a hickey! Jesus! Look."

Wiping my mouth, I answered softly, "You're lucky. I could have bitten it off and I don't think you would have known."

While he recuperated, I remained silent, the briquettes of my anger still red in spots, trying to find common sense or lasting value in having agreed to stay

over yet another night with Todd, pony or no, inventing ways to appease him with something less than, as he had put it, the whole shebang. I could say I was his captive, but I was not. The cabin was equipped with a telephone, and I could have used it to call for a limousine, but I did not.

“I wish you had stayed longer at the party,” he said.

“Until you came back dressed like yourself?” I knew I could not tell Todd that at the time of the masquerade I was two shifts away from taking possession of Joel Silverman’s body: I was a man. “I was not interested in meeting guys then. I might have been more likely to talk to you while you were in costume than later, but that wouldn’t have amounted to anything.” I chuckled inside, envisioning Todd’s advancing me, evading my advances. “I wish I’d seen you in the heels and skirt, although I wouldn’t have wanted to be tricked like everyone else. I don’t like being tricked. As you know.”

“Sorry.”

“I just might have been the one to find you out.”

“Really.”

“I’m pretty good at that kind of thing. I’ve had to be.”

“I can’t get over Jill’s foresight. It amazes me that she knew I’d need a costume on top of dressing like a woman. Without the school-girl motif, people looking at me might have figured out that I was what I was—am. But with the pleated, checkered skirt and the white blouse with the tie and the blazer with the pocket patch and the socks, everyone must have thought I was a woman dressed like a pre-teen girl trying to look like a woman. Layers. The only thing missing was the—”

“Braids.”

“Yes. Jen said she couldn’t find a wig that would accommodate them. She did get me some big eyeglasses—as you saw in the snapshot—without lenses. And she found a catechism book for me to carry around, which helped me figure out what to do with my hands.” Todd stopped to look at his hands. “What do women do with them? I couldn’t hold them behind me because that made it look like I was trying to draw attention to my tits; I couldn’t fold my arms in front because that made it look like I was trying to draw attention to my tits; I couldn’t hold them together in front of me because that drew attention to my tits and made it look like I was trying to keep people from looking at my crotch. I sure did want pockets to put my hands in. I was afraid people would see they weren’t a woman’s.”

“I don’t think you had to worry. They are really quite nice. Smooth, long fingers. Not very vein-y. With painted nails they’d blend right in with all the others holding white-wine spritzers. You could be a hand model—a male hand

model modeling women's things. You audition for the job. You're better than the chicks. They don't hire you. You sue. You win."

Continuing to inspect his hands, Todd said, "I think I did blend in, which is exactly what I wanted to do. Being dressed like that gave me an excuse to look shy, awkward and a beginner with high heels. I think people who saw me—especially the women—thought I was doing a terrific job."

"None of them gave you the evil eye—viewing you as unwanted competition?"

"No, not that I know of. They smiled at me. The more they looked, the more they liked it. They'd do something, like touch their hair in that woman's way, and I'd try to copy it. And then they'd laugh some more. I'd smile back and they'd laugh again. Me and the babes had quite a thing going, long-distance."

"It's good you were sexy and funny instead of just sexy. The last thing you needed was a cat fight to erupt because some chick thought you wanted to steal her boyfriend."

"The wig would have been the first to go. You know, I never sat down—not the whole time, not once. Today will you show me something? When a woman sits down on a sofa in a short skirt and high heels and sinks down in?"

"Uh-huh?"

"How does she get out again? I've watched myself in a mirror try to do it, and I look like a man—a drunken, crippled man. I can't keep my knees together. Or, if I can keep them together, I can't keep my feet together. And either way, no matter what, I can't get up."

"Now that you mention it, I don't know how it's done. I'll have to try it and see."

"And when you sit and cross your legs, how do you hold your calves and ankles so close together? And then you can cross your legs again at the ankles! You twist your legs together like a pretzel!"

"You'd have had to start in grade school. If this body hadn't been doing it a long time, it wouldn't be able to start now. Maybe you could approach it like learning new aikido postures, if you have postures: Twist them a bit farther every day till they look like the stripes of a candy cane."

Todd put a finger to my lips. I took this as a sign that he wanted us to be quiet, but it was not. "These wrinkles—"

"Wrinkles? Where? What wrinkles?"

"You don't have any of them yet," he said. "The radial wrinkles women get here."

"I should hope not!"

"You'll get them, though. I won't. I'm a man. Only women get them."

"I know. But I don't know why."

“It’s another riddle. I’ll tell you the answer. Say ‘The moon is blue.’” I did. “You look like you’re trying to whistle. Now watch me. The moon is blue. Humphrey Bogart. Almost nothing. Want to avoid those wrinkles, you’ve got to keep a stiff upper lip.”

“And never do what I just did, ever again. ‘The moon is blue,’ like hell! It’s giving blowjobs that makes those wrinkles, and I’m going to tell every woman I see.”

“Another pony to not.”

“Deal.”

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Dishing out another pancake for himself, Todd told me, “I’m not afraid of death anymore, because there’s nothing to be afraid of. Jimmy Stewart told me so.”

“I see.”

“I had a dream last night. In it I started to feel like my neck was a hollow pipe and my head was a water tank balanced on top of it. As I moved my head from side to side, the water inside the tank sloshed around. Then I saw the inside of the tank—every detail of it. I looked at the line around it where the water level used to be. And I saw the rivets holding the pieces together. While I watched, the tank turned into a wraparound movie screen—like at the Museum of Science and Industry. And a picture appeared on it. It was an old movie about World War Two submarines. The opening credits came up and they said, ‘Starring Jimmy Stewart.’ And then they said, ‘And Introducing Todd Bergau.’ But when the movie began, it was a Western. There I was, moseying down an old dirt street in an Old West town with Jimmy. Both of us were dressed like cowboys. I turned to him and he turned to me and we shook hands. I started talking, and I had to laugh—not the me in the movie, but the me *out here*, watching, *see*? The me in the movie was talking this dumb cowboy talk.

“‘Mister Stewart,’ I said, ‘yer a big gunslinger an’ you been around. Answer me this: Last gunfight ah got inta, ah got real sceert thet ah was gonna git kilt. What kin ah do ta keep from bein’ sech a coward?’ And Jimmy Stewart said—you know how he talks—‘Wa-wa-wa-waall, son, ya-ya-ya see, ah-ah-ah-ah’m more than-a, than-a gunslinger that’s won some fights: Ah’m *dead*. An so, wa-wa-wa-waall, ya see, ta keep from bein a-scared of dyin’, ya gotta just, wa-wa-waall, *die*. There ain’t no other way ta-ta learn. Ya-ya-ya kin borrow this here six-shooter.’

“I must have borrowed it and shot myself. In the next scene I was lying on the couch at my folk’s house, and you were sitting on the floor next to me, squeezing my hand and talking to me about how I was going to be all right. You got up and lay down on top of me. You were naked. I guess I was too. I think if I was younger this would have been a wet dream. I think we had sex—not a hint or anything, okay? Suddenly, in the dream there was nothing.

Everything was velvety black. But then I started to make out a few specks of light. They were moving toward me—or, maybe, *I* was moving toward *them*. I looked to my right and there were stars. I looked to my left and there were stars. And then, without turning around—without turning around—I looked in *back* of me. I looked *through* me and saw...what? Guess!"

"William Shatner and Leonard Nimoy."

"There was no *me*—at least no me to *see*. Anywhere! I didn't have a body anymore! But there I was anyhow, still thinking about things, enjoying the stars, zooming around in outer space, playing with all that nothingness and everythingness. Nickie, it was the most wonderful feeling I've ever had!"

"Ever?"

"Uh-huh. Without a doubt."

"Thanks a lump."

"I didn't have a body, but I still had a mind. And I wasn't sure I wanted my body back. I wanted to do what I was doing *forever*. But the dream pretty much ended there. I still have some of that velvety darkness in me. Right now it's here between my shoulder blades."

"Good. I guess it's good."

"It's good. And that velvety darkness?"

"Yes?"

"I get it from you. No. You remove something from me each time we do it. You drain me, and I'm left with less of me and more of the darkness. I need to find out how it happens. You're a deep, dark cave I have to explore."

"Well, that's a step up from a rut, I must say."

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"I think of them almost like pets," Todd said as he accelerated the Four-Runner southward.

"Who?"

"Tina and Trixie."

"Who?"

"Your tits. I enjoy their company. Both. Pretty much equally. Quite a team, they are. I wouldn't be able to pick which one I liked best. I'd hate to see anything bad happen to either of them." His tone had taken an ominous turn.

"Is that a threat?"

"No. Think it will, though? Aren't you afraid of the...the side effects we've all heard about? The big lawsuits and all?"

"The side effects of...implants. No. That doesn't affect me. I won't have them that long," I replied without forethought. Todd turned to stare at me. "Just joking," I quickly added. "Keep your eyes on the road. I don't pay much attention to any of that. If someone has to remove them someday when this body is old and shriveled, who'll care? Not me."

"You're joking again."

"Nah. Long before then they'll have served their purpose and won't be missed."

"What purpose?"

"What purpose do you think?" I winked at him.

"Sometimes, Nickie, you..."

"What? Pissed off again? Why?—because you think you're going to be around when this body is old and gray and you have to live with some sweet old lady with pretty darned good legs for her age who still wants you but whose boobs look like empty sausage casings? Will you be able to love her still? Is that what you're cogitating about? I honestly don't think you have to worry. Oh, I suppose I hurt you again."

"I was going to say, Sometimes you impress me with your ability to 'be here, now.' You know the old song by Fleetwood Mac?—'Don't Stop Thinking About Tomorrow'? My problem is I *can't* stop thinking about tomorrow. But I feel a change coming on. It's because of you. It's because of that velvety darkness

you've got in you. The velvety darkness is the future, as I interpret it, and it's out there in a certain place. I'm headed into that certain place, and in that certain place...there's nothing. The future is nothing. Forget about it."

After a few moments of quietude, Todd made me jump nearly out of my skin with a barked "Hey!"

"Hey."

"There's a semi coming up alongside us. I'll turn on the dome light. You show the driver your boobs."

"No, I will not."

"Do it. Flash 'em. Smile up at him, bat your eyes. Play with your nipples. Push 'em up against the window. Then I'll gun it and he'll never catch us. Do it. Do it!"

"He'll tell all his good buddies on the rad-eye-oh and they'll cut us off at the pass and kill you and gang-bang me."

"The future is nothing."

I did it. And Todd gunned the engine.

There was silence once again in the Toyota as I buttoned up, and it was, as it is said, deafening.

"You should have seen his face," I said to break the ice. "Todd?"

"You showed the guy your tits. You showed him your tits."

"You asked me to. You told me to."

"It was fun."

"You're not mad?"

"Nope. I had to think about it, but now I know I'm not mad. I think I'm starting to understand: If you've got it, flaunt it. Nothin's wrong with it. I wish I had something to flash the women—it would take some of the drudgery out of these long drives."

"You could show 'em yer nuts."

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One afternoon, I am ejected from a daydream...no, a dream—I had been sleeping—a sinister thing involving a plot by *Playboy* to trap me, sedate me and carve out my mole with a carrot peeler. I am happy to have that dream interrupted, but not by what I see when I open my eyes.

It is a picture of my younger sister—no, that of Marcia Lynne, of *me, myself*—spread across the expansive screen of the foundation television set. The Chicagoland evening news. High-school commencement portrait. Cheeky, cherubic face. Bony nose. Ash-blond, shoulder-length hair under the mortarboard; A-cups under the robe. Eyes of green.

THE SHOT I FOUND EARLIER.

That photo is followed by a more recent one that is obliterated from the shoulders down by a digitally generated flesh-toned checkerboard pattern that suggests bare breasts. My mind drifts away from the explanatory narration until Marci's father—my father—resident of a well-to-do Cincinnati suburb, questioned off-camera, begins discussing his loss of confidence in the Evanston, Illinois, police department and his intention to hire a private investigator for help in locating his daughter.

The next time I awake, it is no longer evening: It is night, near ten. Was the news report also a dream? I watch the late edition with the sound muted and see the same tape rolled.

Am I being sought in relation to Philip Overbaugh's extensively covered death? Suicide has not yet been ruled out, nor has some form of foul play. No one involved in the investigation has "leaked" to the press information concerning deep scratches decorating the psychiatrist's crushed face—at least this has not been reported by the media—but I know they must have been obvious as curs to what occlude. He had met with a woman. He had raped that woman. And then? Was it a jump, an accidental fall or a willful push? (It had been none of the above: I had asked Overbaugh to climb out, hang on and let go.) No matter: I am convinced that investigators are seeking a combination victim, perpetrator and witness...and *c'est moi*. My heart races. But I need not fear: I made certain to destroy all records of my visit to the office as I left. The doctor's swan dive cannot involve Marcia Lynne Gaydos.

Unless...unless Marci had told her parents about her impending job interview.

“Hello, Gaydos residence.”

The voice is unfamiliar. “Mom?”

“Marci! Girl, we’re right out of our minds with worry, you know?”

“I’ve been busy.”

“So busy you practically drive us all to an early grave? Wait—here’s your daddy.”

“Marcia Lynne! What time is it? Where are you?”

“Forgive me, Father...” What am I doing?—confessing to O’Neill? “In Chicago.”

“Are you all right? You don’t sound like yourself.”

“Tired, I guess.” Who *do* I sound like?

“We want to see where you’re living. We have to see with our own eyes the daughter who hasn’t called or written for...how long *has* it been? Your phone is out of service. Certified mail gets returned. Lots of people are calling for you here, and I don’t know what to have Francis tell them. You’ve got unfinished business to attend to. Some FedEx deliveries from you-know-who we haven’t opened. We’ll bring it. We’re coming up.”

“That won’t be neces—”

“Like hell! We’ll leave tomorrow. Are you still in Evanston?”

A family reunion. I could use some company. Could I pull this off? I have plenty of room.

Hold it. I reside at the pinnacle of Lake Point Tower, surrounded by costly furnishings. Living area the size of a gymnasium. Grand piano. Paintings. Sculptures. They’ll think I am being kept by the biggest enchilada of Colombia’s Cali cocaine cartel.

“It’s such a long story. You can’t now. I’ll come home soon, I promise. Things are happening—all good. I’ll write you with my new Post Office box number as soon as I get it. I’ll call more often. Love you. Tell Mom I love her, too.”

Was there a mom? Yes. Otherwise, the woman who answered—Francis?—would have been more taken aback than she was.

“Bye. Oh, Daddy, do me a big favor and I’ll give you such a hug: Call the cops and tell them I’m fine.”

Did that do it? Gosh, I hope he’s not ticked off, like, permanently.

“I’m not hanging up until I get the answer to one last question.” I listen. “Did you go see the psychiatrist who you thought was going to offer you a big—”

It is I who do the hanging up.

WHO'S "YOU-KNOW-WHO"?
THE PLOT THICKENS.

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Backbone against sofa, ankles pulled in like Susan Campanello's, I sob until my belly button is a pond being fed by a stream in the Tetons.

In that position, I cry myself to sleep.

Stogy is slurping up suds with me, slapping me on the back and calling me "Piss Face." He tells me exactly what to do, and, as always, I know it will work.

I awake. Stogy's words of wisdom are gone forever. I want them back. I want Stogy back. I want a daddy to give my forehead a smooch and calm me, call me "Princess." I want what I had hoped against all Todds, all odds to find in Todd: I want a friend, a boyfriend, a "steady" to call me his lady. A sure thing. A rut, for lack of a far better word, to settle into. Someone like Rick Mattingly to tell me I am the world he wants to live in. Someone—the same someone—with whom to fall asleep and wake up day after day. Too much to ask?

Get a husband? Be a wife? Now how would *that* work?

What we need to get here, kid, is *real*.

I pour a glass of bourbon and dump it into the sink. I rub myself dry with a dish rag and curl up in an afghan. I switch the channel to MTV and weep.

Stogy's suckling at the hospice had felt instinctively, nearly spiritually, fulfilling. These big knockers of mine are going unused; their true purpose, ignored. They plead with me to put them to work sustaining life.

The tears form so readily! I cannot wipe them away fast enough. What is this? My period. Maybe not. Maybe...

Never have I fretted about missing one, for in the past, such a non-occurrence had merely hastened a shift into the body of a man. But tonight I am emotionally unprepared for that eventuality and want to stay female, to stay the me I know as Marci.

Have I really gone more than a few days longer than usual without the bleeding?

The street-level convenience store is open twenty-four hours. I fling on sweats and take the elevator down to it, alternately running my hands through my hair and gnawing a thumb.

Todd Bergau. There was no one other than Todd after Overbaugh, and Overbaugh was too long ago. But I did not give Todd a chance to ejaculate

inside me at the cabin. This is no virgin birth. His spermatozoa must have met my ovum elsewhere, after our Wisconsin vacation, but when?

The car is in free fall. I remember. Images and sensations once suppressed, sublimated or crouching in hiding now overtake me.

One week after the Kalmer shoot, back in Oak Park. Twenty-four hours before I first awakened at the foundation feeling far too much like the dizzy and queasy Beverly Ellenwood, my head hanging off the edge of the bed like the Liberty Bell—heavy, cracked and useless. I remember raising it slowly to keep its clapper from clanging.

That afternoon I repeatedly tried to sit up in bed while remnants of the solids I had consumed with Todd the night before grew animate and eager to escape. I remember. I remember trying that night to tell myself the story of what had happened and for the most part failing. I remember trying again to do so the next day and the following night. But I do not remember anything else about those days and those nights. I must have eaten, drank, regurgitated; taken shits and peed. But I do not know.

What I do know as the elevator door opens is why I do not know more.

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“What can I get you?” Todd asked me, returning from his closet.

“What are you going to have?”

“Scotch on the rocks. I wish I had something better: I heard from Landiak. Kalmer’s agency people want to put you and me under contract—as a team. They’re creating a character for you: ‘Kim.’ Using the ‘K,’ they’ll have ads with headlines like, ‘Go Kamping with Kim,’ ‘Go Klimbing with Kim’ and so on. Do you like to travel? Sounds like there could be a lot of it. We’d have to shoot ‘day for night’; ‘summer’ in the winter, see?”

“Hmm.” Within sixty days, a Kalmer check, made out to Nicole C. Baker and mailed to a nonexistent address, would be returned to sender.

“‘Hmm.’ Is that all you’re going to say?”

“Scotch sounds fine.”

“Settle down, now. Let’s not get rambunctious. I thought you’d be doing handstands about this.”

“I’m happy. Thank you. I just don’t know how much time I can commit.”

“We’ll talk with Landiak. Two or three days every season, depending on the location, is what they’re thinking. Want something to munch on?”

“No thanks—still too full from dinner. Look what you did to me.” I puffed out my cheeks and crossed my eyes. Todd sauntered away grinning as proudly as if *he* were the chef at Topolobampo.

Free-form percussion emanated from his kitchen, echoing through the emptiness of his living room. Its walls were painted gray. Its windows were covered with skinny gray blinds. The few pieces of furniture—a low leather sofa, a balloonlike easy chair and a large lacquered coffee table—were black.

“And I’ve got the island slides in the projector,” he called out. “Wait till you see.”

Not a single photograph, not a single picture or poster or *anything*. The condo was a *tabula rasa*.

“Here you go,” said Todd, startling me with the drinks. He handed me a filled glass and led me to the sofa. I sat down upon it. Todd wild, Todd smiled widely as I shook off my shoes and drew my feet up onto the buttery nappa. He left again and returned with a bucket of ice and an opened bottle of Cutty Sark.

"Very nice room," I said.

"Thanks. I feel refreshed here. Some people think it's cold. But see, my job calls for me to look, look, look at things; find and fix all the microscopic details. I don't have anything to look at here but you, and that's the way I want it. Nothing about you needs fixing. You're feast for the eyes—I can feel my rods and cones gaining weight as we speak."

"Thank you. Well, it is...uncluttered."

"Yeah. I'm not at all a collector—of anything but electronic gewgaws and tapes and records and CDs. Just audio; no video."

"TV?"

"A hand-held one, for wars."

"Gosh, I have a television as big as a freezer. Like a freezer, it's always on. I hope to be buried in it when I die. Where are all the CDs?"

"Behind this panel." Todd rapped a gray Formica-clad door in the wall at the side of the couch.

"And the speakers? May I pour more of this?" I drained my glass.

Nod, Todd nodded, sweeping his arm in an arc across the room, first to the left and then to the right. Four rectangles of gray grille cloth were fitted into cutouts in the drywall; two high and two low. "I guess you could say I believe a stereo, unlike a woman, should be heard and not seen—hey! Teasing! Would you like some music?" He took two steps to the built-in cabinet housing his library. He selected a compact disc and rotated some knobs. He listened and rotated.

"Oh yes!" I said. "Phenomenal sound! What a pair of woofers!"

"That's *my* line."

"Woofers? There's a new one. What I mean, buster, is the low notes are amazing. I can feel them right here!" I placed a fist at my chest like an egg in a nest.

"Really?" Todd fell in next to me and bumped my hand away with his. "I'm picking up good vibrations too. Boy. That was the first time I'd ever done it that way. It was really something."

"Could you..."

He withdrew.

"Can you just, you know, sort of hold me for a while...pretend I'm a kitten?" I had begun to think I had erred with the chipmunk episode; the "let me hold you in here" business; the fellatio. Todd's attempt at coitus had frightened me, as had my forgiveness. "What I need more than anything else tonight is to be held. Sometimes that's all a woman needs."

"Down in the dumps, Puff?"

"I lost someone not long ago after many years. I can't stop thinking about how he got so old, so sick...wasted away. Lung cancer. He was like a brother to me, and a father, and a grandfather too."

"You did know him a long time. Was he the guy who pulled you outa the lake?"

"What? Oh, yes."

"Uncle Frank, was it?"

"Not a saint, you know. But...darn." I wiped a budding tear from my eye and inspected the smear for black specks.

"I lost a good friend too, a short time ago. Joel Silverman, of the party? Not long afterwards, he went to sleep in his car with the engine running. So unlike him."

"I know."

"You—"

"I know we all lose valued people. Sorry about Joel. A lot of people I've known have died young. Stogy, Frank was old. It was time. Still, I'm not sure I know how to handle it. I thought I could. I've been through a lot. But this is beyond me."

"Do what comes natural. I'll be right here, holding you. You can cry if you want. I don't mind seeing tears so long as I can be sure I didn't cause them. I hope I never make you this unhappy."

This was a form of male seduction, I knew, and wished to remain on guard; yet I did want Todd to hold me. I felt my bottom lip quivering. I could not contain a sob that went, ridiculously, "Hee!"

From his back pocket he removed a handkerchief. I folded a small section of it over the tip of an index finger and pushed it, hard, into the corners of my eyes, one at a time. "Life is passing me by, Todd. I mean *real* life. Real life flows from in front of me to behind me...and I stay put."

"Like the guppies."

The sound of the word "guppies," for some reason, made me excessively sad. Tears almost squirted out.

"But I thought you were Miss Changeability."

"It's the changing that keeps me from changing. The more things change, the more I stay the same. And...and I'm not making any sense, am I? I don't know what I'm trying to say. I don't know if I'm really trying to say anything. I don't know if I believe what I'm saying. I've never been like this. This is Marci talking now, and the booze; not me."

"Who's Marci? Hey, who is she? Tell me."

"I will, I will." Think now. "My shrink."

Todd rested his hand on my nylon-y knee. I pushed at my eyes again. And then I blew my nose, grotesquely. Todd chuckled uncomfortably, as did I.

“Ladylike? Black goop dribbling down my face, messing up your hanky, getting all splotchy. Look at this face.”

“You don’t have to ask me twice.” Todd clamped his hands upon my shoulders. I snuggled in. “Oh, Nicole,” he said softly, “I want so much for you to let me cuddle you all night.”

Immersed in grief, I almost told him that sounded wonderful, which it did.

“I can’t, Todd. You know where that would probably lead. And I do want us to cool it in that area.”

“I’ll tie Mister Happy down with gaffer’s tape.”

“No. I really believe it would be best if we, oh, not started over, ’cause it’s impossible, but got to know each other better in other ways and then maybe...”

“So you’re not going to stay tonight? For sure? Please?”

“Not tonight. Please don’t say ‘please’ again. Maybe some other time. Maybe soon. Give me some elbow room.”

“Yeah.” He released me. “Elbow room. In a lifetime of disappointments, what’s one more?”

“You’re overreacting...or overacting.”

“Am I? ‘Elbow room’ isn’t the first step toward breaking up, is it? Am I being let go? Is this elbow room going to grow day by day until it’s the size of Soldier Field? If you’re trying to break up with me, I want you to do it, right now—walk away. Right out of here. Go. Don’t keep me hanging on, waiting and hoping but having nothing to say about it.”

“You must burn up a lot of calories doing this...jumping to conclusions.”

“We’re not breaking up? Good. Are you gonna stay? No? Isn’t there anything I can say or do? I’m cool with that. How about another hour or so? Is there room within your elbow room tonight for one more drink? More Cutty, or would you prefer to join me in something a bit off the beaten path? It’s made by monks out of weeds, they say. I’ll show you the island shots. Put together, the drink and the slides are the best antidote for the ‘Life is passing me by’ boo-hoo-hoos I can think of. Hell, you’re so fast, *you’re passing life by.*”

“I’ll have that drink—a tiny one. I’ll watch the slides, and then I’ll be on my way.”

“And then I’ll let you. But I’ll never forgive myself for it.”

KALMER’S “KIM” CAMPAIGN RAN SUCCESSFULLY, I SEE, BUT WITH SOME OTHER CHICK IN THE TITLE ROLE.

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“Driving the diaper truck”—that is how I once heard it described. I am sitting on the icy, tiled floor, straddling a toilet. I have rested my elbows and hands on the rim, forming an X with my forearms, and eased my head down with forehead at the intersection—this in order to throw up while unconscious. Cold saliva flows freely.

Someone knocks. “Lady? Lady, you gotta go now. I gotta mop. You been in there most of the night. My shift is close to over.”

Shift?

“Cut the shit,” I say, my voice ringing in the ceramic bowl, “you’re not a shifter.”

“No, really. Can I give you a hand? Call a friend? Get a cab?”

I hoist my elephantine head and point my potato of a face at the closed door. “Who am I?”

“I’ll get that cab. But if you can’t do it for me, I’m gonna have to look in your purse. I promise I won’t take anything. All right? I don’t want to call the cops, see? I’ll help you get home, but I have to know where your home is and see if you have money for a taxi. So I’m gonna unlock this now. Okay?”

“Japs and Asians, y’know, drive all hunkered down, and they never get out of the left lane on the expressway. Blacks think they own the road—‘I’m a god-dam African American and I can do whatever the hell I want and if you don’t let me I’ll start a race riot.’ Indians and Pakistanis and all those other camel jockeys can’t drive *at all*. And they treat their women bad. You don’t want to get mixed up with one of them—take my advice. Puerto Ricans? I don’t stop for them no more. One of ’em shot me one night right here in the leg, tryin’ to rob me. I ran the sucker down—took out six parking meters along the way. He’ll never walk. Gonna need a lot of cab rides, yessireebob, but he’s not gonna get any from me. And then there’s the Jews—”

“Jews are bad drivers along with everything else people say?”

“*You’re* not Jewish, are ya?”

“How the holy fuck should I know?”

“Hey. Right. Gotcha. I’m shuttin’ up.”

"We're here. We're here. We're—"

"Where?"

"Ain't this your building? It's the address the guy at the gas station gave me. You gettin' out or not?"

I smell vomit...and gasoline. I touch my numb face, searching for signs of injury. My nose is running, but the fluid is reassuringly clear. My teeth feel rough and pitted. I unbutton my coat. I am naked underneath it to the waist; from there to my toes, only pantyhose. I cannot find my shoes.

My purse. Got it. Everything inside seems intact, though much is puzzling. I believe I told the Shell attendant my name was Nicole Baker; gave him a Schaumburg address. That is who I thought I was and where I lived. But I carry the pocketbook of someone called Marcia Lynne Gaydos, resident of Evanston. Four-twelve East Church Street, apartment seventeen. And what is this? A stark, harsh Polaroid photograph of one woman riding another as Barbara Wolfe had ridden Randel Tarpley. Nicole—me—and...whom? Marcia?

Head thrown back, mouth thrown open, eyes closed, I appear to be enjoying myself tremendously. I am wearing pantyhose. The other woman is wearing garter belt, nylon stockings, heels and a bra big enough to fit me. Laura Petrie "flip" hairdo.

The "other woman" is Todd Bergau.

"Lady?"

"Nope. Yes. I'm getting out. What do I owe you?"

"The guy at the station paid me in advance. *I owe you.*"

"Thanks. Stay here till I find my keys and we'll call it even."

No keys.

"Wait a minute, wait a minute!" I say. "Here's two fifties. I need to go downtown. Lake Point Tower. First, though, I have to puke."

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A ton of sheet metal slides off the roof. My eyelids slam open like runaway window shades. I shut them again and wince as their insides sand my eyeballs raw. Hello?

“Fuck,” I say, and reach out. The phone has been stolen. Uh-uh, not really. I rise up on hands and knees and spin around like a mutt.

I gulp and grab for the handset. I topple over with it into my pillows, and the earpiece jabs into my breast, forcing from me an ungodly wail. I pull the handset near to my ear and quickly push it away again as a high-pitched jackhammer bashes into my eardrum. “Motherfucker!” I smash the handset into its cradle.

Within seconds of my brain’s coming to rest inside my skull, the metallic avalanche resumes. I spear the handset once again and use it to strike myself in the jaw. “What the fuck, *what!*”

“Miss Zachary, ma’am,” begins an edgy and altogether unfamiliar voice, “sorry if this is a bad time. I can call back later.”

Am I Miss Zachary? I ask myself. Fuck no! “What?”

“Stuart Muller, ma’am.”

There’s no Muller here either, for Chrissake! “*What?*”

The upright, uptight young caller is deeply into his presentation, offering unrequested statements of increasing detail about an apparently tragic family emergency: “And so, I thought it best to stay home from work today—if that’s all right with you, ma’am—at least until the doctor can tell give us his prognosis on my m—...on my mother’s...condition.”

“Stu—was it *Stu?*” I say. “Sorry, kid. Enough is enough. Clean out your desk. You’re fired.”

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Todd served me a beverage containing what he had described as an imported, herb-based liqueur. It tasted like an old-fashioned brand of cough syrup, left over from Larry Hibbs's day. There was more to it than codeine. The herbal libation dropped me like a zoologist's dart and gradually paralyzed me, first from the neck down, then up.

Rohypnol, I have determined, was the secret ingredient.

He shredded my blouse-top bodysuit in an unkind effort to remove it unassisted. He cracked the flimsy plastic front gasp...I meant to say "clasp" of my gossamer brassiere with a single tug; broke the zipper of my skirt. I know this because I found those items, and my shoes, in a soggy-bottomed paper sack beside me in the taxi.

I remember Todd's lifting me up in a much more Jerome O'Neill- than Mark Asplund-like manner—dragging my feet across the carpet, his forearms hooked under my armpits.

My pantyhose were torn at the seam. Apparently he had used a sharp object—one of my own fingernails?—to punch a hole in them just big enough for his tire iron of a penis to get in.

I think I remember saying to him or at least wanting to say to him, "Don't, Larry; don't Doctor; don't Todd; please don't" while seeing through closed eyelids what I thought was lightening, which must have been flashes of the instant camera. He must have tossed one snapshot into my purse to serve as "proof" of my compliance—few women are raped in the female-superior position—and kept others as souvenirs or for use as evidence should lawyers become involved.

His penchant for cross-dressing might have worked in his favor had the case gone to trial: This was a man whose partner had allowed him sufficient time to do himself up for the occasion.

From the drugging to the dragging, from the lightening to the diaper truck, from the toilet to the cab, from Oak Park to Evanston, from Evanston to Chicago and from that morning to the next when Stuart Muller made his call my mind remains blank as the walls of Todd's condo. And until mere minutes ago, it was blank from Stuart's call all the way up to the evening news. Empty

for days. This effect, I learn, is precisely why the drug is so popular among men who will stop at nothing to have their way with resistant women.

“ROHYPNOL, A COLORLESS AND TASTELESS DRUG OFTEN PRESCRIBED AS A REMEDY FOR CHRONIC INSOMNIA, HAS BEEN DUBBED THE ‘DATE RAPE’ PILL...”

SAY BYE-BYE TO DRAG-QUEEN TODD.

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A male employee of the store reacts to my intended purchase with poorly amused concealment...concealed amusement. He does so for I have placed on his cash register belt three different brands of home pregnancy test. He must be thinking, This woman wants to be *really* sure. He is correct.

Results of the tests are unanimous and, I begrudgingly accept, as certain as the outcome of using such products can be. Only an M.D. would be able to provide a valuable fourth opinion. But I cannot see one. A physician would want to know my address. He or she would want to review my medical history. Furthermore, I know that a physician would probe and stare in an unfeeling manner completely unlike Cousin Rick's.

The miracle of modern chemistry: Mere days after conceiving, I know because I urinated on strips of plastic that am with child.

How do I feel?

I pace in circles around the dance floor, my hands at my belly, trying to decide.

I could bring the fetus to term, paying a midwife to assist with the birth of Todd Bergau's son or daughter when the time came—three months short of a year from now—and paying her more to keep her mouth shut thereafter. I could employ a live-in to assist with weaning and rearing. I could learn to feel good about this, although it would put a crimp in my style.

On the other hand, I could abort it, but that would necessitate consultation with a physician...or worse. Furthermore, although I have not in the past given thought to the morality of abortion, I now must consider whether what is left of the sanctity-of-life philosophy of Father Jerome Peter O'Neill would allow me to proceed in that direction.

How do you feel, Marci? What do you want to do? I will leave it up to you. It is time to go.

"TIME TO GO"? UH-OH. SAY IT ISN'T SO. PLEASE STAY. PLEASE!

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“What I got for you is good news and bad news. The good news: I know where your daughter is. People are watching her in Chicago. But she’s not exactly doin’ great.”

“Good grief, man! Who is this?”

“My name is my business, pal. We ain’t holding her for ransom. And I’m just the messenger here. We don’t want nothing from you except a promise that you’ll meet her and a big guy called Tommy at the airport there in your town when and where I tell you and you won’t ask no questions.”

“But—”

“No buts. Hold a sign with your last name on it. Tommy’ll find you. Tip him a twenty for his trouble would be nice. He gets her, hands her over, you say thanks and he’s gone. I think she’ll do what you tell her to do—she follows orders good. You won’t need no help that a skycap can’t give you taking her through the airport to your car, but you might want to have a wheelchair—she don’t walk easy. Don’t call the police. Don’t bring help. Once you got her, don’t take her home. Make plans right now to get her into Careways MedServ, a hospital kind of place close to where you and your wife live. Drive her straight there. She needs help with her brain, see?—maybe fell down or something. Want the number? I got it right here, if you’re interested. Better not try anything. Double-cross us and you’ll never see her again. Do we have a deal?”

ARE YOU FOLLOWING THIS? WHO PLACED THE CALL? WHO’S THE DAD? WHO’S THE DAUGHTER? MARCI?

CAREWAYS LOCATED CINCINNATI.

THIS IS ROTTEN.

AND IN THE MEANTIME, THAT FUCKER BERGAU...

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I must get away, and I will...as soon as I have dealt with Bergau.

I attract the attention of a raven-haired and effervescent though bulimic female flight attendant. In her body and the guise of a photographer's representative, who, through networking, had heard about the untimely death of Joel Morris Silverman, I invite Todd to a business dinner and then to my O'Hare-area hotel for a room-service nightcap.

This time, I am the one in possession of Rohypnol.

While Todd sleeps stuporously I kneel beside him, flooding his face with half a bottle of leftover Chardonnay, followed by half a can of Drano. The mixture crackles and smokes; Todd appears to be trying to fly away shoes. No. I meant to say "shoo away flies."

This is getting worse, is it not?

I am sure it has become as annoying to you as it is frustrating to me. I think of it as a lisp or stammer. It is a recent development. And it is a constant embarrassment.

Bear with me.

Increasingly lighthearted, I wing my way to Buenos Aires. In a land of stick-figure window dummies and tell-all clothing, I hear the word *flaca*, or "skinny girl," uttered by *portenos*, locals, in reference to myself, which is a compliment, rather than *gorda*, a dreaded insult that five pounds more flesh on my bones, flesh on my bones—did I say it right?—would have elicited. An extra little wiggle finds its way into my walk. I speak fluent Spanish. I bask on the beach, proudly topless and very nearly bottomless, as do many other stunning if underfed women in richly varied shades of brown. I tango—do I tango!—and drink and eat (waste food) in the company of marvelous young dark men who throw hundred-peso notes around as though they were mango peels. I flirt at them with my hair. I bed a pilot and—you guessed—steer the plane home!

"HOSPITAL SPOKESPERSONS SAY BERGAU, WHO SUFFERED IRREPARABLE CHEMICAL BURNS TO BOTH CORNEAS AND SURROUNDING FACIAL TISSUE, WILL LIKELY NOT RETURN TO THE FIELD OF PHOTOGRAPHY.

“POLICE SAY THEY CONTINUE TO SEEK A REPORTEDLY HISPANIC WOMAN, WHO WAS SEEN BY A MEMBER OF THE HOUSEKEEPING STAFF LEAVING THE WESTIN HOTEL O’HARE ROOM AT APPROXIMATELY THE HOUR AT WHICH THE CRIME IS BELIEVED TO HAVE OCCURRED.”

SO MUCH FOR BAD-BOY BERGAU. IS THAT IT FOR MARCI, TOO?—SENT TO THE NUT HOUSE LIKE THE OVERBAUGH BABE? FUCK! I FEEL LIKE SWITCHING THIS OFF.

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Would you like to ask me why I waited so long? Why did I not destroy Todd Bergau more quickly, as soon as I, Marci, was able to think clearly and walk a straight line with knife in hand? Why did I not stay with Marci's body, stay as long as possible, savoring every minute? Why did I squander so many dozens of valuable hours seeking out and shifting into not just one but two subsequent bodies? I have several reasons.

One, for days after the rape, after remembering the rape, I remained mired in depression. I realized that Todd Bergau's killing would inevitably lead to Marci's being apprehended by the law, bail denied. Marci's, or Nicole's, relationship with Todd was well-known, not to mention photographically documented. Unlike Donna Campanello's, Marci Gaydos's motive would be self-evident.

Two, the individuals who had hide, had died at my hands in the past had died immediately following a shift—purely in order that I might move on from that shift without the encumbrance of discovery. To my recollection, I had murdered no one in punishment for the reason of their having wronged me or for any other reason outside the context and requirements of a successful shift. I was not a murderer *per se*, and felt uncomfortable with the setting of a new precedent.

Point Three: Although I, Marci, had frequently squeezed the word “die” through my teeth when talking the Todd situation over with myself at the foundation and had envisioned collecting a variety of weapons to use against him, I could not so easily envision stabbing him or throttling him. With my twiggy arms and his martial art? I lacked the needed confidence, yes, the needed muscle...and the *ki*.

Four. This you may find hard to accept, knowing me as you do: While Marci, I had come to appreciate—to grasp the nature of—Todd's passion, impatience and indiscretion, convincing myself that I, being historically not entirely devoid of duplicity, had either allowed him or driven him to force himself upon me. I had given him, as he must have seen it, no other choice. Having been a man or two...or two hundred, I understood. I had posed nude for him. I had stayed over with him at the cabin. I had told him women can get

tired of nice, careful, understanding guys. I had painted a picture for him of how women every now and then enjoyed “fucking, pure and simple.” I had shaved his legs—an act we both had found extremely sensual. I had resisted coitus, but I had spread out before him a buffet of alternative sexual relations perhaps more intimate than intercourse, if any can be: I had allowed him to come in my mouth. And “allowed” is not the word. I had instructed him to drop me off in front of an apartment building nowhere near Lake Point Tower at the end of our trip down from Wisconsin, but days later I had let him take me to his home. On that occasion I had worn the shortest skirt and the tallest shoes then in my collection. And, having shaken off said shoes, I had asked him to hold me and had said yes to one too many drinks, knowing full well it was one too many. Like a pusher, I had let him sample me. Certainly he would want more, beg for more, scream for more, take more if given the chance.

I asked myself, Did you mislead him, lead him on, let this happen, *make* this happen? This I asked myself over and over again. I answered myself each time, chin sinking lower each time, the circles I paced in growing smaller and smaller, Of course you did. Aware that such pangs of self-doubt and twinges of unwarranted forgiveness were exclusively female in origin, I knew a shift into maleness was a prerequisite to tidying things up.

Five, the shift into the body of the man who delivered Marci to her father solved some problems but caused others. I had selected that body chiefly for its bulk and its ability to intimidate those less bulky (it closely resembled that of the bouncer at Happy Jack’s). This proved useful in carrying Marci to Cincinnati and scaring off her father’s hired helpers. However, that body would have been too big to move surreptitiously around Todd Bergau’s neighborhood, hiding behind bushes and the like. It was, obviously to all, up to no good. It was not a body for which Todd would have opened his front door.

Six, thus, use of a woman—a special kind of woman—was a must. I felt both physically and emotionally fit for the task to come upon my shift into the body of the Argentine stewardess, for it was dazingly attractive, in an especially Todd-baiting way, and its blood ran hot as molten gold. Her mentality and physicality gave me the anger, the vengefulness, the guile—not to mention the big-busted-waif look—I knew I would need to do the deed.

There you have it. I required time to think things through and I took it. Time was on my side, as it always had been. And, after all, what was a few days?—a few days for Todd to stop jumping at shadows?

There is one last point I feel I must bring up before we move off the subject of Todd Bergau, if you do not mind. Just a few days prior to his drugging me, Todd had started elaborating on the concept of the velvety darkness, as you know, and this he said originated with me and was being conveyed to him

from me through sex. He described it as a pleasing, calming influence. I knew nothing then and know little now of this phenomenon. Yet its undeniable effect on Todd had begun to make itself manifest. He did seem to be relaxing, badgering me less than before about the future and whether it might see us remaining together.

The less he wanted to know, the more I wanted to tell him.

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I do not know who I am. I do not know *what* I am. I am a being of some kind, an onion-like being. I am made of layers, which I am removing. I peel and peel and get smaller and smaller until I am a nub or a nut of a thing. I am not disappointed. On the contrary, I feel liberated by the loss of those layers—for at the core of me—no matter how many new layers I may accumulate subsequently, will forever be this essence...the essence of Marcia Lynne Gaydos.

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The lobe of Lake Point Tower which is home to the Patricia Lorraine Mattingly Memorial Foundation faces almost exactly due north. This, I believe, is the most desirable orientation of the three available. It affords equally view taking breaths of the cityscape to the left and the lake to the right. The hustle and bustle of the refurbished Navy Pier lies at my feast, at my feet to the east; that of Lake Shore Drive to the west. Straight in front I can see the winding shoreline of the “third coast” as it runs all the way to Evanston and beyond.

The view is panoramic and demanding. When I first moved into the newly remodeled space as Philip Overbaugh, I was not certain I could remain: Walking around the area generated in me a consistent feeling of falling which I did not enjoy. I kept many of the blinds drawn. Gradually I grew out of the vertigo and began leaving the windows uncovered. I do draw the curtains when window washers return for another look-see or when sunlight threatens to damage my paintings and prints.

Initially, I—Overbaugh—chose furniture worthy of display in the Museum of Contemporary Art but absurdly uncomfortable. Later, I—Marci—found joy in softening this, replacing some of the metal with wood, some of the shaped plywood with upholstery, some of the black upholstered surfaces with others more vibrant. I also put in storage some of the gloomier graphic works and purchased others that were pretty, tranquil. The mud-pie Dubuffets were among the first to go, along with the smeared Bacons. These were replaced by Diebenkorns, Averys, rosy Rothkos and the work of numerous Colorists. Since then I have made other changes, moving into and hurriedly out of Cubism, embracing and then running away from Pop. I have not rejected the tastes of Philip Overbaugh, because I cannot: That will of his part remains strong within me.

I can easily accommodate one hundred guests at a time, and I often do. Civic celebrities in sequins and sable flock to the Patricia Lorraine Mattingly Memorial Foundation to make hefty and heartfelt contributions in return for glasses of cheap wine, plates of greasy hors d'oeuvres and a few notes from the piano.

I can play quite well. A short time ago I could read music with ease. I am no longer able to do so, but I have picked up a new skill superior to the one lost: Melodies which I believe to be original spring Keith Jarrett-like from my fingertips extemporaneously. The notes fly away, never again to return in that order, and I do not mind. My music, like almost everything else in my life, is evanescent—the way I prefer it.

Disregarding mild objections from remnants of the Overbaugh personality, I have immersed myself in photography. I now own some of the finest equipment available. In addition, I have acquired a variety of smartfully, rather, artfully smudged canvas backdrops and have begun a tradition of posing and shooting select new bodies amid them, *sans* clothing. (Others I shoot in a more conventional head-and-shoulders way, not for display but for the sake of record-keeping.) I missed out on the first great many truly photogenic identities I occupied, but better late than never.

Marci would have excelled at this.

I am energized by the manner in which light plays on the complexities, the concavities and convexities, of the human form. If there is an entity anywhere in the cosmos more deserving of photographic exploration than the human being at its peak of anatomical perfection, I do not want to know. (Have you allowed yourself to wonder why no portrayal of beings from other worlds has engendered in us a feeling of physical inferiority? I think it not possible. We might swap knowledge with them, but not bodies. Let them be smarter, but not better-looking.) I feel like Michelangelo and da Vinci combined, enraptured by the adventure of recording as if for the first time every muscle, every sinew, every joint.

A radio-controlled remote system enables me to release the shutter by speaking a word. Usually the word is “Now.”

Narcissistic? Would you not be?

I do my own black-and-white as well as color printing. My preferences always lead me back to an exacting monochrome process which results in prints that are rewardingly soft and warm, with flesh tones which, when dodged and burned-in and bleached, look like flesh, and shadows as deep as the spaces between galaxies. Some I purposefully distort—elongating, twisting, posterizing and solarizing—until they become contortedly abstract.

I hang only those which do not show a face.

Several of my earliest photographic manipulations can be viewed at the MCA—part of a gift from the PLMMF.

Many guests interpret the growing photographic journal in the gallery entryway to be symbolic of the foundation’s *raison d’être*: It has become

famous nationwide as an investor in the search for a non-pharmacological cure for schizophrenia and related disorders.

When people attend my *soirées*, they always see me, of course, but they seldom if ever see the same me twice. Regulars ask about the “gracious and erudite” master or mistress of ceremonies from the previous time, and I always thank them cordially on behalf of my busy colleagues.

I suppose you think you have caught me in a mistake. I have been allowing observant throngs, including the Chicago mayor and chief of police, to sashay freely around this aerie and talk at length with each new foundation “employee,” an unforgettable charmer who, the night after next, will be found dead or stumbling down the streets of a slum, mumbling.

Had these emcees come from Chicago, the foundation’s headquarters might have been suspected of being the lair, so to speak, of a monster, as it were. But I shop elsewhere. I cut from the herd students at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, in great part because these outgoing young people, as a result of their rural Puritanical upbringing, are flattered to the point of abandon by advances from one so overtly on the prowl.

Suckers.

My first task after a shift these days is to change into jeans or chinos and drive myself in my new student body up-state, where blondes become brunettes (and vice-versa), contact lenses replace spectacles (and vice-versa) and Reeboks are exchanged for something in satin from Anne Klein or patent leather from Allen Edmonds.

Down to the incinerator I usually send the gown or tuxedo the morning after each party. When ready, I pack the casual pants but wear something more fetching for another trip south. After the next down-state shift, I dress the old body back up in its wrinkled denims or Dockers. When I have time, I soil it with mud or motor oil. On occasion I have poured alcohol or Quaaludes or Rohypnol down a throat to complete the picture. I deposit these bodies in cheap motels, unused stairwells, empty silos and so on. Motoring home, I am always careful to discard my Chicago trash, my Chicago fashions in trash bins along the highway.

I hereby dare anyone who attends my affairs to connect the dots between the foundation’s eloquent, urbane sophisticates and the dimpled...no, the filthy, rumpled, doped and drunken young bums whom search parties find littering the countryside.

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Christian Dior.

Estée Lauder.

Yves Saint Laurent.

Laura Mercier.

Oscar de la Renta.

Calvin Klein.

Elizabeth Arden.

Ralph Lauren.

Guy Laroche.

Perry Ellis.

Giorgio Armani.

A plethora of perfumes and colognes baring those labels and others did not go unnoticed by a cleaning woman at the foundation. “You must like to smell all kinds of different ways,” she said.

“They’re for guests who might like to freshen up.”

Robin Denise Gould.

James Matthew Berhorst.

Lindsey Irene Cheverie.

Roger Thomas Dement.

Jenna Martins Kinney.

Roy Adam Fehrenbach.

I once erred almost fatally by leaving their facial portraits fanned out across my desk, in full view of her. Had she been more well-informed via regional media, she might have recognized any number of the faces as being those of “victims” of the “ruthless predator and killer” who had been dubbed by members of your fine profession the “Urbana-Champaign Campus Vampire.” And then she would have had to die.

Time to move on. I have been thinking about a return to the University of Wisconsin at Madison.

SYSTEM BOGGING DOWN. I'M NOT GOING TO SEARCH FOR ALL THE NAMES OR GET ANAGRAMS FOR THEM. YOU GET THE PICTURE—THESE WERE REAL PEOPLE. MOSTLY U OF I STUDENTS, AS HE SAID.

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Marci pirouettes around the “TV room” at the hospital, in tutu, *en pointe*, singing softly to herself. As I move near, her whirling slows. “Do you think I’m pretty?” she asks. I reply affirmatively, for she is that indeed. She has kept her figure. She has painted her kissable lips and applied a touch of mascara to her already-long lashes. “Dance with me?”

Yes, I say to myself, *do so. Dance. Stay. Live here with her, take care of her.*

Her dark eyes sparkle. They are irresistible.

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Roy Adam Fehrenbach to Shannon Michelle Fitzgerald.
Shannon Michelle Fitzgerald to Bradley James Merritt.
Bradley James Merritt to Jerri Lee Braverman.
Jerri Lee Braverman to Douglas Davies Farr.
Douglas Davies Farr to Kelli Annette Boccuzzi.
Kelli Annette Boccuzzi to Dean Louis Thomas.

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Rebecca Rosemary Watanabe.

THIS ONE I HAVE TO TRY.

She was a perfectly detailed miniature. Five-one? Five-two at the most. Piercing eyes. The tip of her nose upturned, as though alert to subtle changes in the atmosphere. Flowing down to her shoulders, a mane less like hair than a new polymeric fiber from the Japanese subsidiary of Du Pont—as full of darkness and light as the Magnificent Mile at midnight.

ABUSE OWN MACABRE BETRAYER. LET'S SEE WHO THE MACABRE BETRAYER IS WHO GETS ABUSED. I'M SURE THERE'LL BE

I was director of Human Resources at Careways MedServ. I had read about Rebecca Watanabe in the pictorial lifestyle section of *The Cincinnati Enquirer* and invited her to come in for an exploratory conversation.

“Mister Thomas,” she said, lowering subtly tinted eyelids to our handshake.

Under her boxy suit coat she wore a matching vest, the darts of which drew the fabric rather tightly to her chest. It was a chest I would not have expected to see on a woman of Asian heritage.

I had used every moment of my walk behind her to my office in examining her legs. They were short, but so uncommonly slim were those limbs that when viewed apart from objects lending a sense of scale they looked as long as Marci's. And she moved them as Marci once did hers—with a stately, regal air. The mien of a woman who knows her every step is being held in view and refuses to be flustered.

“Sit,” I said. “Please.” Rebecca Watanabe leaned her briefcase against the chair at the side of my desk, then reached around behind herself to smack the booth, that is to say, smooth the back of her skirt before sitting.

“Your credentials are impeccable,” I said to her. “Graduation with honors from Loyola, meritorious residency at Reese. Successful practice here in Cincinnati. Everything we are to discuss would seem perfunctory, but I will go through the motions. Here's one of them: Tell me something about yourself outside the field of medicine.”

“My undergraduate, pre-med studies took me deeply into an area I still find to be vastly interesting: religious philosophy.”

Her lips—ohnies and ibbies—sparkled as they seemed to be sending each way on its word with a kiss.

“What flavor—*kind*?”

With those shoulders shaking, she began her answer. Something about “Bible-beating Buddhist.”

“Yes, of course.”

“It is, one could say, a dogma-eat-dogma world.”

“True,” I added some time later.

“Yes, I think so.”

She went on.

I gloried in her company almost too much to wait more than a few hours for the shift. Some harmless, short-lived, orally administered anesthetic or muscle relaxant—readily available steps away—could have moved things along quickly, but the body of Dean Thomas would have been difficult to transport from or conceal in the oft-inspected and well-guarded facility.

“Another thing that makes my field of leisure-time endeavor a never-ending adventure: all the arcane sects.”

My expression must have conveyed outlandish incredulity, for it threw her into delightful hysterics.

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Forty, ruddy, reedy, tweedy. I studied the man's wool herringbone hat, slacks and jacket, thinking, Who's this bloke pretending to be?—Sherlock Holmes? If he lights up a bleeding calabash I'll shove it down his throat.

Rebecca had arrived at the staff party dangling like an ornament from the branch of this dry, brown tree. His drab appearance seemed fitting in that the holiday festivities, if they could be described as such, were lackluster—seasonal cheer and camaraderie having been moderated to near-melancholy by the clinic's recent loss of many valued employees.

Questions about them spread with each passed cup of punch: Had they been dismissed? Had they quit? As a group? Why? Where had they gone? And I, as head of staffing, became entangled in the rumor mill. I felt required to reply to each query until I had done what I had gone to the party to do.

Shannon Michelle Fitzgerald: ah, bought a day-care franchise in Indiana.

Bradley James Merritt: joined the *Journal of the American Medical Association* as editorial director.

Jeri Lee Braverman: on sabbatical in Italy.

Douglas Davies Farr: only visiting.

As my interest waned, however, my answers grew increasingly gruff, hurting more than helping, I gather: “Kelly Boccuzzi? We fired the incompetent twit.” What was I to care?

Rebecca's escort doffed his fedora and did pull a coat from his...a pipe from his coat. The Careways chief administrator was there, shaking hands and welcoming Rebecca in an official way, and, no doubt, I thought, raving about her outfit, a mostly black *ch'i p'ao*-like confection with frond-shaped splashes of aquamarine and maroon. The shiny silk, the tight-as-skin bodice and the long slit up the side gave her audience the impression that Doctor Watanabe had come straight from the title role in *The World of Suzie Wong*. Through the slit I saw flashes of shoe, calf and thigh. She turned and stopped, turned and stopped as if being instructed to do so by a Todd Bergau.

“Well, hello there, Dean,” Rebecca said with a smile. The tree-man stood confidently at her side. “We've been looking for you. I'd like you to meet Keith

Macaulay. Keith, this is Dean Thomas. He was instrumental in bringing me to Careways. Keith's a professor, of philosophy, and one of my many mentors."

The shift into Dean Louis Thomas had resulted in my having acquired not only a formidably haughty British accent but an argumentative arrogance, an adversarial approach to figures of authority, which I rather enjoyed. "Oh." I sucked my teeth. "Do you delve into Eastern religions as well?"

"No," said Macaulay, matching me in pomposity, "rather something which provides a stimulating counterpoint: I suppose if I were to classify myself I'd have to say I'm a Sartre-style existentialist."

"All right, then. Rebecca—"

"Keith, explain?" she said.

"Oh, dear," began the professor. "It really is a very lengthy story. Perhaps some other time."

"I've got a few minutes," I said to Rebecca, "and then I would like to have some time alone with you."

I began counting the buttons on her dress.

Macaulay began, "Briefly, very briefly: Sartre said, essentially, one decides either to live *inside* oneself or live *for* oneself."

Ten, fifteen...

Rebecca jumped in: "*Etre en soi, ou—*"

I interjected: "'*ou etre pour soi.*' That much I remember."

Macaulay, who had been beaming proudly down at the intellect he had helped to shape, now eyed me suspiciously. I surmised that pipe from his smoke, smoke from his pipe would set off an alarm and get him tossed out. Unfortunately, he did not light it but held it in one palm as he held Rebecca's elbow in the other. The professor stated, "The notion of '*etre en soi*,' as you appear to know, can be defined as—"

"Living like a *thing* rather than a human being," I said, "believing free choices are not available to one at every moment." I had not known I had this in me.

Twenty, twenty-five...

"Yes."

"And '*etre pour soi*' implies living as a sentient being who initiates free choices and assumes direct responsibility for the results."

Thirty, thirty-five...

"Goodness, Dean!" said Rebecca.

"Am I correct in assuming that Buddhism is the antithesis of Existentialism?" I asked.

"To some degree but not entirely," she said. "Zen is the branch I like most. One of its major tenets: Life is life and it is our duty to simply—in simple fash-

ion—live it out, then let it go, making as few waves as possible along the way. To stop making choices, to stop intellectualizing, to stop thinking about life so much and just be. Just being leads to peace and peace leads to enlightenment.”

“To *lower* our form of life in order that we may *raise* it,” I said. Go with the flow. Stop fighting like the guppies.

“Well put,” said Macaulay.

Forty. Quite a night’s work ahead of me.

“The essence of Zen, as I see it,” I added, “is ‘Fuck philosophy.’”

“Rather less so,” Macaulay said.

“So to wrap things up: According to Sartre, as my interpretation has it, I can do what I want,” I said, “no holds barred, so long as I contemplate the consequences and prepare myself to face them—or choose not to face them.”

“Yes,” Macaulay said.

“Act, and then move on to another act. It’s liberating.”

“Exactly.”

“Leave.”

Macaulay bit the tip of his pipe and made a series of small smacking noises with his lips. “Sorry?”

“Leave. I don’t like you. You’re not welcome here. Leave.” I reached out for the elbow of Rebecca Rosemary Watanabe. Macaulay gave it to me.

The first letter of what might have been “Why, Dean, I never!” or “What in God’s name?” formed on Rebecca’s rosebud of a mouth while she manufactured an expression of dumbfoundedness. Macaulay meekly bade her *adieu*.

Before she could speak to me, I told her her dress looked as though it had been designed to become a hobby for someone like myself and that I felt I needed a hobby.

Instead of using words like “rude” and “forward” to describe my behavior, she called it “unusually to-the-point.” She added, “Do you always say exactly what you feel like saying?”

“I never say anything I *don’t* feel like saying—but then, no one ever does, as I see it. Sartre would agree, I believe. I happen to be better than most at knowing what I want and how to go about getting it.”

“What do you want right now? What do you want *me* to say?”

“‘Let me shake a few more hands and then take me home’ would be good for starters.”

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“You asked for it, Dean.”

What I had requested was a reason for the chronic sadness she worked so hard to camouflage. Rebecca sat wordlessly, holding the stem of her glass with the fingertips of both hands, looking down as she rotated it back and forth, while I, for easily the one-thousandth time, marveled at the sparkle of her hair. The boo-hoo-hoos were surely on their way, as were the caresses of consolation.

“I’m sure you have you heard about the relocation camps during the Second World War.”

“Yes. A great many Japanese people were forced to move from the West Coast inland, right? Some lost everything they had.” I set my glass down on the piano finish of her cocktail table, then quickly picked it up and held it at an angle as no one would have had it contained liquid.

“You need something to put that on,” said Rebecca, “and something more to put *in* it.” She slid into her shoes and glided off to her wet bar without my goblet. Moments later she glided back with an unopened bottle and two black rubber disks, which she set on the table. “There’s the west coaster,” she said, “and here’s the east coaster. Can you pop this?” Rebecca sat down six inches or so closer to me than she had been before and refilled both glasses. “This was Canada.”

“I wasn’t aware—”

“Worse than the U.S. My parents—the people who would become my parents—were among those forcibly relocated.”

My mind was elsewhere.

“*Nisei*,” I heard Rebecca say. “Victoria, on the island.” She spoke of waving Tojo ashore, of turning the other cheek, of Toronto and an Episcopal parish. “Next, Dad joined an accounting firm and my mom opened a deli sort of place—Franco-Japanese.”

“How do you eat quiche with chopsticks?”

“Patiently. The deli grew.” White tablecloths; money. The first Honda car dealership in the city, now the biggest.

I exclaimed, “Hurrah!”

"Yes, hooray," Rebecca replied somberly. "Who said 'Living well is the best revenge'? *So there*, Canada!" At the compass point she had chosen to represent north she thumbed her nose.

"So it didn't turn out badly for them in the long run."

"Not in the long run, no. But the short run is another story altogether. I've spared you the worst parts." *Sansei* acquaintances. Inner strength. Emotional discipline. Shouldn't tell the story while drinking.

A vibrato sigh bounced off the walls.

I stood and used a gesture of deliberation to wipe the residue of our kisses from my lips.

"Where are you going? Wait a sec," she said as she put on her shoes. She rose, looking fretful, to accept an embrace.

With each one's arm around the other's waist, we began a slow procession across the room. I, on the left, nudged Rebecca to the right, away from the closet where she had hung our coats and toward a hallway; at that instant Rebecca nudged me leftward. We stopped. At once we both said, "Oh." Together we took another step, nudging each other as before. We stopped again.

"Dean."

"Rebecca."

"I don't do this. Not so soon. Not ever with people I'm going to have to work with; not with someone in your position—"

"My letter of resignation is on Ramachandran's desk."

"You resigned? For what?"

"To deprive you of the only excuse which might have worked. I can get another job, but I'll never meet another Rebecca Watanabe."

With her fingers in mine, I tugged her along as I stepped backward down the hall. "The bathroom?" I said. "Do you have to stop? Your study?" I peeked in and saw a room burgeoning—surprisingly messy—with books and papers. I wondered whether I would bother going through them. "This the bedroom?" I twisted a dimmer switch and nighttime turned to dawn. With a slight twist the other way, I transformed dawn into dusk.

Confounded, Rebecca stared up at me as I took hold of the first of her multitudinous buttons. "I've never undone a dress like this before," I said, unsure of the truthfulness of that statement—perhaps I had worn one. I then proceeded to the others, taking my time, savoring my ardor. The *ch'i p'ao*, in essence, is foreplay.

“How does it feel?” Rebecca asked. I raised my bare chest off hers. “To live the life you want to live, without constraint.”

“It feels,” I said, slipping my penis inside her, “just...like...*this*.”

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“Excuse me—hi!”

The balding but dashing bearded and stylishly dressed Raymond Alan Gaydos looked up from his coffee and then down at me quizzically. Preparing for this meeting, I had left my smock in my office.

“Hello, Doctor Watanabe. It took me awhile, didn’t it?” His eyes shot to the scoop neck of my mauve shell. Between the lapels of my tart, my smart taupe suit I was showing more than a hint of cleavage. At a “well-preserved” thirty-nine, I thought myself to be easily fifteen years younger than he. “Were you on your way to a table?”

“Sure. Let’s grab a seat.” We ambled across the nearly deserted Careways MedServ cafeteria to a spot which afforded us a view of the entertainingly landscaped grounds, their rolling hills and valleys softened lyrically by a blanket of new-fallen snow.

I remembered a moment when a Korean dry cleaner to whom Rebecca Watanabe was a regular customer had stared at Rebecca blankly on the street. The Korean had explained her lapse and surprise in broken English. “Did not know you without clothes.”

I told this story to Raymond, who laughed while again sneaking a peek at my chest. I could almost read his thoughts: *Without clothes*. This brought an especially broad smile to my face, which Raymond studied at length.

He pulled out a chair for me. I think, while he waited, he gazed over my shoulder in appreciation.

I sat and pretended to be struggling with my skirt hem, which had risen higher than mid-thigh. He remained standing behind me until I turned around.

“Oh, uh...” he said, his face flushing, and sat.

“Mister Gaydos—”

“Call me Raymond...Ray.”

“Ray.” Hastily, I introduced the topic I had come far, with great effort, over the past several weeks to discuss with him. “The police still have no idea who it was who brought your daughter to you? And he didn’t ask for money or anything else? Very strange. It has been difficult for me to determine exactly what Marcia Lynne experienced during the period between the time you last talked

with her in Chicago and the phone call from that man. There is trauma of one type or another, but it's unlike anything we have seen."

This was no fabrication. I had used my expertise—Rebecca Watanabe's expertise—in neurology to have Marci examined thoroughly with advanced electronic equipment. My official diagnosis was, "I don't have the foggiest." Colleagues at Careways were likewise stymied. In conference we guessed it amounted to an embolism or aneurism, but there was no evidence of vascular failure. A tumor or tumors of the frontal lobes might have led to behavior like Marci's, but CAT and PET scans found no abnormal growths anywhere inside her cranium.

"To give you an example of how baffled we were," I said to him, "we gave the breast-implant controversy an undue amount of attention. You've read, I'm sure—they've been implicated in every complaint from lethargy to arrhythmia to constipation."

"Is there nothing definitive?"

"Some women develop the symptoms of systemic lupus erythematosus—a painful disease of the skin, joints and inner organs—and that's nothing to sneeze at. Auto-immune disorders also. The debate rages on."

"I've never met a woman who had them—aside from Marci—to my knowledge."

"Yes you have," I grinned.

"You? Son of a gun. You're pleased, I take it." *Me too.*

"Very. They do require some care: massaging on a regular basis."

"Oh. Uh-huh." *Say when.*

"And they often get abnormally cold."

"Uh-huh." Raymond's eyes fought their way to my nipples, which were fully contracted and large as gumdrops—a configuration that never seemed to change. *Lemme warm those babies up for ya.*

"My view of the other complications?" I said, wondering as I spoke what my new view—mostly Watanabe's view—truly was. "In a nutshell: Many of the alleged problems stem from what can only be called buyer's remorse. Women approach the surgery with unrealistically high expectations. They allow themselves to believe their entire life will change once they have enlarged breasts. They assume men of the highest quality will fawn over them and therefore their social life will become that of a movie star. Sometimes this happens, and sometimes not. Quickly, some of the women to whom this does not happen begin to feel let down. And for that reason I believe breast implants *per se* do not have as much to do with health problems as the gloomy realization that bigger boobs alone are not enough to make a woman feel fulfilled. I've spoken to a number of women who said they felt they had cheapened themselves by

way of the experience and were now more at odds with their physical being than ever before. No wonder those women start to feel sick. And *feeling* sick, as we know, can *make* one sick.”

“That makes perfect sense to me, with my limited understanding of the female psyche.”

“You understand it about as well as anyone, I suspect. In comparison, men are simple as roosters, and women dislike them for being so simple. I understand why the Good Lord made the two sexes dissimilar physically—tab A into slot B—but one of the great mysteries of life is why He made them so different psychologically.”

“Anything else would be redundant, don’t you think? Two heads better than one?”

“Good point. But two heads ceaselessly butting? Men and women alike spend a lifetime asking themselves and anyone else they can find, ‘What do women want?’ and getting no useful answer. Ask a man what he wants and he’ll tell you. In twenty-five words or less. And, when all is said and done, it isn’t much. It’s often truly silly. But since it isn’t much, he can develop a ten-point to-do list and go about getting it. And he often gets it. If women envy men, it must be for that reason more than any other.”

Quite the philosopher.

“Is what you want so hard to express?”

“Let’s go back to the breast implant as an example. Can you see how a woman’s going to a doctor and saying, ‘Here’s my money—I want big hooters’ is an admission of having bought into everything she used to say she resented about our culture? Yet there are, I would wager, one hundred women putting themselves through it in America alone today, right this minute. Thousands and thousands every year. And growing.”

“Are they all going to wish they hadn’t?”

“Not all. Personally, I feel better than ever.”

I’ll bet you do.

“I made the appointment the very day of my divorce.”

“Serves him right. Did it change your life?”

“Somewhat.”

Men all over you.

“It sure changed Marci’s. Everything about her changed. I knew it would happen. She used her high-school graduation money. And then came the dancing and the pictures. I don’t know what rattled us more.”

The pictures? The digital checkerboard series from TV.

“The magazine people keep writing, calling.”

Magazine?

MAGAZINE? THERE'S THE MAGAZINE THING AGAIN. ALETHA, REMEMB

"It seems she signed a contract to go on tour. 'Glamour'-something. With the others."

The others?

WHAT OTHERS? CUT TO THE CHASE.

"I take it it's like being a priest," said Raymond Gaydos. "You can't say you never were one. Never stop being one."

PLAYBOY? THE SLOGAN: "ONCE A PLAYMATE, ALWAYS A PLAYMATE."

He swished his coffee around in his cup. "How is it the Eagles' song goes?—'You can check out, but you can never leave'?"

I decided not to press him for details at that moment, for he had grown somber and distant.

"The..." Raymond stopped, looked away, choked back a sob and tried again: "The b—. The chi—."

"The fetus? Zero complications there."

"Was it...alive?"

"It had been. Yes."

"Healthy?"

"Upon cursory examination, yes."

"Not deformed like a drug baby or anything."

"No. Of that I am sure." My answer, I could see, puzzled him as much as his question had puzzled me.

"If I asked you to, could you find out whose it was? The father?"

"We could find out whose it was *not*, with a very high level of certainty, assuming DNA samples of, shall we say, the candidates, were made available to us. Why does this concern you so?"

"It would ease my mind to know whose it wasn't. One man I want to be sure is not the father. I'll leave it there for now and let you know."

Yes? What is it?

I asked to be left alone.

Make this brief—I have work to do.

HE'S TURNED OFF THE AUDIO AND VIDEO. MY HUNCH IS HIS ATTENDANTS THOUGHT THEY'D BETTER CHECK IN ON HIM. I'M GONNA GO MAKE A SANDWICH, STRETCH MY LEGS. I FIGURE WE'VE GOT A GOOD 10 MINUTES OR SO. I'LL TURN UP THE VOLUME SO I CAN HEAR IF ANYTHING HAPPENS.

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I'M BACK. NOTHING YET.

WHAT WAS GAYDOS DRIVING AT JUST THEN? WHO DID RAYMOND THINK THE FATHER OF MARCI'S CHILD MIGHT HAVE BEEN? HAD HE MET TODD OR HEARD ABOUT TODD? OVERBAUGH? SOMETHING I CAN'T RESEARCH UNLESS THE BIG MAN CARES TO GIVE US THE DNA RESULTS, IF THERE WAS A TEST DONE. BUT THERE'S SOMETHING ELSE I CAN CHECK INTO WHILE WE WAIT.

1996

VICTORIA FULLER
KONA CARMACK
PRISCILLA TAYLOR
GILLIAN BONNER
SHAUNA SAND

I'M GOING THROUGH ALL THE CENTERFOLDS BACKWARDS, FAST AS MY EYES WILL LET ME, LOOKING FOR MARCI.

KARIN TAYLOR
ANGEL BORIS
JESSICA LEE
JENNIFER ALLAN
NADINE CHANZ

ULRIKA ERICSSON. NO RELATION, RIGHT? WRONG SPELLING.
VICTORIA SILVSTEDT

1995

MELISSA DEANNE HOLIDAY
LISA MARIE SCOTT
STACY SANCHES
DANELLE MARIE FOLTA
CYNTHIA GWYN BROWN
LEIGH PARLOVE

OH, MY GOD. HERE SHE IS, MISS JUNE. "ON THE LEIGH SIDE." LOOKS LIKE SOME OF THEM USE A NOM DE BOD. THAT'S WHY I HAD SO MUCH TROUBLE UP TO NOW. NO MISTAKING THIS BOD FOR ANYBODY

ELSE'S, THOUGH, NO MATTER WHAT SHE CALLS IT. NOW WITH THE NEW NAME I'M GETTING INFO ON LOTS OF APPEARANCES BY THIS BABE IN PLAYBOY PUBS THROUGHOUT THE NINETIES.

STATS ON THE CENTERFOLD "DATA SHEET" CORROBORATE WHAT WE'VE BEEN TOLD.

BUST: 32D—32D, IT SAYS. THEY LOOK A WHOLE LOT BIGGER THAN CS ALL RIGHT, BUT WOULDN'T DS STICKING OUT SO FAR ADD INCHES? 32 SEEMS TOO SMALL TO ME. IT'S LIKE A STORY PROBLEM: IF A WOMAN HAS D-CUP BREASTS AND THE TOTAL CIRCUMFERENCE OF HER UPPER BODY...NAH, CAN'T BE.

WAIST: 21. HIPS: 34. HEIGHT: 5'8". AN INCH TALLER THAN SHE SAID. DON'T KNOW WHICH IS RIGHT. WEIGHT: 114. HEAVIER, TOO, BUT STILL CLOSE TO SKIN AND BONES, AS WAS THE STYLE...EXCEPT FOR THE KNOCKERS, OF COURSE, WHICH LOOK LIKE THEY COULD WEIGH A COUPLE OF POUNDS EACH. AMBITIONS...MODEL, ACTRESS, WIFE, MOTHER. DOUBT ANY OF THAT EVER HAPPENED.

THERE'S A SHOT OF HER BUTT-ON, BRUSHING HER HAIR—LONG WAVY BROWN HAIR. THE DENZEL WASHINGTON GUY FROM AMOCO WAS RIGHT. HER BACK IS REALLY, REALLY TINY. 32? HMM.

OFF-PUTTING IN A WAY. LIKE BERGAU SAID, TOO MUCH OF A GOOD THING. SHE SHOULD HAVE SETTLED FOR CS, IN MY OPINION. DONE WAY BACK BEFORE SYNTHETIC TISSUE COULD BE FORMULATED AS NEEDED TO MATCH THE CONSISTENCY OF MUSCLE, FAT, GLANDS. STANDING UP, LYING DOWN, THEY'RE PRETTY MUCH THE SAME. FAKE, NOW THAT I CAN GET A CLOSE LOOK. GOT THAT "NOT SQUISHY-ENOUGH" THING GOING ON. BUT BETTER THAN TOO FLOPSY, RIGHT? CHILLY NIPS AS BIG AROUND AS MY PINKY. WHAT WAS BERGAU'S WORD? OHNIE? I GUESS I'D ACCEPT AN INVITATION TO CHEW ON THESE HERE OHNIES.

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Are you still there?

Sorry for the interruption. I ordered them to stay out, but they answer to a higher authority, it would seem.

Where was I? Oh, yes: Gaydos and Watanabe. Discussing Marci's cosmetic surgery.

Gaydos asked me, "Should we have them taken out?"

NO! OH, MAN, IF

"No!" I said emphatically. "She's been through too much already. I'm certain you will have an opportunity to discuss remedial surgery with her and win her approval, if the opinions—and I do mean opinions, *plural*—are unanimously in favor. Replacements filled with a saline solution or vegetable oil might be advisable. What's important now is she's not in peril physically—the runny nose is nothing—and is showing rapid progress in learning. It won't be long before she's potty-trained, I'm sure, and that's a big step along her journey back. I see progress each time you bring her in." I felt a tear blossom in one eye. I dabbed at it with the point of a napkin, mindful of my makeup.

"God, she was...*is* something special."

"I have children of my own, but I can't begin to identify with how difficult this must be for you. How is your wife dealing with it all?"

Raymond Gaydos sniffled and cleared his throat. "I have no idea. She went to live with her sister the week Marci was released."

"So you're really very much alone these days. I'm sorry—I'm not making things easier. I'm sorry I said that. I'm truly sorry. I'm not known for my bedside manner. Sorry."

Gaydos chuckled, and his laughter seemed to rejuvenate him. "That's okay. That's really okay, okay? Well, Francis lives with us, and she's a hoot. We have an aide in around the clock, too, as you know. And my work still demands a great deal of my time. So I don't sit and mope. Our son Jonny lives within a few miles, and he comes around as often as he can make the trip, being as busy as he is with his job. He and I are not as close as we used to be, but I can't bring myself to tell him to stay away—he's heartbroken. I have lots of friends. I'm

doing all right.” I lightly touched his arm with my left hand. “And so you are single?”

“Yes. I am a *rikonsha*, a divorcée. Married roughly seven years...after smoothly three.” Raymond chuckled again. “If it were not for the children, I would consider that chapter of my life to be an almost complete waste of time. I could have spent it better in a cave, hibernating. But my son and daughter are everything to me. I chose Cincinnati to be nearer them, yet I still don’t see them nearly often enough.” I tightened my grip on his arm. “Say: May I come to visit Marci at your home? I might have some further advice to offer with regards to her care if I can see her in that environment. She must have continuous stimulation, as you know. Don’t allow her to just sit, either.”

“Right. I’d like that, Doctor. Let’s check calendars and make it a weekend, Saturday, late afternoon. You’ll have your visit with Marci, and then you and I will go to dinner.”

“Very nice. However...”

“Yes?”

“You must begin calling me Rebecca.”

Becky?

No, most definitely Rebecca.

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Raymond Gaydos's affection for Rebecca Watanabe grew swiftly, seeming to double each day I came to call. Unfortunately, in age and in overall appearance he was beneath me, a step down. I do not like stepping down. Would this present a problem?

Have I always been able to enjoy the orgasm which is so essential to my talent?

In answering, I must refer you to Lawrence Hibbs. It was his—my—first time, and he—I—was filled with anxiety. The ambiance—near-freezing weather, a muddy ditch, as you recall—left much to be desired. Yet my anticipation of orgasm brought on orgasm.

The act of looking forward to it helps make it successful. Think back: At those times when you were unable to perform, were you filled with anticipation of the orgasm or in some way not altogether there? Do I embarrass you? I must apologize.

Since I have far more to anticipate than you do, far more to look forward to during the sex act, I seldom have had a problem.

After I have lived as one sex for a time, the prospect of becoming the other grows tremendously stimulating. Add to that the flabbergasting attractiveness of my recent partners and I am sure you will conclude that I am truly excitable.

For you, quite likely, it is the partner you are with who provides the needed physical or emotional stimulation. For me, it is not only the partner I am with but also the partner I will become, and, as if in a guess, as if in a chess game, those partners whom I will be able to become several “moves,” or shifts, later.

With Raymond Gaydos, for example, the key to my achievement as Rebecca Watanabe was thinking not “Oh Ray, oh Ray, oh Ray,” but “Marci, Marci, Marci.”

For a second or two after that shift, I felt I had skipped over Raymond's “generation,” as it might be phrased, altogether. I was more than mildly disappointed to realize that that had not happened and I would have to make the best of a body I did not find likable.

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I had enjoyed being Japanese.

Early on in my tort, my short but torrid relationship with Raymond Gaydos, he and I had begun probing the language of Rebecca Watanabe's ancestors—his business took him on occasion to Tokyo—and the often-humorous incorporation into it of words from English. It became a ritual with us.

One day when I arrived with quick-service lunch in paper bags, Raymond asked me, "How do you say 'fast food' in Japanese?"

"*Fasudo fudo.* And, believe it or not, 'hamburger' is '*hanbaga*' and 'French fry' is '*furenchi-furai.*' They're called 'loanwords.' English has plenty of them, too. 'Honcho,' for instance, is from the Japanese, and it means pretty much the same thing in both languages."

A few days later, when I brought with me a camera and asked to take pictures of Marci for the purpose of record keeping, Raymond inquired, "How do you say 'snapshot' in Japanese?"

"*Sunappushotto.*"

After we discussed my staying over one night at my earliest convenience, he asked, "How do you say 'shampoo'?"

"*Shanpu.*"

"How do you say 'bikini'?"

"*Bikini.* Shall I bring one next time?"

Next time, I did, in a tiny handbag swinging from the shoulder of the "Suzie Wong" *ch'i p'ao*.

Raymond and I were alone in the house with Marci, who was asleep in her upstairs bedroom. He invited me to join him in his hot tub—a very Japanese kind of thing to do—with a baby monitor close at hand. We shared a plate of fruit and a bottle of Sauternes.

"How do you say 'banana'?"

"*Banana.* Why do you ask?—glad to see me?"

"Yes. And I had a dream. You brought a bunch of them and Marci ate them all. How do you say 'dream'?"

"*Yume.*" I had to smile. "Spelled in English, that would be 'Y-U' and 'me.'"

"Now there's a good question," Raymond said. "I'm still trying to answer that one."

“Shikata-ga-nai.”

“Beg—”

“It translates, losing much, as ‘Cannot be helped’ or ‘You can’t change what happens.’ You and me—pardon the grammar—were destined to be, and that’s all we need to know.”

Ray wrapped his arms around me and kissed me for a long time. At the end of the kiss I was amazed to see my swimsuit top floating away like a pair of sampans through the mist. I still do not know which of the two of us had removed it.

I can only assume it was Francis who found the warm and rosy-pink but nevertheless dead-as-a-doornail—pardon the cliché—body of Doctor Watanabe slumped against the wall of the tub the next morning. I assume Francis screamed. I assume she went running to locate the aide, to call for Mister Ray and to check on Miss Marci. I do not know this to be true. What I do know is Francis did not find Raymond and his daughter at home that day, or ever again.

HERE'S HOW THE LOCAL WEEKLY SPUN IT IN A SIDEBAR—

MEDICAL EXAMINER'S WARNING:

ALCOHOL AND HOT TUBS CAN BE DEADLY

BY CURTIS T. SIPE

STAFF WRITER

A MIXTURE OF LARGE AMOUNTS OF INGESTED ALCOHOL AND PROLONGED USE OF A HOT TUB HEATED TO MORE THAN 100 DEGREES APPARENTLY LED TO THE DEATH LAST SATURDAY OF A PROMINENT CINCINNATI-AREA PHYSICIAN.

THE CAUSE OF DEATH OF REBECCA R. WATANABE, M.D., 39, AT THE HOME OF MISSING LOCAL BUSINESSMAN RAYMOND A. GAYDOS, 53, REMAINED UNKNOWN MONDAY, SAID AN OFFICIAL WITH THE COUNTY MEDICAL EXAMINER'S OFFICE.

HOWEVER, VALERIE BREGENSER, SPOKESPERSON FOR THE MEDICAL EXAMINER, SAID THAT WHILE FURTHER TESTS ARE BEING CONDUCTED, EVERYONE SHOULD BE AWARE THAT ALCOHOL AND A HOT TUB CAN LEAD TO DEATH.

“THE INTERNAL SYSTEMS OF THE BODY ARE ALTERED BY THE DRINKING,” SHE SAID, “THEN YOU ADD THE EXTRAORDINARY HEAT OF THE WATER. THIS IS A KNOWN HAZARD.”

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Although far more strenuous than I would have preferred (I had had to hire on at Careways as a nurse and work my way up, in a manner of speaking), my shift into Dean Louis Thomas, from there into Rebecca Rosemary Watanabe and thence into Raymond Alan Gaydos proved crucial. I had learned that Marci's reaction to most visitors during her stay at the clinic as well as to visitors at home had been a timid canine's: circling, slinking, hiding behind furniture, snarling. She had, however, remained close to and trusting of her father.

After I shifted into the body of Raymond Gaydos, though, I saw in Marci an underlying level of suspicion, of doubt, of anxiety I had not expected. She was like a dog reacting to its masker...its master in a mask.

The eyes?

Rather than pick up where father and daughter had left off, I would have to console her and cajole her, reassure her I was in fact who I appeared to be.

Why did this occur? I can only speculate, since it was the first time I had been through exactly what I was going through then. I was back in the company of a body out of which I had once shifted, long after the shift. Since that body had retained, after the shift, some small part of the intellect it had possessed when my full consciousness occupied it, it is possible it had retained parts of memories of having been...of having been...*me*—the self I was before the shift—do you see? It is no more easy for me to put into words than it is for you to comprehend.

Now, I remain certain that Marci in her infantile condition was not able to conceptualize the phenomenon of shifting, even to the limited extent that you can. I am convinced there was no thought in her head that went, "Oh, he looks like my father but he used to be Doctor Watanabe, and before that, Marci." Of course not. Impossible. Yet, as I say, there was something. I foresaw myself expending much effort toward her reeducation.

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Marci napped like a child in the rented Dodge mini-van almost all the way from Cincinnati. Occasionally throughout the trip I would reach over to her—curled up in the seat next to mine, knees to breast, head buried in the pillow I had brought for her, sucking her thumb—and I would smooth her hair. I would say, “My girl.” She was.

She awoke with a start, as would a puppy, when the tires of the van hit familiar asphalt. We had exited the Kennedy Expressway and had reached Michigan Avenue. She began jerking her head one way and the other, desirous of taking in all sights and sounds.

At one-thirty in the morning, the avenue and side streets were nearly deserted. I felt good to have not brought her home at rush hour: I believed the commotion might have caused a collision.

We stayed at Embassy Suites that night, only because the offices of Schied, Osler and Gloomis were closed for the weekend. (No single code for the foundation’s keypad lock remained functional for more than a month, and amidst the hubbub of the previous twenty-four hours I had neglected to call ahead from Cincinnati and set up a new one.)

First thing Monday, I phoned the firm.

“Hello,” I said, “This is Kenneth ver Beek. I would like to speak with someone about the Patricia Lorraine Mattingly Memorial Foundation.”

“Just a second.”

“Edward Berg’s office. This is Shelly. Can I help you?”

“Hello, Shelly. I would like to speak with someone about the Patricia Lorraine Mattingly Memorial Foundation.”

“Sure. I’ll put you through.”

“Good morning, this is Catherine Russo, Mister Hilliard’s assistant. What may I do for you?”

“I would like to speak with someone about the Patricia Lorraine Mattingly Memorial Foundation.”

“One moment.”

“Hello, Tom Hilliard.”

"I would like to speak with someone about the Patricia Lorraine Mattingly Memorial Foundation."

"Ver Beek, you say? Speak."

I recited the first few of the ten syllables in the password.

"Wait."

I waited.

"Gloomis."

"I would like to speak with someone about the Patricia Lorraine Mattingly Memorial Foundation."

"Yes?"

"My name is Kenneth ver Beek."

"Go on."

Now I supplied all ten.

"Thank you so much for calling, Mister ver Beek. It will be a pleasure serving you. The keypad code until the next call or until the thirty-day code period is over—whichever comes first—is 'three-oh-one, four-oh-one, two-nine-two.' I suggest you make a note of it."

I waited again.

"Will there be anything else?"

"Erase the tape of this call."

"Of course, Mister ver Beek. Policy. Standard operating procedure. And?"

"Money. Cash. By messenger."

"How much would you like, Sir?"

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A uniformed doorman seated behind the lobby desk at Lake Point Tower reacted to Marcia Lynne's reappearance with an affectionate, troubled smile. "Why, hello, Miss Marci," he said, "Welcome back!" He had not seen a past "employee" of the Patricia Lorraine Mattingly Memorial Foundation return after so long an absence. He was not even slightly responsive to me, for guests of the foundation—public relations consultants, financial advisors, representatives of the media—had often gum and con, come and gone, with and without the company of a staff member.

I wheeled Marci along before she could reply.

Joy filled her eyes as the elevator car began its long ascent. "Ump!" she said, "Ump!" At the top we began winding our way down a long, zigzag hall leading to a pair of vault-like front doors. Marci's hands began to fly about wildly as she vocalized in a way which would have proved embarrassing if neighbors had seen and heard.

There were no neighbors.

The entry had been located by the Overbaugh personality in such a manner that anyone daring to sniff at it would have had to ignore all posted warnings and venture past the keypad. Then an alarm would have been triggered, and guards in the employ of the foundation would have charged to the scene with guns drawn.

When the immense mahogany-veneered steel panels swung silently inward, Marci sprang up, rushed in, dropped "Bibbie," the fluffy Gund elephant she had carried with her, and ran straight to the dance floor. Still vocalizing, she began to fling herself around, whipping her arms autistically. She looked at me and began fingering her, began fluttering her fingers about her head, directing my attention to her ears. She wanted music.

I ran through much of our collection of jazz that day. "Pay *at* un," she kept saying, "Pay *at* un." One of her favorites was Pat Metheny and Lyle Mays's "As Falls Wichita, So Falls Wichita Falls." I must say I too found it uplifting, although I disliked having to recite its title for her "gen" and "gen" as if it were something in which she could perceive illusive meaning. More likely, she enjoyed the sound of it.

It was a day of taking stock and restocking: The cupboard was bare. I ordered and had delivered enough fresh foodstuffs to last us the week. I rifled my cookbooks for recipes and planned for us seven days of superb meals.

Then came nightfall. The lights of the skyline to the west resembled those of the “mothership” in *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*.

Time for bed.

I had not previously allowed myself to fantasize about the logistics of this. (At the Embassy Suites I had dozed in a chair at Marci’s bedside.) In addition to the master suite, there were two small guest areas, which had been used for storage. I could not picture Marci choosing to sleep alone; nevertheless, I felt I ought to ask.

“Marci, bedtime. Where?” I said, switching off the audio system. “By yourself, or with me?”

Her answer was, “You,” or something to that effect.

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Sleeping with Marci—that is to say, being asleep with Marci—was one of the most soothing experiences I had arranged for myself. And I believe she relished it as much as did I, for as she hugged Bibbie and I hugged her, all three of us remained quiescent till well into daylight.

HOW MUCH YOU WANNA BET HE DOES MORE THAN SLEE

It was near noon before Marci and I awoke, almost in unison. We lay there blinking, stretching, then staring dreamily into each other's face in a fashion not unlike newlyweds. I ran the back of my fingers across her soft cheek and down her long neck. "May I?" I asked her, and hearing nothing in the negative, slid my hand to her breast. I experienced *déjà vu*, for I felt as though my hands—past hands which had been mine to control—had been there before. And this was so: Once they had been there against Marci's wishes, in the form of Philip Overbaugh's; frequently they had been there in self-examination as Marci's; several times they had been there in an outwardly objective and purely professional manner as Rebecca Watanabe's.

I took her nipple between middle and index fingers as if holding the filter tip of a cigarette and stroked it in a circular motion with my thumb. Her eyelids fell and she began to purr. I believe I purred as well.

The mood was suddenly shattered by a screech like an alley cat's.

In an instant, Marci was up, out of bed and through the doorway. Of course I followed.

I powdered her...I spotted her in the powder room, on the toilet. Apparently feeling a need to explain, she said, "Peh." She raised herself off the seat and pointed to the yellow trickle. "Seh?" This made me laugh, and she laughed too.

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What words can I use to characterize our relationship without becoming indelicate or intruding too deeply into our privacy?

HOW ABOUT “SICK” YOU SICK BAST

Fathers and daughters in the traditional parent-child roles may express love for each other, but they seldom claim deep mutual understanding: Taboos impose strictures on their closeness. “Friends” sounds pleasant enough, but does not begin to describe the profundity of the reciprocal affection which flowed between myself and Marcia Lynne. “Man and woman” sounds too rough, too coarse, too biological. And “husband and wife” is exactly wrong, for there were no disagreements about wanted and unwanted responsibilities, no broken promises of the type which turn matrimony into acrimony. There was none of that, for Marci did what I asked her to do, always, to the best of her abilities. She was Barbara Eden to my Larry Hagman, a jinni who granted my wishes, albeit always expressing a childish, strong will of her own.

She was my craft, my absolutely absorbing avocation—a masterwork in the making. She was a living, breathing mannequin in whom I took great pleasure dressing up in costumes of all kinds.

I controlled her caloric intake fastidiously, for I did not want her to gain weight. She looked ideal to me where she was—not quite as thin as the Argentine stewardess—so I often had to deny her snacks. (I called the Streeterville Ace hardware store for an assortment of “baby-proofing” devices to use in the kitchen.) I was intent on being able to perceive skeletal structure—most especially cheekbones and ribs. She often had to go hungry, but we all suffer for our art.

Marci loved to hug and be hugged. She delighted in being bathed. She liked having her hair washed and colored, although soap in her eyes was catastrophic and she was not fond of the “tink” of dyeing chemicals. She enjoyed having what smidgen of makeup she needed applied and seemed to melt when I told her how pretty it made her look. She luxuriated in having her fingernails and toenails shaped and painted.

She very quickly relearned how to kiss expertly. And she was filled with new wonder each time I ejaculated in her presence.

One thing Marci was not: a traveling companion. I tried once to take her outside the building for what I had hoped would be a brief stroll to nearby Olive Park, perhaps to build a snowman. Automobile traffic, pedestrians, wrens had excited her to the point of vocalizations which to listeners must have seemed like wails of anguish. I could not have risked being halted and questioned by anyone, especially police or the tower guards.

We had trotted back, and she had settled down.

I bought toys and rented videotapes, supplied coloring books and the like. Those items, and the clothes, of course, generally kept her sufficiently busy and quiet. Oh yes, and music. She loved music—any kind I played. She would twirl in time till exhausted, then collapse and sound...sleep soundly, in the middle of that hard, cold floor.

She also liked to pummel the keys of the piano, but I loudly and often declared this a “no.”

Her schooling consisted primarily of rudimentary instruction in table manners. While living at the clinic and later at the Gaydos residence, she had been allowed to eat any way she wanted to, so long as she would eat. This I forbade. We practiced long and hard to restore in her a sense of etiquette.

Marci had also lost much of what she had once known to be feminine grace. Her previously fluid gait had become clumsy, spasmodic, ataxic—perhaps the result of impairment to the correct workings of the cerebellum. (I remember thinking that at the time, but I do not now know what it means.) When she wanted to sit, she sat, and remained in whatever posture gravity suggested; when she wanted to stand, she seemed to crawl up onto her feet, using her forearms. Her previously deliberate, decorative manner of holding and moving herself—again, the all-important body language—had evaporated like spilled perfume.

You would guffaw if you could accurately envision me offering her guidance in such things. I, as Raymond Gaydos, had to demonstrate for Marci how a woman walks, gestures while talking, reposes while listening. She was a superb mimic and picked up the subtleties quickly. Being a mimic, she also copied my movements as Raymond Gaydos, dumping undesirable male behavior into the ragout. Fortunately, actresses on television assisted me in separating the two.

You see, it had been my intent—a hopelessly optimistic one, I realize now—to raise Marci to a level where I could organize a party with Raymond Gaydos as host and Marci Gaydos as guest of honor. Mutely, vacuously, inscrutably magnetic, she would endear herself to everyone. Not to be.

GOOD. SOME DRUNK WOULD HAVE RAPED HER.

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To busy myself at times when Marci needed no training, I continued my work with photography, shooting from every imaginable vantage point a model most complex. She would pose for minutes at a time—only minutes. More than that and, even with fast film, strobe light and a bit of sedation, the image recorded was a blur. So I took to using my Hasselblad not for portraiture but snapshots. I “burned” as much film as I could before Marci grew petulant and restive, then edited out all the unusable negatives. I did not waste time in the darkroom attempting to perfect each print. Instead, I worked quickly, being satisfied with nearly any one showing sufficient shadow detail. The reason: I used them as guides in producing pen-and-ink drawings.

My pointillist style required application of pink, of ink to paper one tiny dot at a time. And since most of these drawings measured two feet by three feet, tens of thousands of dots were required. I could lose myself for hours.

After a month of this, I felt ready to burst. I would have to find a way to leave the penthouse...with Marci in it.

I considered hiring a nurse. I invited some women offering the needed expertise to meet Marci and me in the front office of the foundation. Marci was uncharacteristically uncooperative and vociferous each time. When I introduced her to a strapping male physical therapist of Chinese-Danish descent, she smiled and hummed appreciatively. I hired him on the spot at twice his current salary and asked him to return the next day.

He was prompt and energetic.

I left Clas Li and Marci, she dressed in modest sweatshirt and pants, as he was laughingly preparing her favorite breakfast: a mixture of canned pasta and applesauce.

Over my weeks of self-imposed imprisonment, I had slowly altered Raymond Gaydos’s physical appearance. Gradually, to avoid alarming Marci, I had trimmed my beard and trimmed it again, until there was nothing left but a mustache, which I also trimmed until it disappeared. I put on fifteen pounds, fifteen pounds or more (only ten of them intentionally). And I used Grecian Formula to darken what was left of the hair on my head.

Now, I knew these changes alone would not have been enough to foil an all-out nationwide manhunt. But they would have slowed down any pursuers. The authorities could not, after all, have known where I had headed with Marci in the rented van. And the van had been rented long-term not by Raymond Alan Gaydos but by the late Dean Louis Thomas, and had been driven from the Embassy Suites to an impoverished part of town by a man with whom Raymond Gaydos had contracted anonymously to park it there and walk away. Yes, Ray Gaydos was a “missing person,” as was his daughter, and quite likely a witness to the death of Rebecca Watanabe. But I was not afraid. I could make any bail that could be set. I did not fear incarceration. What I feared, if I feared anything, was interruption. That, and leaving Marci in Clas’s care for more than a day at a time.

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I felt free to move about the city. I went shopping, toured the Museum of Contemporary Art and proudly viewed the photographs bequeathed to it by the PLMMF, lunched at a bustling restaurant and made contact with a number of exceptional waitpersons and clothing store employees.

One of the latter made a lasting impression. This member of the Banana Republic sales staff greeted me while I flipped through a rack of sheer white “poet-style” nightshirts, looking for something which might flatter Marci. “I could try one of those on for you,” she said, smiling gleamingly. I told her that would be informative. “Follow me.” She stepped into a changing room and quickly stepped out again, modeling the long blouse. “I’d take you out where the light is better, but I don’t have on the greatest underwear for this,” she admitted. I had to agree. Visible below the ruffled lace at the neck were brassiere and panties of a type I had sorted through earlier at the store: all-cotton, in a tiger-print motif. “Is she about my size?” I said yes, although it was far from the truth. Well, not that far. The employee turned about in place, arms outstretched overhead, and stopped to face me. “You like?” I liked, and I believe she could tell. Nevertheless, I did not, as it could be said, buy the shirt right off her back. Nor did I buy any other shirt at Banana Republic. Instead, I left while the brash young woman was changing back into her work clothes. To be truthful, I must say she had shocked me. Her exhibition had been either a clever sales ploy or, to use the slang, a come-on. It had been a come-on, I allowed myself to conclude. Raymond Alan Gaydos, I delighted in thinking, still had some of the old animal magnetism in him.

Despite the fresh of breath air my jaunt had provided, I began to ache for Marci and returned home earlier than I had planned. I tiptoed in with a gift box, ready to surprise her with her newest dress-up item. The idea had come to me via a talkative bartender at my penultimate stop.

“Me and women’s high heels, man, I’ll tell ya.”

The mixologist has only one customer. I remove my sport coat, loosen my tie, roll up my sleeves and settle in for what seems to be taking the shape of a lengthy but presumably engrossing soliloquy.

“*Lordy* I love em. The higher, the better...until they get *too* high. Then they’re *hooker* shoes! But the rest, they’re *terrific*.”

I nod. Another fine line.

“I hate ‘mules,’ I don’t like slings, I don’t like lots of straps, and I’m not crazy about suede.”

Moi ausi. I am drawn in, completely. I order a second martini, just to keep him talking.

“You wanna know something? I can tell from a long ways off, by the sound, whether it’s a woman walking and whether she’s wearing high heels and what kind of high heels they are.”

I know.

“Men go ‘clump, clump, clump,’” he says, “taking big steps. Women go ‘click-click-click,’ much faster, taking little steps. Men go ‘clump-click, clump-click, clump-click.’ The heel of their shoe comes down first and the toe follows later. Women in really high heels make a single click—or two clicks so close together they *sound* like one click—because the heel of the shoe and the toe come down at almost *exactly* the same time.”

This is not news, but it is fun.

He continues, animatedly, “The thinner the heel, the higher-pitched the click. When I hear that sound that tells me the woman is wearing really high, really skinny heels, I always turn around to find her. And even when she’s not all that outstanding, I still say to myself, ‘*Great shoes*.’”

His hands now flat upon the bar, he says to me, “Can I tell you something in strictest confidence?”

“Sure.”

“I own some. I don’t wear them. I buy, like, size six or seven or whatever Marshall’s or Parade of Shoes has cheap. I couldn’t care less if they’re right-up-to-the-day in style or not. What I do is, I put them someplace so I can surprise myself, find them where I least expect to. Like some sexy, happy-go-lucky lady made herself at home. Like a girlfriend took them off for bed. It makes me smile. I collect ’em.”

Dealing out fives, I picture his closets rivaling those of the foundation, those of Imelda Marcos.

The bartender’s enthusiasm has been contagious. He is precisely right. Women’s high heels are works of art, of architecture, of engineering. I love the sound of tall, skinny ones going “click-click-click.” It is a mating call. I love collecting them for Marci and finding them, within limits, scattered around.

I miss wearing them. But wearing them now would be absurd. Many slender men—Todd Bergau comes foremost to mind—have legs most women

would die to call their own, but presently I am not by any means slender and therefore do not.

I can wait.

"Hey, thanks," he says. "And *boots*?—I'm glad you didn't get me started on that."

Boots. Julia Roberts. A televised motion picture to which Marcia Lynne had reacted warmly two nights earlier.

I must travel far to find them, but I finally obtain for Marci a pair of over-the-knee boots with skinny heels exceeding four-and-one-half inches in height. Red in color.

Long box behind me, I cut across the dance floor and toward the master suite. Music was playing.

Clas Li lay on our bed wearing only a T-shirt. Marci, nude, sat next to him, holding his penis in both hands: the fingers of the left wrapped around the base of it, bobbing; the palm of the right cupped over its tip.

Imagine my disappointment.

Imagine my rage as Li moaned, "Oh-God, oh-God, oh-God."

Imagine my dismay as ejaculate oozed out from between Marci's fingers.

Imagine my restraint.

Of course I felt like killing Li, or at least maiming him, but I wanted no violence in my home—not in front of Marci. If possible, I told myself as I watched the interloper's head loll back and forth across my pillow, I would find him at another time and place and settle things.

Marci looked up at me and smiled proudly. "Seh?" she said, her left hand continuing to slide along Li's lubricated penis.

"Well, hello," I replied.

"Jesus!" Li exclaimed, snapping up as if spring-driven. "Mister Ulrich," he wailed (using the name I had told him to use), "I—it was Marci's idea! I know how bad—I'm sorry—she started to cry when I said no! I'll never—"

"Correct: You'll never," I said, knowing it to be so.

"What's behind your back? Don't hurt me."

"I won't hurt you. You must be going? I'll see you out." He reached for his trousers. "No, leave it all where it is."

He blubbered to no avail. I shut the big doors behind his...behind.

Often I have wondered what he did next. My hunch is he crouched for a time at the top of the tower's eternal spiral of a stairwell while trying to formulate a plan of action. A few moments spent in berserk vacillation, then a decision to leave the building as quickly as possible. Did he ride the elevator all

those stories down wearing nothing below the waist, tugging at the hem of his only garment as a woman would that of a short skirt on a windy day? If not, did he tie the T-shirt around his hips like a Polynesian? What did he do at the guard's desk, where he was ordered to stop and sign out? And on the flush, the slush-filled street, did he hail a cab? Did he explain to the cabby, "I just left the Mattingly Foundation, where my boss's daughter..." I doubt it. I laugh about his predicament frequently.

Returning to the bedroom, I saw Marci sitting cross-legged, as she had been when I discovered her with Li. She smiled wanly.

I surmised that I had been told the truth: What had transpired during my absence had been Marci's idea. I could see her in my mind, talking her gibberish, gesturing toward Li's privates, perhaps leaping forward to unzip his pants, as he did his best to resist. I could see him re-roughing her...see him rebuffing her, perhaps getting rough with her. I saw the tears and heard the horrendous howling of which Marci was capable when unhappy. I saw Li, frightened and befuddled, attempt to calm her, and find only one way in which the calming could be accomplished. I saw him hesitantly remove the bottom of his light-blue uniform. I saw the big, sublime smile bursting upon Marci's face, and the sheepish grin on Li's in response. I saw Marci take the man's erect penis in one hand and pull it toward the bedroom as one would pull the handle of a Radio Flyer wagon, for this is what she had often done with mine.

Never had I touched her genital reason for any region other than cleanliness. To my knowledge, she had no concept of female orgasm. She had intended only to please Li as she had frequently pleased me in return for a bit of candy.

There was a component of innocence in the situation which I could not dismiss. I had not taught Marci that sexual intimacy was for the two of us and only for the two of us, or that what we did together was "sexual" or "intimate." I had felt no need to do so.

After all these years, I remain, to a fault, an innately trusting person.

"Marci," I said matter-of-factly, "go wash. Then come back in here." Obediently, she went away and returned. She showed me her hands. "Put your clothes on," I said. Something in the tone alerted her to my contained annoyance, for as she drew up her panties and secured her brassiere, she stared off blankly at the wall, eyes unfocused. "Stop. Look at me," I said. "Now take them off." She unhooked the bra. "Marci, when I tell you to undress, you do. You do not do so for anyone else. Understood?" She nodded. "Doing what you did

with Mister Clas just now was a no; doing it with me is permitted. Understood?" Again a nod.

"Bah gur?"

"No, not bad, sweetie." I kissed her. "Good girl. I know you won't do it again. And because I know that, I have a present for you."

She wore the boots while we ate dinner, accompanied by a red merrywidow, red stockings and red thong for her; red wine for me.

After the meal, I asked her to walk, walk, back and forth across the black-oak tongue-and-groove, going click-click-click in those sky-high, my-oh-my-high high-heeled boots, and of course she did. As an exercise, I taught her a new set of movements, those of a runway model, which require the spine to be flung into an exaggerated C-curve first to the left and then to the right, the shoulders and arms to be held in check, the face to remain pointed expressionlessly, vacantly straight ahead and the feet to be planted sharply, one directly in front of the other, in rapid, determined, Lippizaner-like succession.

Was it the walking? The clicking? The clothing? The wine? Was it the testosterone that had coursed through my veins upon finding Clas Li in my bed? Was it a feral need to reestablish the invaded property as mine? Was it love? Whatever it was, it drove me to do something which—it goes without saying—I had not done before.

"Will you be my Valentine?" I asked her, lowering myself to hands and knees on a thick rug for the purpose of instruction. "Now let me move your pants off to the side just a bit..."

When I first began to penetrate Marcia Lynne, she became distressed. Her lack of recent experience with coitus quickly grew obvious: When I rocked toward her, she rocked away. This would not do. My solution was to relocate her to the foot of a purple divan. There I instructed her to kneel before it and rest her upper body on its cushion, her arms at her sides. Grasping her pelvis, I eased into her, centimeter by centimeter. At the halfway point she squealed—something unintelligible and disruptive. "Shh," I said. "Close your mouth." This she did, the sweetheart, and as I pushed onward the subsequent noises she made sounded fine.

I want to say I took a dozen strokes. Three, I know, I took as slowly as I could bear, for Marci's reassurance. But the rest were so fast and slapping, driven piston-like by sequential explosions of theretofore unignited emotions, that I am probably underestimating their number by half.

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Identity crises. Not to be expected of someone as long-lived and experienced as I. You may be surprised to learn that I have gone through a number of them over the past century. Oh, yes, I have often lost myself entirely in my shifting: I have made numerous mistakes in continually reintroducing myself as a member of first one sex, then the other. For example, I have caught myself tugging up on a short squat, rather, a short skirt before squatting to retrieve a fallen object, as if to prevent the “knees” of the garment from bagging—as a man would do with his slacks—only to reveal an excessive amount of thigh. Todd Bergau had had a problem with this, too.

I am fully aware that women and men do even the smallest things differently, have separate and distinct body-language “dialects.”

Finding a scrap of paper or wad of chewing gum stuck to the bottom of his shoe, a man bends his leg in front of himself, as had Todd, to pick it off; a woman lifts her foot off the floor behind herself, as Todd should have, and looks over her shoulder.

If feeling a draft, men hunch their shoulders and stuff their hands into their pockets; women, with or without pockets, hug themselves.

When inspecting his fingernails, a man makes a fist and stares at his palm. A woman checking her manicure straightens her fingers and gazes at the back of her hand.

Generally speaking, women are not permitted to itch—well, they are permitted to itch, but not to scratch an itch between collarbone and knee in public. Todd, in drag, could have easily given himself away in an instant by forgetting this. Men are free to touch themselves almost anywhere, almost anytime, although groping one’s genitals or one’s rear end is considered disrespectful to others.

Visualize a business lunch. A first-time meeting, utterly platonic, both participants thoroughly heterosexual. Picture the man sitting with legs held together at the thighs, his ankles crossed under the seat of his chair. Picture the woman opposite him in a V-neck blouse, stretching far forward to rate her colleague’s meal, forgetting to press the three middle fingers of one hand into the

V. Now picture her leaning far back after dining, with hands behind her head, elbows spread. Listen as the man says, “What a darling place.”

I bring this up not because I expect you to find it revelatory but because male/female social customs have eluded me at inauspicious moments. I have appeared to be ignorant or impolite at best, a masculine woman or a feminine man at worst, and I have found this counterproductive. As a woman, I have opened doors not only for myself but for male companions. Worse yet, as a man, I have been known to dally at a door, waiting for my female companion to reach the handle first and with a look of dismay usher me through.

“Miss?” a woman once called out. “Oh, Miss!” I heard her cry a second time. Then I felt a tap on my shoulder. She spoke the word “Miss” once again, and with great precision, as though she thought I were foreign or hard of hearing, and continued, “Is this your purse?” I had left it behind, hanging from the back of a restaurant chair, as I had left behind dozens of purses one at a time on a first night out following a shift into the body of a female. I was not yet fully in command of my new identity.

“Oh, Miss,” a man called out a moment later. I turned around, assuming I had forgotten also a scarf or some other such girly accouterment. The waiter winked at me, smiled and said, “Come back soon.”

Ordinarily when I am a woman (and sometimes when not), I will react with speed to a call of “Oh, Miss?” But if the call is “Hey, blondie,” I will seldom respond at all, in part because the term borders on crude and in part because I am not always certain of my hair color. Similarly, when I am a man, I remain aware of the penis and testicles between my legs, but seem to “misplace” my specific masculine facial features until I literally find them reflected in a shop window.

We sleep not perchance to but *so as to* dream, I believe, and I do dream a lot. In most of my dreams I am as formless as was Todd Bergau in his Jimmy Stewart dream and searching for a form. If wakened by a noise in the dark, I must at those times “feel” myself “up,” as the expression goes, to reassure myself I have a shape and that it is the one with which I had gone to bed: “Ahh, *there* they are.” Only then can I drift back to sleep. Sporadically I resist and attempt to guess what sex I am without moving. Sporadically my guess is incorrect, and an irrepressible need to get to know my surprising new self keeps me up all night.

During the late nineteen-sixties and early nineteen-seventies, I was uncertain much of the time. (I was not alone.) When male and wearing my hair conformingly long, I was more than once “reminded”—incorrectly, of course—that I was female, purely because a clerk in a store addressed me from the back as “Ma’am.” Without hesitation, I would drop all male mannerisms

and take up female ones, leaving bystanders to come to blows in debating my chromosomal constitution and sexual orientation. Also, in those days many young women ceased wearing makeup. Short hair and a bulky sweater allowed me to be perceived as male or androgynous when I least wanted it. I quickly decided—no matter how non-counter-culture it appeared, no matter how much I seemed to have “sold out” to oppressive, over-thirty, “establishment” traditions of male/female customs, no matter how conservative I was thought to be—I would reject all clothing, hair styles and accessories (“love beads”) smacking of “unisex,” purely to escape indecisiveness...mine and that of others. In order to ground myself in my current identity, whichever type it happened to be, I would, if necessary, dress like a Young Republican.

To this day, when I am a woman I wear no pantsuits; when a man, no bracelets, necklaces or, most certainly, earrings.

What are men with pierced earlobes trying to say? Even Todd Bergau, preferring clip-ons, had not gone so far.

My actions after dinner with Marci deprived me of all sense of self, or, rather, all love of self. The result was not good.

Well, I cannot say it was one-hundred-percent detrimental, for it allowed me to leave a body I had dreamed for weeks of leaving: that of Raymond Alan Gaydos. So displeased had I been with it that I had given some thought to shifting out of it while living with Marci, rationalizing that this might work to her educational benefit—provide her with a sister, so to speak, and a feminine role model for a time. I went so far as to mentally select two specific individuals: the Banana Republic clerk and the daytime “weather girl” on Channel Two. I favored the latter in part because she was so perk and party and in pause. Damn it! Let me try again. In part because she was so pert and perky, and in part because I felt Marci would recognize her as a friend of sorts. I lost my nerve when I pictured Marci’s reaction to the abrupt departure of her father and the arrival of a same-sex roommate who would, unsettlingly, be here today and gone tomorrow.

In all other ways, shifting from Raymond Gaydos back into a body I had once before occupied proved to be, short term, unfathomably unwise.

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A cloud or veil or cataract or pall which I could not shake off or sweep away—such was the effect upon me of Marci’s idiot-level intelligence quotient. It gave me the unbalanced stagger of a drunk and slurred my speech accordingly: “Wathafasganon?” I felt stupid. I had regressed in every sense of the word.

I remembered possessing the talent to shift, but recollected few details of most of the personalities I had previously absorbed. (Those I have mentioned heretofore and a handful of others were all I had left. Hundreds were and are...gone.)

Wobbling over to the gallery, I stood as if on stilts—as if on that rocking el car—searching for something to hang on to. I viewed the pictures displayed in the entry as would have a first-time visitor to the foundation. Whose naked, writhing, ostensibly healthy and yet ostensibly tormented bodies were these? What were their names? Where were their faces? It was a nightmarish experience, like a photo-journalist’s artful documentation of a mass suicide or liberated death camp. Anonymous these bodies were, yet recognizable as “my people.” They were my ancestors. And thus I was their descendant, their progeny.

I sensed movement and jerked myself around toward a glassy cabinet. Initially I did not recognize the shape reflected in it as my own: Trembling, I shot a glance behind me, half expecting to find Marci standing there, her hands on her hips, done up in the outlandish outfit, snickering with pride at her unfunny fun-house joke.

My overall appearance was to me that of a transvestite—one more highly skilled than Todd Bergau, but obviously a poseur, a preposterous impostor nonetheless.

I stumbled into the bathroom. Glowering at myself, I fought with the clasps of the merrywidow, ripping most of them out of the fabric, breaking off most of my nails. I cut the garter straps and thong away with scissors, then used one of the blades to slit my stockings, gashing my legs in the process. I stripped off the boots and flung them aside as if they were offal from a fishery.

I clawed at my pony, my phony, ponderous breasts and twisted them, as if trying to tear them away. I wanted to be able to dig in and pull out the sacks of

plastic gel that made them what they were, then bind them up in elastic bandages as had Jennifer Keck hers the night of the masquerade.

I struck myself in the forehead and punched myself in the stomach. (Had I owned a riding crop, I might have beaten my backside raw.)

I hurt myself so badly I sat down and cried.

I found three douche kits and used them all.

I showered and toweled, then showered again.

God, how I wanted out of that body.

Yet, in order to leave the physical identity of Marcia Lynne Gaydos, I knew I would have to submit to a man—let him handle me and undress me, let him spread me wide and fall on me, let him slobber on me and pump his phlegm-like goo into me—and the thought made me retch myself dry.

Wrapped up in a thin robe which had hung from a book, from a hook on the back of the bathroom door, I collapsed once again on the seat of the toilet. For what might have been an hour I remained slumped there, sobbing, cursing, bleeding, biting at the jagged edges of my nails and spitting out the pieces. Filled to overflowing with loathing. But whom did I loathe? I did not know, and that made me loathe everyone and everything male.

However, possession of a penis or something very like one seemed, momentarily, appealing—useful in impaling the body of Ray Gaydos as it had impaled mine.

Within seconds I would have my chance.

From all appearances intent on confrontation, the still-ambulatory body of Raymond Alan Gaydos lurched in. I held the scissors in my right hand above me, dagger style, overcome with revulsion for the bloated, mottled, hulking thing looming there, drooling, steaming, stinking. I knew it was not responsible—or could no longer be held responsible—for my state, yet I wanted to blame something beyond myself, and the body of Raymond Gaydos was easy to blame. It was a naked body with me there in the all-too-white space, and in the brutal, bluish fluorescent light it was especially unattractive—far more so than my emaciated own. I despised it.

I despised Rebecca Watanabe for having looped, for having stooped low, only to bring me to this wretched condition.

I despised sex.

I despised “hooters” and “knockers” and “woofers.” I despised “clits” and “cunts” and “twats.” I despised “dicks” and “rods” and “cocks” and “boners.” I hated “hand jobs” and “blowjobs” and all other related jobs. I hated the slime...and the smell. Mostly, I hated men and the second brain—like that of the stegosaurus—they carried at their tail.

Had this meeting taken place anywhere but within the confines of the foundation, my home, I might have called upon Beverly Ellenwood's surgical expertise and done some gelding—some lobotomizing—snip, snip, and snip.

Probably not. This was, or had been, my father, do you see? How could I injure my own “daddy”? I had only once before felt anything approximating kinship with the body of someone so closely belated by blood. Did I say “belated”? Hah!—how I wish! Whatever. Now as then its effect was powerful.

I put the shears down within reach. The male body was not exceptionally big, but it was solidly built under its recently acquired layer of flab. I feared a wrestling match with it could be my undoing. I needed it to remain relaxed.

As its eyes ceased their watery wandering and zeroed in on my scabby legs, the expression I saw on its face was one closely resembling concern. If the body had been able to speak, I am sure it would have inquired as to my wounds.

“I’m okay,” I said to it, “Let’s go to the bedroom.”

“Put on your pants,” I said to it, then changed my mind. “Lie down.” This it did, on its back. Its prick grew rigid—as though expecting sex. Furious, I ignored its underwear and manipulated its slacks up its hairy legs. I could have tucked in its dick, but I chose not to. I screwed on its loafers. I muscled the two-hundred-thirty-pound rag doll to a seated position and called for it to rise. It obeyed. I pulled on its shirt and did up the buttons unevenly. For my purposes, the worse it looked, the better. The unzipped zipper and the erection poking through it were a nice touch.

When I let go of the body, it seemed to dangle from invisible wires like a marionette in storage.

I remembered being forced to watch some kind of cruel medical experiment which had been recorded on black-and-white motion-picture film and shown to Lori Griffin's junior-high-school science class. Laboratory personnel had excised almost all of a mongrel's brain, leaving only the medulla oblongata in place. Once they stood the brainless animal up, it remained there. It could not bark, wag its tail, eat, or sniff; but it could stand. So could the body of Raymond Alan Gaydos, if not quite as steadily. I gambled that it would continue long enough for me to find something to wear.

Had it fallen, I would not have been able to bring it back to its feet. What would I have done if it had died?—called the Mafia?

All in all, as Raymond Gaydos, I had taken a tremendous risk.

Makeup and lingerie, skirt and blouse, pantyhose and heels—no! They would have made me feel foolish! I chose baggy chinos, a sweater and gum

boots, and drew one of Raymond Gaydos's sport coats over the top. One parka for me; one for the body.

I felt good to have this errand to run, a reason to dare myself to leave my Tower of London. Had I stayed in that night, you would not be listening to me now. Taking my life had begun to seem justifiable, preordained, an overdue respite. Thoughts of how and where I would do this had clogged my mind, pushing all other thoughts away. I had begun to equate necrophelia with suicide: kill, fuck, and die. The middle part not easily done as a female, though.

I guided my catatonic associate to the front doors of the foundation and into the hallway. I tottered the imbecile past the guard's desk and out to the street. I trudged my stroke victim as a health-care professional would trudge one, respectfully not hurrying, slowing my pace to match his.

In this manner I made my way, inch by inch, eastward, in the direction of Navy Pier, with hard, tiny kernels of snow stinging my face.

My destination had been the very end, where the pier extends farthest out into the lake. There I would wrap the hands of the body over the railing and leave it gazing endlessly at the ice or to do whatever its miserable medulla oblongata would have it do.

I could not force myself to suffer the shuffling.

I stopped at a concrete block which served as a bench and sat the body of Raymond Gaydos down on it. Conveniently, a paper cup somersaulted by in the chilling breeze. I snagged it and curled thick digits around it.

My hand upon its shoulder, I smiled down at the body and snorted; it smiled wistfully, inanely back and began to masturbate. I wished for a scrawled cardboard sign reading, "Watch me jerk off—twenty-five cents."

The police, I presume, did not tell this indecently exposed bum to "move along, move along" for hours.

For all those hours I meandered aimlessly around the neighborhood, trying to walk straight, think straight.

I wonder how much money accumulated in the cup.

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“People, people who need people.”

That is the record being spun while I look for an inconspicuous place to camp out at Oldie’s. As its name suggests, this tavern, situated inside the warehouse-turned-shopping mall called North Pier, is, I have learned, a place where popular music of the Sixties, Seventies and Eighties is played nonstop. I find this comforting. Oldie’s is near Lake Point Tower, and I have lived as a discerning adult fan of a sub-set of this musical genre, rock and roll, through all the decades represented. And more. Although I must assume that other ears I have worn have heard these songs many times over, most of the melodies sound new to this pair. Right now is a good example. Something about getting by with a little help, with a little help. I ask a young barmaid who it is.

“The Beatles,” she says.

“They’re good.”

“No kidding,” she replies incredulously. “Where you been?”

I stake out a table near a window and open a copy of the free, weekly *Reader*. From the corners of my eyes I see men staring. I assume a disdainful posture and set my jaw. I can halt them from thinking me congenial, but I cannot position Raymond Gaydos’s jacket around me in any way to sufficiently conceal my, my overdone womanliness. Furthermore, the crowded bar is a sauna. I begin to sweat. The jacket must go.

I once owned a big and bulky macramé-like hooded sweater, bulkier than this. Not when I was Marci One, as I have come to call the version of her first time around. Not when I was Lori Anne Griffin. Theodora? The Theodora era is right. But who I was then is not the point. I was in the woods with a man. Not O’Neill. Not Todd. Some Bohemian in tie-dyed jeans. His name is beside the point as well. Whichever man it was, he sat down next to whichever woman I was, picked up a tiny twig and wove it in and out through two of the gaps between the miniature ropes of that sweater. He found another slender object and likewise sewed it in. Neither he nor I uttered a word for what seemed like ten minutes while he threaded in and out a dozen other twigs and leaves. For perhaps five minutes more, he silently arranged assorted slim objects amid the

yarn. Finally, he said, “There: camouflaged. You’re invisible. Now you can go anywhere you want and no one will be able to see you.”

I wish it were so easy.

“Dyke?” I hear one of the men say. “Who cares, man?—I can look. Tits are tits. And those are beauts...if they’re all hers.” So if I’m not interested in you—you God’s gift to women, you—I must be queer, is that it? I’ll show you queer. I’ll show you “all hers”—I’ll beat you to death with ’em. I want to slap his face. I want to slap every man’s face. Line ’em up. Are you with me, girls?

Girls. Shit. Padded bras. “Easy come...easy go.” If I could find that smugly strutting slut I’d give her a good one upside the head, too.

I need to find a big, angry hermaphrodite to pal around with. Clean up this town. Rid it of human vermin. Both sexes.

Clearly, I am not a person who needs people: Tonight I need only the noises they make. The only “people” I care about in the least, because I dislike them less than these, are the ones whose restless spirit fragments churn inside me. I feel a growing connection to these distant relatives, though I do not feel sure they are friends as much as adversaries at this moment, jostling one another and “me,” vying duplicitously for my attention, luring me, leading me into their purgatory-like domain.

Adrift. Pushed and shoved. I believe I could float away into oblivion by refusing to act or think on my own and thereby setting loose my past acquaintances to chart the course—someone new at the helm every watch, taking turns sailing off through the velvety darkness. A mutiny which I might not have the strength or the will or a reason to resist.

Why don’t I let life live me for a change? I’ve had it up to here with being a sentient being...with being in control. With being.

The past must be buried now more deeply than ever. The future not only lacks appeal but must be shut out, shut down. The present, more than ever, is all. It is the night in the duet by John Lennon and Elton John which is playing: something to get through. My only goal is to get through it, and, as in the duet, whatever gets me through it is all right, it’s *all* right, it’s *all* right.

Tomorrow? Whatever this thing called tomorrow is, it’s just a shot away, it’s just a shot away, it’s just a shot away.

Lots of shots away. One sip at a time.

And whatever tomorrow is going to be, it is going to be, with or without you—oh, oh—with or without you.

Better without you.

You’re no good, you’re no good, you’re no good. Baby, you’re no good.

I'll have another.

Think, Marci—or whoever you are—about something creative, positive, light and breezy, eyes wide open, Marci-like. Be the Marci you used to be, a-leapin' and a-laughin', hidin' 'hind nothin' whatsoever for the window washers.

Show 'em yer tits. Show 'em yer nuts.

A joke. Okay. Let's have another one.

Guy walks into doctor's office. Doctor tells him, "Go to the window and stick out your tongue." Guy says, "Why the window?" Doctor says, "I hate my neighbor."

My unborn child.

Stop.

Horse walks into a bar. Bartender says—

The fruit of thy womb.

No! No. No, he says, "Why the long face?"

Shortest joke in the world. Get it? Funny? Maybe once. I don't remember. Something Youngman.

HENNY.

Lady says to doctor, "Why can't I see my baby?" Doctor says, "Steady yourself: It's just a big eyeball." Lady says, "Oh, God! What could be worse?" Doctor says, "It's blind."

A baby.

Damn you, Todd!

Where are you now? What have you been up to? What do you look like? Wait!—don't tell me. I'd rather remember you pretty.

If you and I had shifted, if I had become you, would I be here? In makeup and lingerie, skirt and blouse, pantyhose and heels? I'd be very good at it—crossing and tossing.

Damn you, you MedServ murderers!

Cut it out!

That's what you did.

I was as doped as Todd doped me when you went after me, into me, when you excavated me. Who gave you the right to scrape my baby out?

My daddy did.

Damn you, Daddy! Damn you, Raymond fuckwad frostbite-dick Gaydos.

Did they burn the mangled embryo?

Stop it!

It must have looked like...

Come on now. This is going too far.

Chicken cacciatore.

Who said that? I'll kill you.

The wing-like things that might have been arms, the skin and the bones...and gobs and gobs of chunky red sauce.

Fuck!

Where are its ashes now?

Who's asking? Don't do this to me. O'Neill? I have nothing to confess! I was there, but—

In a landfill?

Please!

In a sewer?

Oh!

She did her best, didn't she? Didn't that beleaguered body strap a snap, kick out with its long, strong legs, crunching a nose or two, sending sticky tools flying?

How should I know? I can only hope.

Music. Listen to the music.

Baby, Baby, Baby don't leave me, oh please don't leave me all by myself.

Would my baby have loved me through my changes? Would he have inherited my talent? Would he have felt cursed in that way, or blessed? After coming of age, would he have decided to stay with me, shifting as I shifted? And what if he and I had...

Cain and Eve.

New subject, new subject...

Let's talk about Rick.

I don't think so. Who's bright idea is this? Who are you?

Hoo-hoo, hoo-hoo.

C'mon tell me who are you—I really wanna know. Tell me who the fuck are you.

Marci Gaydos. Marcia Lynne Gaydos.

Again.

Marcia Lynne Gaydos, again. One more time!

Yeah. And who will you be next?

Who the fuck cares?

Who the fuck cares who the next fuck will be? Not fucking me, for fucking sure. All-purpose word, fuck. Can I say it so many times it stops having any fucking meaning? Let's have a go.

Fuck. Fuck. Fuck. Fuck. Everybody! Say it loud and say it proud: fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck. Oh, we're fucking to Pretoria.

Fuck, this has all grown so wearisome. Seduction is too easy; intercourse is a messy, gooey, stinking, boring chore. Occupying a body, no matter how cool that body might be, is no longer quite what it's cracked up to be.

Neither are you.

Up yours.

Fuck you.

Shut up!

Get up. Move on. Go home. Take some pills. Sleep. Dream of floating formlessly, sexlessly. Make the dream real. The velvety darkness beckons.

Could I see it through—put an end to this? I still have plenty of Rohypnol left.

Careful, now: You appear to be planning something, and you are not to plan, remember? No future.

I finish the second martini, then order a third. Just a shot away.

Music.

Listen.

“This could be the last time, this could be the last time, maybe the last time...”

Maybe.

“...I don’t know.”

Me neither.

Fadeout.

Fade to black. Paint it black.

The song now playing so infectiously is “Sunshine of Your Love,” by Cream, the waitress tells me after wondering aloud if I am from Albania or someplace. I work on concentrating while the guitar player...Eric Clapton squeezes in an instrumental quote from a song I do know—“Blue Moon.” Is this humor? Don’t ask me.

The names of numerous rock-and-roll groups of Cream’s era begin flooding into my awareness. The Beatles, of course—what a fool! Jefferson Airplane. The Moody Blues. The Doors. I will stay till closing if the deejay plays nothing but their recordings.

The images are vivid.

I so dearly miss the Sixties, I think.

The term lost, I mean tossed about loosely by the two-faced pain, mainstream press at the time was “free love.” That was at least half correct, for it did seem free of charge. Even for someone like myself, for whom commitment had and has always meant nothing, the Sixties was a surprisingly loose era, a time when going to bed with someone new and unknown was free also of all pretense and formality. “Hi. What’s your name? Want a hit? Wanna fuck?” No, one would not have said that to another on an inaugural meeting. One would have said, “Wanna screw?” Manners still counted for something.

How is it the motto of the Gladiators goes?—"Live today for tomorrow we die"? More or less. I believe such an attitude contributed to free love, especially as our involvement in Vietnam escalated. Young men, facing the likelihood of conscription into a war they feared as much as ridiculed—ridiculed as men make light of all they fear—became transparent hedonists. Their female counterparts grew empathetic and assisted them in existing for the moment. In addition, a true sense of siblinghood developed between men and men, women and women, women and men, and...have I forgotten anyone? Within a specific strange rage...age range, strangers felt drawn and held together by a common sense of persecution and anger at every aspect of the violent culture for which they considered one another blameless. Their hearts were in the same, right, place and beat as one to a four-four rhythm.

Miniskirts and hot pants with "go-go" boots, the "braless" look and the Pill all played their parts, too.

As I recall, "Get It While You Can" was the title of a number by Big Brother and the Holding Company. It seemed to speak volumes to me at the time. Caught up in the fatalism of it all, I took its advice, as did my peers and comrades.

If you have been thinking that my statement at the start—my having lived inside five hundred bodies over the past century—was hyperbolic, try to expel thoughts of the nasty Nineties, the decade I would call your most formative years—a decade in which I heard one self-proclaimed social scientist say in all seriousness, "By the point at which the woman has said 'no' the first time, sexual harassment has already taken place"—and try to envision the decade that was mine. Picture the temporal phenomenon known as the "Summer of Love," the late-in-the-decade embodiment of an epoch during which both sexes felt acutely in need of physical contact, felt undemeaned by the act of openly asking for it, felt thankful and not vengeful, bigger and not smaller for receiving it...in all forms conceivable, as often as possible.

FAR FREAKING OUT.

One part of that period for which I do pot...no, I do not do pot. One part of that period for which I do not pine is the emphasis placed on recreational chemicals.

"Theodora," she had said. "Pappatheodoropoulos." That alone had knocked me back. Black corkscrew tresses flowed down across ivory cheeks past the full bodice of her "granny" dress. We had met while in line purchasing tickets for an out-of-town Jimi Hendrix concert. Yes—Jimi Hendrix. She had asked me how so "straight-looking" a guy could be interested.

Theodora lighted a candle. "Sit with me on the floor over here. Get a pillow." She positioned an engraved wooden box to the right of the candle and a

pelvic...What? A velvet pouch to its left. "I want to read you something, and I thought you'd smoke some dope with me." She stuffed mulched leaves into the bowl of a miniature pipe.

I filled my lungs while Theodora shuffled pages. Staring at the one from which she was preparing to read, I said, "Sure you're not Martian?"

"I'm putting you in my power," I heard her say, although her lips did not move.

A man's voice from far away rang out, "Why don't you more some?"

Theodora set the pipe aside and said, "You're ready for the knife—didn't take long." She burst from a cocoon and clattered away on legs a lard, a yard in length, jointed in four places.

"Hey!" she squealed, "What's the matter? Come to Teddi." I clutched at my woman-size teddy bear. "The knife is good. It's pretty—look. I put it on the floor and spin it." I saw the blade grow flexible and flaccid and harmless as it revolved. It grew increasingly rigid as its speed decreased. "Aha! It's me! I'm *it*! It *had* to be me! I *made* it me! Arise." She extended a claw composed of five black knitting needles. Courageously, I accepted them and followed her to a bed. "Undress," she commanded me, juggling the knife in her one human hand.

Slowly I lifted the sheet away from her gently heaving torso. Swiftly I ran the shaft of metal to its rib, to its hilt between two ribs. Theodora jerked once as if dreaming of falling.

I awoke when a long-haired fellow in a notch-collared madras shirt and low-slung bell-bottoms entered the unlighted room. "Hey, Teddi-babe, you sleeping? We waited for ya. You...you fucking bitch." I sat up, hiding my breasts from him with my arms as he bellowed, "Get the fuck out and take that fuck with you!"

Not quite fully dressed—even less so than was the custom at the time—I left my former body in the care of the grumpy hippie and seesawed my way through Lincoln Park in the dark in Earth Shoes, excavating handfuls of tactilly unrecognizable objects from my cavernous, fringed leather bag and stopping in one headlight beam after another to examine them. Among "roach clips," wads of tissue, birth-control pills, some other pills and more pills, sanitary napkins, unused bus transfers and a crumpled pack of clove cigarettes I found no money, no drivers license, no information of any kind regarding my address, my family, or anything else of value except for a ticket to the Hendrix show.

Any other decade—a decade like the Nineties, for example—and I might have fallen back to the bottom. But the Sixties did all right by me.

Somebody?

Anybody?
Take me back!

Sleep again.

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HOW LONG IS THIS GOING TO GO ON?

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Are you there?

Still at the bar? So am I.

Seated facing the entry door, I have seen a variety of moderately intriguing characters stop into Oldie's. I would not have given this newest newcomer more than an instant of my attention had he not been wearing full operating-room regalia, complete with rubber gloves. Oh, yeah—this is *exactly* what I need.

As he passes each woman, he attempts, oftentimes successfully—greeted with titters of alcohol-inspired daring-do—to lay the free end of a stethoscope upon her chest and listen. What nerve.

WHAT A GIMMICK!

What a gimmick. Then he whispers something in her ear that makes her giggle as she waves him off.

Before long he gravitates toward one of the least gregarious-looking individuals in the establishment.

"Get that thing away from me," I say.

"What seems to be the problem? "Hemolytic anemia? Thrombocytopenia? Orofacial dyskinesia?"

Does this dude know what he's talking about? Do I look sick? *Am* I sick? That could be good—take things out of my hands.

"Occasional instances of transient reversible hepatic transaminase elevations have occurred, as I'm sure you are aware," he tells me. "Elderly patients seem to tolerate ulceration less well than the young. Adenomas of the..."

Averting my eyes, as if searching for guidance in Braille, I run my fingertips across the names and profanities carved into the adhesive table top.

"You have to be careful!" I snap my fingers back. "In clinical trials, the occurrence of somnolence has been reported. In this setting, the patient requires immediate reevaluation with reassessment of the treatment regimen." I cannot help but stare at him. The man in white shows me good teeth. "Due caution should be exercised when driving a car or operating potentially dangerous machinery."

"I came here to be alone. Go play with somebody else!"

"No problem at all," the man says. "The majority of studies do not indicate a teratogenic effect. The time of administration may be varied to suit individual patient needs." He remains. "Shake well before using."

Just one unwanted conversation seems unlikely to make me feel irreparably uneasy, so another begins. An overlarge but otherwise innocuous-looking man of thirty-five or so in a wrinkled suit rotates his spool, his stool, and speaks: "Doc, she's trying to be nice. Do what she says and shove off." Looking at me, the man in the suit uses his index finger to draw circles in the air around the side of his head.

"You think so?" says the man with the stethoscope to the man drawing circles. "Studies in beagle dogs indicate that approximately two percent of the dose is excreted in milk—" he turns back to me—"and you look like you have a lot of milk to excrete."

"That does it," the suited man says. "You gonna shove yourself or do you need some help?"

"Hey, mac," says the bartender to the man in the suit. "He leaves before he upchucks, and he pays before he leaves. He doesn't hurt anybody. Around here that means you stay as long as you like." Addressing the man in white, the bartender adds, "But let the chick be, will ya, Doc?"

"Due caution, am I right?" He folds up his stethoscope and puts it in the pocket of his smock. He reaches for my hand, which I provide. His fingers are soft as a woman's, as an infant's. "Shake well."

I do not turn around to watch him go but rely upon the man in the suit to signal the pretender's exit.

"Know who that guy is?" he says to me, stepping off his stool.

"Uh-uh." He had looked familiar, though.

"Kind of famous. He's a real doctor—or was. Doctor Douglas, Douglas..."

"Farr," I say, as my glass begins to vibrate in my hands.

Doctor Douglas Davies Farr, obstetrics and gynecology, health correspondent for the local NBC affiliate. I had known him well—actually, much less well than intimately—while he was in Cincinnati briefly, on sabbatical of a type, preparing a report on pioneering new work at Careways MedServ. I had shifted into his body and from it on my way into Rebecca Watanabe's. Did I tell you that already?

Was it he who performed the abortion, or had he observed?

"Right," the suited man says, beginning to collect his change.

"How did he get back up here?"

"From where?"

"Does anybody know what happened to him?"

"Nope. One day, fine; next day, crazy as a loon."

Yes. That's about the way it goes.

"Did you see him try to do the broadcast after? It would have been a gas if it hadn't turned out to be so sad. Sometimes he comes in and almost seems to be making sense with all that medical gibberish, which he gets, I think, from drug ads like you see in *Parade*. But he's nuts—we all know it. And *he* knows it. It comes and goes, and he knows that, too. Gotta be hard. I guess I wouldn't mind being nuts if I was so nuts I didn't know I was nuts, you know?" The man in the suit straightens his tie. "Would you mind if I joined you?"

A third male admirer has been waiting in line. He hovers nearer. *Golly* I'm popular. "Am I interrupting anything?" he says.

The disk jockey has inserted a tape which he had surely selected for the satire of it. Most of the patrons, including the man in the suit, seem more unpleasantly puzzled than entertained, but I hear myself snickering sardonically. During the decade from which this drivel sprang, I had shifted countless times in order to keep myself from being balled...not exactly. From being hauled before one after another draft board to rationalize why I should not be sent away to have my legs blown off. It is Sergeant Barry Sadler's "The Ballad of the Green Baret," an essay extolling the valor of those employed in genocide, set to pop-march music.

What a waste that war was. What a waste all wars are.

You see, I do not disrespect human life nor undervalue it, regardless of what you might think. Every human life (give or take a few lumpen, anonymous, red-ant/black-ant millions here and there in lands I will never visit) is important to me, for it represents a life one day I might lead. Too many robust young men I aspired to become were snared, caged and shipped to the sausage factory called Vietnam to be ground up and packed into bags before I could learn their name. Twenty years ago, the snazzy guy approaching me now might well have been one of them. And he never would have had the opportunity to ask me...

"May I have this dance?"

Clean-shaven except for the hint of a mustache and goatee. "Buzz-cut" hair; slim-cut jeans. Crisp white dress shirt and skinny, keyboard-motif tie. Striped vest chosen with care from a resale shop. Cowboy boots. Shy. His buddies probably put him up to it. They could not have armed him with a better line, for it makes me chuckle, and that is something I felt I might never do again. He smiles well. He is holding a Rolling Rock long-neck with one sip missing.

"Thanks, but I'm waiting for 'Ringo.'" I return to my paper.

This is an allusion, I believe, to a nineteen-sixty-four release by Lorne Greene, the patriarch Ben Cartwright of "Bonanza," a long-running television show of the time. It is dirge-like; undanceable: spoken; not sung.

Interesting, the trivia I have retained.

My rejoinder proves too abstruse for the young man, who, apparently, thinks I am awaiting a companion. Now, what kind of guy would that be? One with rings? More likely, one with piercings. No matter: I have portrayed myself as insufficiently charmed. How had Todd put it? “Unavoidable, unapproachable, unavailable.”

“Okay.” He turns. “Rats!” I hear him exclaim to himself.

This man has witnessed me quaffing liquor and likely has heard the garbling of diction it has exacerbated. He might think my inhibitions are breaking down, but if so he has another think coming. It is not inhibition with which he should concern himself but fortitude. I will not rush into anything. I will take some time for contemplation and educated decision making. He seems sincere, and I intend to demand that he use every opportunity to prove himself so. I will give him the den, the benefit of the doubt, with one eye open to anything outside the boundaries of, as Todd had put it, strictly on the up and up. There is a razor knife in the pocket of my parka.

“If you want to dance with someone, why don’t you request ‘A Whiter Shade of Pale’?”

Hmm. Why did I say that? I know: For three decades, “A Whiter Shade of Pale” has been the preeminent “slow” rock number, often used to conclude the music program of a prom. When young people hear “A Whiter Shade of Pale,” they know it marks a critical juncture. Boys who had not previously mustered the gumption to drift around the floor in physical contact with their date usually succumb to Procol Harum’s dreamy melody and hallucinatory lyrics...and their young lady’s ultimatum.

“I already did—the minute I saw you come in.” This is a lie, I presume, but a flattering one. He adjusts the empty stool across from me. “May I? What’s happening...aside from complimentary checkups at Oldie’s for the ladies on Saturday night?” Boldly, he flips the *Reader* around.

“Hank Jones at the Jazz Showcase.” Making things up.

“Again? I saw him there last month.”

“You did? I’m a fan.” I am? “His *Mandinkas* is outstanding.” It is? Who the hell is Hank Jones? What are Mandinkas? Where did the loathing go? “Marci...Ulrich.”

“Mitchell—Mitch—Yanahan. Have we met? I’m always trying to get them to play a Dave Brubeck track here now and then—nothing less accessible than that. ‘Take Five’ was a hit, right? Who could it hurt? I don’t know a whole heck of a lot about it, but the difference to me between music like this and jazz is, jazz always sounds fresh. If you’re in rock, you’ve got to be worried about your image and age. It’s all marketing. When you’re in jazz, all you have to do is make amazing music. Which I’m sure is not as easy as it sounds...or to make a

living doing it. Take Jagger, Clapton. How old? Almost too old to rock-and-roll. We care. Now take Hank Jones. How old do you think he is? It doesn't matter, right? If I hadn't been to the show, I wouldn't know what he looks like, I wouldn't care, and I would still dig his music. So good."

"What makes it 'good' when it's good?" I seem to have misplaced the answer. This version of Marci Gaydos knows nothing about the makings of jazz, as far as I can tell.

"Inventiveness. Things unexpected. The soloist will begin with the tune and then veer off from it, getting farther and farther away with every bar, building up stress, and you get antsy wondering how he's ever going to get back, and you know he has to—he can't let it end there. And suddenly, pow!—he's home."

"The slow start, the big buildup, the tension, the waiting, the climax. Sounds sexy."

"Truthfully, I never thought about it that way. But you're on to something. That's where the name 'jazz' came from. How's your drink? For me, jazz can't be very far 'out there,' though. Some of it's *all* unstructured, nothing the mind can hold onto, no song to sing—one lonely note at a time, unattached to the ones before and after."

"Ah." Like me.

Hang in there, girl.

"Ornette Coleman, for instance. He sounds like a bagpipe player falling down the stairs."

I laugh—heartily, loudly, jigglingly. My nipples rub abrasively up and down against the rough yarn of my sweater. Staccato, like a vibraphonist's mallets. They grow hard. Mitch takes notice. It all feels excellent.

"Want something?"

"Double Beefeater martini, dry, up, big glass this time, three olives *and* an onion."

"Shaken, not stirred, Mister Bond?" For a moment, I am bamboozled. I am not a "mister," am I? I look down. I think not. "I'll see what I can do."

I watch him go. Buns as tight as Todd's must have been at the party. I watch him return. Nice broad shoulders. Beefy.

"Beefy," Mitch says to me. "Your drink. Looks beefy, substantial. Been to Pop's?"

Pop's for Champagne, miles from here, is one of the best rooms in all of Chicago for listening to jazz. Yes? Yes. It is not expensive, but it feels so. I remember being there, clapping till my fingers sung, stung for a songstress who was one of the founding members of Manhattan...Transfer. I do not

remember what she sang. I do not remember her name. I do not remember what my name was at the time, who I was with or which sex I was. "I love it."

"Finish your veggies and then let's say we split."

"I uh..." I look out the window, scratch away some frost with ragged nails. The foundation.

Agoraphobia is what it is.

In an effort to clear my head after dropping the body of Raymond Alan Gaydos off at Navy Pier, I had set out for one of the many fine taverns and clubs along bustling Rush Street—a very long walk in cold weather but no doubt an invigorating one. I quickly found I could not stray that far. The foundation is a womb and the cord between it and me is shorter now than it has ever been.

Reflected in the glass, with cold, wet darkness beyond, Mitchell Yanahan's eyes plink up and down my spine. I see I look as mediocre as it is possible for Marcia Lynne Gaydos to look. No hairbrush; no lipstick. "I'm not exactly dressed for the occasion," I say.

"You look great."

"Think we can get a seat?"

"No problem. I made a call."

"When?"

"The minute you came in." His smile is brilliant.

"I'll believe that when they play—"

The disk jockey segues into...which song? Yes.

Handsome Mitchell Yanahan rises. He lifts my arm off the table. He excuses us repeatedly as he pries the crowd apart and reaches a relatively unpopulated pan of spark, span of parquet. We join another couple in an awkward two-step.

Mitch holds me less closely than he could, less closely than I need. I press myself into him until the tips of my breasts are flattened, Nicole Baker-like. I am almost too tall for him, but he does not seem to mind.

I rest my cheek on his shoulder. He places one back, rather hand, on the neck, that should be back, of my neck; the other on the back...small of my back. Damn it! I snuggle my hands, one atop the other, into the indentation between his thick latissimus dorsi.

We shuffle around. The tacky soles of my clodhoppers squeak against the flooring. Our toes play bumper cars. Mitch could use some lessons. So, it appears, could I.

"How did you do this?" I ask.

"What's that?"

I lift my head. "The song."

"I'm the deejay's boss. I run a music business. I put sound systems in. And you?"

I have had hundreds of professions, as you know—a few of which I could describe in some detail. I could be anything for Mitch. Waitress? Veterinarian? Psychiatrist? Voodoo priestess? "I'm a dancer."

He pulls back, stops shuffling. "You are kidding."

I am insulted. Have I lost so much? Then I realize he is thinking *exotic*. Only hours ago I looked every inch the part—complete with G-string. No doubt Mitch has installed audio equipment in "gentlemen's clubs," such as Scarlett's on Clinton Street or Crazy Horse Too on North Kingsbury, and has seen their entertainers coming to work in determinedly unpretentious wardrobes—incognito. Tonight, that is me. Undeniably, I meet or exceed the physical requirements. Too much on the Buenos Aires anorexic side, though. One of these days, I have got to eat. (I wonder what would happen if the disk jockey were to play "The Stripper" by David Rose and his Orchestra.)

"Modern ballet," I say. "I tried out for *Joseph* awhile back." Did I?

"I thought so." He moves his feet. "You walk like a gazelle or something. Maybe I saw you on stage somewhere."

I do? I like hearing it. And hearing it makes it so. My dancing improves.

The music fades. The disk jockey announces a break and turns up the sound on a television set. Sports Channel. How romantic. The Bulls have won. The home team? Looks like it. Yes, of course. The announcer eulogizes Randell Tarpley—one of his previously unbroken records has been shattered by a player named Jordan—and I confront vaguely hurtful memories.

"Michael is the man," Mitch says.

"Uh-huh."

"Well..." He takes my right hand in his, palm to palm, then completes the sandwich with his left. He bows and delivers a kiss—to his own fingers. I laugh out loud—so loud I honk. "Goodnight," he says with a wry tick of a dimple and turns away, dousing my laughter. He turns back. "Unless you're ready for some bubbly."

Lake Point Tower. Can I see the lights of home from here? No.

Mitch hails a cab. He offers to ride in it with me to my place of residence. I doubt my ability to resist letting him walk me to my door. "Thanks, but not tonight," I say.

Coatless, hands in pockets, Mitch shifts his weight from foot to foot; I hug myself; the cab driver revs his engine. If Mitch and I are going to do more than shake hands again, we had better make it snappy.

Throwing back the hood of my parka, Mitch takes hold of my neck and touches his lips to it. As he retreats, he sort of bumps into my lips with his cheek, as if unintentionally, as if a real kiss were too much to expect.

What's going on?

Marvin Gaye.

Right.

I'm swooning.

Mitch shoots his hands down to my elbows to steady me. He touches my lips with his. And again. The cab pulls away, screeching its tires, as Mitch keeps the kisses coming. These are not big, wet, sloppy kisses, but small, dry, teasing, pecking ones which dare me to up the ante. We stand in the shadow cast by a buzzing street lamp, serenaded by the bass line from "Da Doo Ron Ron." Some girl's doo is ron-ron-ronning, that is a fact. I cannot help but sway in time. And all the while, kitsch is missing...Mitch is kissing, kissing, kissing, kissing, kissing me.

"For every kiss you give me, I'll give you three." Did Mitch say that, or did I?

He takes my fat bottom between his teeth and pokes the tip of his tongue into its cleft. *Lip*. My fat bottom *lip*. Does that make more sense to you? My fat bottom. Shit! I do not have a fat bottom.

With eyes closed, I open my jaws and wait. I must look like a starving baby bird.

Susan Campanello.

The Body of Christ.

Miracles happen.

Instead of the kind of kiss I hope for, I get no kiss at all. Through drooping eyelids I watch Mitch pull back. He is inspecting me, probably asking himself what it is, exactly, he is hoping to get himself into. He wants to make love to someone who looks like a bag lady with the knockers of a showgirl and, apart from the knockers, he does not know what he sees in me. His stegosaurus brain has taken over. It is smaller than his other one, but stronger.

Now he attacks, exploring my teeth, my tongue, my soul.

Something inside me begins to quiver.

What if I come?

Has it already happened? Am I Mitch?

Am I dreaming?

Am I drowning?

Am I dead?

Do I exist?

Somewhere *between* Mitch and me?

Is this something, or *what*?

My knees buckle.

"Watch it!" he says. "Are you all right?" His hands are cupping my bottom—my non-fat bottom—I think it unarguable, to prevent me from tipping over. It helps.

"I really have to—"

"I know. Here's another cab." Mitch motions it toward us. He opens the rear door and ushers me in. He shuts the door for me and trots around to the driver, deals out four bills. "Take her where she wants to go," he says, "safely. Wait till she goes inside."

Goes inside? No, "she" doesn't go inside; "he" goes inside.

"The change is yours. Hang on." Mitch knocks on my rolled-up window and spins his finger around. "Your phone."

"I'll call you. What's yours?" He tells me. Then he heads his cock...he cocks his head sideways and kisses me, his tongue darting in and out. He steps back. "Come again?" I ask, dim as a twenty-five watter. Mitch repeats the number and raps the roof of the cab three times.

The driver laughs as he says, "Ain't love grand?"

Lacking anything better with which to write, I lick my finger and hurriedly scrawl ten numerals on the taxi's grimy rear window, for all the women motorists in Chicago to kill themselves trying to read backwards. I then ask the driver for a piece of paper and a pen, which he has ready.

As instructed, the cabby waits in the cul-de-sac driveway as I flounce into the lobby of Lake Point Tower. He lingers further until I turn to him and wave. I meander toward the elevator, humming "A Whiter Shade of Pale."

Vestal virgins—how many?

"SIXTEEN VESTAL VIRGINS."

"VESTAL: OF OR RELATING TO THE ROMAN GODDESS VESTA, MEANING CHASTE."

AREN'T ALL VIRGINS BY NATURE

Oh, well.

My stomach recoils. I feel as though I have been hit there with a wrecking ball. Nowhere in my foggy conscious mind exists a notion of the keypad code. The more I try to recall it, the more Mitch Yanahan's telephone interferes.

All I can do is try.

Weaving to and fro in front of the buttons, knowing that three erroneous attempts will set off the alarm, I punch at random.

Once.

Twice.

I think long and hard about a third attempt, a series of digits which seems to have worked before: Stogy's phone.

Dejectedly, I slog away.

A call to Schied, Osler and Gloomis would prove fruitless, I know, because the firm's hours of business are nine to five Monday through Friday and this is Saturday, past midnight, *Sunday*. I had set up a contingency plan for times like this, but I cannot remember what it is I am required to do.

Checking my pockets, I find something familiar: Raymond Gaydos's bill-fold, which I have carried all night deep inside the corduroy sport coat. It contains all the identification and money I have with me—familiar, yes, but almost worthless. The identification is Raymond's, and that will get me nowhere. The bills in the wallet total ten; all except two of them are ones, and those two are fives. Where will that get me? A scrap of paper. A cash register receipt from a store called Love Muscle. For the boots, I gather.

I feel like Theodora Pappatheodoropoulos from so many years back, every bit as lost, every bit as dependent upon the unknown for my welfare.

Though Raymond Gaydos's wallet contains a cash card which could enable me to withdraw money from an Automatic Teller Machine, nowhere can I find the necessary Personal Identification Number. Nor can I remember it. No credit cards.

Desk. Front office. Second drawer from the top. A Bulldog clip biting down on them. Hundred-dollar bills in a stack the size of an ice cream sandwich. If I could only get into the foundation and get that money...I wouldn't *need* that money. *Duh?*

Sobering up, I figure out that my problem is liquor. I have been guzzling gin and vermouth like Raymond with the brawny...uh-uh. I could use some brawn. The scrawny body of Marci.

Will I sleep in a movie theater? On one after another bus? Will I take the el to O'Hare and snooze in a lounge like a passenger whose plane has been grounded? Will I walk the streets, panhandling? I could be believable in such a role. Can I sell my body? Probably not dressed like this for more than a twenty. Amateur Night at Scarlet's? There's a novel idea: "Gents, give it up for Bag Lady!"

Can I get myself picked up at Oldie's and shift into the body of a man who has money? I think so. Do I want to? No. Not tonight. Could I get him to take me to his place? Yes. Only to sleep? Uh-uh.

What would Stogy advise for a fix like this? I know: He would say, "Mug some broad going into a fancy store and run like hell."

The stores are closed, Stogy. The broads, few as they are, have men walking with them. I, on the other hand, am alone. It is I who might be mugged.

Will I call Mitch? Yes. Will he be home? No. He'll be at Oldie's.

Wrong, I learn, he left a few minutes ago.

Could I go looking for the body of Raymond Gaydos? Yes, although the walk would be frigid and probably futile. Even if the paper cup were filled to the brim with quarters, it would contain not much more than twenty-five dollars.

Daddy? Are you in there? Talk to me. What's the PIN?

I return to Oldie's for some mulled wine and some mulling.

"Now, Mitch," I say when I reach him at his apartment two hours later, "please believe: I'm doing this only because my pocketbook got ripped off. I am not doing this...you know. All right? I have thirteen bucks in my shoe. Will that get me to your place by cab? I might have to stiff him. You'll have the tip? Thanks. Your address? I'll be there as soon as I can. Thanks again, buddy."

"Buddy"?

How about "Baby"?

"Honey"?

"Mitch" would have been best.

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Mitchell Yanahan remained a gentleman throughout my overnight stay. He provided a still-packaged toothbrush. He gave me a choice of either an extra-extra-large Chicago Bears sweatshirt, which would have fallen almost to my knees, or a polyester warm-up suit for sleeping. (I chose the latter in order to conceal my pock-marked legs). For bedtime entertainment he referred to a stack of magazines made up primarily of *Audio*, *Musician* and *Stereo Review*. He allowed me to “crash” on his living-room futon-type sofa with lots of blankets and let me sleep there undisturbed, if not unobserved, all night.

In the morning he showed me to a fresh container of Brut Scented under-arm deodorant (“I bet it’ll smell completely different on you,” he said). He produced a pair of undershorts—fitted boxer-style—without a leer, *double entendre* or suggestion that it would be only fair of me to leave something of my behind, leave something of mine behind in trade. He let me shower as languorously as Todd Bergau’s girl next door without interruption—after offering to leave the apartment for a newspaper while I did so.

He requested the honor of taking me to breakfast at the West Egg Café, then begrudgingly agreed to let me shop and cook for him instead. He offered me as much cash as I would need till Monday. (By then, though, I had recalled both the current keypad number and the weekend procedure for obtaining a new one.) And he paid for a lipstick which I had told him I could not live another hour without.

He began talking about what we might do after brunch, after I had gone home to change, of course, should I be willing—maybe rent ice skates.

On our way to Treasure Island, we had stopped to look at and comment on a mound of snow into which someone had scratched the words “I love you.” Mitch told me he was touched by its sentiment; I told him I was touched by its impermanence.

As we waddled back toward his one-bedroom with our sacks of fresh produce and canned goods, Mitch again stopped at the icy monument to pay his respects.

“See,” I said, “it’s already melting.”

"It's the thought that counts. I think I'm glad it's melting. That makes it more powerful. The idea of the thing is better than the thing itself. Like contemporary art."

"Do you like it?"

"Yeah."

"Me, too."

"Yeah."

"What's up?"

"A lot of men have fallen head over heels for you, right? Some of them told you they loved you, right? I'll bet you thought they were lying, that all they wanted was your body. Can't blame 'em. A guy's gotta start somewhere."

His smile!

"They fell in love with you for your looks. That's about all *I* know about you. But I'll bet they would have grown to love other parts of you just as much. You impress me as someone who would be easy to love in many ways."

"I'm not easy," I said, my teeth clattering.

"I didn't mean it like that."

"Neither did I. I'm not easy to love. You don't want to know how hard I am to love."

"The other person has to be the judge. You have nothing to say about whether you're loved or not, or whether loving you is easy or not. If I decided to let myself fall in love with you, I'd love you, whether you wanted it or not."

"Well, yeah," is all I could say, "but I'm cold." I half expected Mitch to reply, "I'll bet you're not as cold as you think," but he did not.

Instead, squatting down to sharpen the message, he asked me a question that made me drop one of the sacks. What do you suppose it was?

SOMETHING ABOUT THE MAN'S JACKET.

"Do you want kids?" he said.

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To the still-life I added a green pepper. Picture-perfect, I thought, in a style similar to that of the great photographer...Who? I could not remember then and cannot now.

EDWARD WESTON WOULD BE MY GUESS. HE'S THE ONE WHO MADE PEPPERS LOOK LIKE NAKED LADIES.

The meal for which I had shopped was to revolve around a scrumptious egg dish—the recipe for which I seemed to have memorized somewhere along the line.

“Fine.” Mitch said. “We’ll get back to the kids thing. How about cats?”

“What about them?”

“Do you like ’em?”

“I don’t know the answer to that one either.”

“You don’t? How can that be?”

“I don’t know.” I fetched a large blue mixing bowl from his cupboard.

“Have you ever had one?”

“Had...”

“A cat.”

“Sorry. I don’t know—um, uh-uh. Look in the bag for the cayenne pepper, will you please?”

As instructed, Mitch looked. “Maybe we didn’t get it. Have you ever wanted one?”

“What?—oh, a cat. Keep looking.” I had skillfully cracked an egg into the bowl with one hand and, to Mitch’s mind, no doubt, I had as skillfully side-stepped the issue. “It’s in a jar. One with a black-and-brown label, I believe. Red stuff inside.”

“Here. I want to know if you’d like to have a cat.”

“They’re okay, I guess, for some people,” I replied, “but my building doesn’t allow pets—*furry* ones.”

“Would you have one if you could?”

“Gee, I...” I swung a sauté pan from a low shelf to the top of the stove. “Melt a little puddle of butter in the middle.” I switched the burner to medium-high.

Bisecting an onion, I began, “I’m gone a lot, and...” The end of that sentence dissolved in my tears.

“Let’s say you could be home more. Would you have a cat *then*?”

“I guess...I haven’t thought about it.”

I diced the pepper. Twitch, Mitch twitched when the chunks hit the pan. I ordered him to stir, and he took up a wooden spoon.

“Well, then, let’s say you had a minute right now to think about it. What do you *think* you’d think?”

“I’m having enough trouble thinking about *brunch*. For instance, I can’t remember whether I put salt in the eggs. Did you see?”

“Nope. So?”

“So *what*? The *cats*! Can we finish this sparkling conversation later when I can concentrate? That big skillet you said you had? Get it. Let’s see now...mushrooms, garlic...”

“I just think compatibility starts with—”

“*Darn* it! What is this?—the Spanish Omelet Inquisition?” Mitch smiled and resumed shepherding the chunks around in the pan. I sucked in a breath, wiped my fingers, placed my hands on the counter behind me and said, “What about you?”

“I can’t *stand* the buggers! They *stink*! Their *food* stinks! They *poop*...in the *house*! They have *germs*!”

I slapped the Formica. “Well, there you go. I hate cats too. Peel garlic.”

“Smoke?”

“Where? Oh, no thanks.”

“Do you?”

“Not since I shifted out of...the college party-girl lifestyle.”

“Me, never.”

“Cool. So now are we going to go look at rings?”

“Sorry about the dancing last night—if you can call it that,” Mitch said to my buttocks. My head was inside his refrigerator. “I had my chance to learn. Missus Ward’s class. Eighth grade. I didn’t know my friends had signed up for Saturdays at nine. I went at ten-thirty, so I was in a class with kids from some other school—no guys or girls I knew well enough to say hi to. I felt like an idiot, of course, trying to do the...samba, and the...rumba”—Mitch flung his hands upward, approximating the gestures of a South American female movie star of the Forties whose name I knew but could not recall—“and the cha-cha-cha.”

CARMEN MIRANDA.

Mitch performed a robotic one-two-three. “Jeeze.”

“No fun at all?”

“Most of the girls were squirrely—hunching their shoulders, chattering and jittering. All but one. This one held herself apart from the rest. She was well on her way to becoming a whole different species, I could see. Foxy *lay-dee*. She must have had a big sister at home. This eighth-grader had had some lessons in being flirty. She had a damned good start on a figure, and she knew it.”

Mitch’s eyes rolled away. Mine did too: Patty Mattingly; Lori Griffin.

“I can remember thinking how choice it would feel to have her chest pushing into my chest—like you and me last night. Shit. Here I am ready to cream my jeans over a fourteen-year-old I saw ten years ago. I need help.”

“Tuna-fish shake.”

“Huh?” He glanced worriedly around the kitchen as though it were something I had instructed him to buy but which he had not bought.

“Keep talking,” I said with a laugh.

“Now, Missus Ward did goofy things to break the ice—party games and so on. For this first class, she had all the girls line up on one side of the room and all the boys on the other. The boys were going to get their partners for the morning by choosing something put on a tray by each of the girls. She passed the tray around and told the girls to take off something—”

“It was *that* kind of dance class. Career development.”

“The tray went around. Most of the girls contributed a ring or a necklace or a bracelet. It would have been hard for any boy to see whose bracelet was whose, right? He’d pick a partner without knowing who he was picking. But the cool girl I’m talking about didn’t bring jewelry. All she could put on the tray was one of her shoes. It was a soft-looking sort of slipper-like thing. I was standing near the front of the line, ready to grab for that shoe, but then Missus Ward—damn her!—ordered all us boys to do an about-face, and I turned out to be almost last. So I stood there practically wetting my pants as the tray full of strange girl things got closer and closer and I could see nobody had picked the cool girl’s shoe.”

“Please don’t tell me—”

“A classmate of hers ahead of me got it. I was so bummed I never went back. And that’s why I can’t dance. Destiny.”

“Can you skip?”

“Beg pardon?”

“Let’s skip out of here.” I tugged on his sleeve and began to sing, “We’re off to see the wizard...” But Mitch would have none of it.

“Do you believe in destiny, Marci? Fate? The inevitable? Karma?”

“Mitch—”

“There was this other time—I was walking somewhere around the Loop, all gussied up for some kind of client call. Ahead of me, spinning around in one of

those miniature tornadoes the buildings make was this sheet of soggy newspaper. I could see it up there swirling. I said to myself, ‘That thing is going to smack me in the face.’ And as I kept walking, I was trying to think what I could do to get away from it. I got closer and closer and started to bob and weave like a prize fighter; I stopped and then started up again. All the time, I was watching this soggy paper spinning around. Finally, I was within maybe three feet of it and I jumped off the sidewalk into the street between two parked cars—trying to get away from this thing. It got me. Right in the face. All over my suit. And when I tried to peel it off, it came away in flakes. I had to pick them off of me for the rest of my walk. I think I still had some on when I went into the meeting.”

“And—I can’t wait—the moral of the story is...”

“I’m in line to dance with the fox, but I’m not going to get to. The soggy paper of life is about to smack me again.”

“Are you talking about me?—about us? Did I say something wrong? The hard-to-love thing? The unresolved kids controversy? The cats? The cigarettes? Was it that comment about having been a party girl?”

Mitch Yanahan let go of the dishwasher door. It shut itself loudly. “Who are you in relation to Raymond Gaydos?”

Egg yolks and acid erupted from my gut. Had the body I had shuffled out to the concrete block been identified? By whom?—a guard at the tower? Had this discovery been reported by the press? Had I been on television again? Was Mitch in fact the aforementioned private investigator, hired by Marci’s parents? How long had he been following me?

“I don’t—”

“I went through your wallet a minute ago.”

“You what?”

“I found your wallet—or what I thought would be your wallet—in the jacket you wore, and I looked inside. A guy can’t be too careful these days, right? Everything in there had Raymond Gaydos’s name on it. Nothing in there was yours. No purse. You could be a street person for all I know, although you’d be the sex—...the prettiest one I ever saw. Call me nosy, but I think I deserve an explanation, considering how much I’ve—”

“Let’s sit.”

Mitch coasted in my slipstream of silence for some excruciatingly long moments while I ransacked my head for an idea. It was like being in a maze: Every turn looked like a way out but dead, but lend, but led to a dead end. What I came up with was not much, but it was the best I could do.

“My dad. He had a heart attack. He’s fine. We took him to the hospital in a hurry Friday. In all the commotion, I left his jacket hanging on the back of a

kitchen chair. I had planned to take it and his wallet to him yesterday—not that he'd have had any use for them. I was on my way to do it before you and I met at Oldie's. Then I had such a good time with you...well, I forgot. It's getting late. I'd better go—"

"Your last name is Ulrich?"

"No. I made that up. I was going to tell you. A *girl* can't be too careful, either."

"Is your first name really Marci?"

"Yes."

"Then you're Marci Gaydos."

"Yes?"

"From Cinci."

"That's where my folks live."

"I saw your picture on the news some weeks ago, didn't I? You were a babe—I remember. But your hair was different...and your boo—. Well, anyway. Something about a detective? Then, more recently, a report about the executive Raymond Gaydos disappearing along with his brain-damaged daughter—like a kidnapping? And a lady doctor who got cooked to death? I've followed this. I just moved here from Ohio. You're not brain-damaged."

No? What a relief.

"Who are you?"

Had I remained in touch with Mary, Mother of God, I would have fallen to my knees then and there and begged for her intercession. I did say something like "Help me, Lord." What happened next proved that one need not believe in prayer to have prayers answered.

"Mitch," I began, hooking a finger over the waistband of his jeans and bowing my head, "This is it. The girl you saw on TV wasn't me but my twin sister. She's the one named Marci—Marcia Lynne. *My* given name is *Martha*. Do you gag? I have always wanted to change it. Dorky."

"Reminds me of the Paul McCartney song about a dog," said Mitch.

"I didn't like it very much better when people started calling me Marti for short."

"Reminds me of Marty McFly in *Back to the Future*."

"Okay. So, when my sister ran away, got herself mixed up in drugs and wound up crazy, I took her name."

As intensely as I could, I looked straight at him. He looked back, numbly. His voice softened. Bambi eyes. "It doesn't sound as though you two were very close."

"Not at all. It's weird for identical twins, I know. They're usually in a mind-meld thing. Now, I'm not saying she got what she deserved, but she screwed up

my whole family with her nutso ways until Daddy took control and had her committed. I guess I feel better knowing she's tucked up in an asylum or whatever the politically correct term for it is these days where she can't get into any more mischief."

"Hmm. There's one other thing." Mitch reached down to his stack of periodicals, peeled one away and displayed its cover. "Is it all right if I show you something?" It was a "newsstand special" from *Playboy*. He swore as he fought with its glossy pages, which were stuck together with static electricity. "Right. Here we go. Which one is this?"

GOTTA BE "LEIGH PARLOVE."

Leigh Parlove. She's not quite wearing a "babydoll" nightie. Toeless high heels trimmed with fake white fur. The photographer and stylist had worked with lighting and props to make the shot resemble a period piece reminiscent of Playmate layouts from the late Fifties or early Sixties, but it did not—not entirely—for two big reasons, and thus the model's bustline was a punchline.

"I know I also have the issue with the centerfold spread from a couple of years back around here somewhere. I spent some time looking for it while you were in the shower. Might be in storage. Well?"

Aletha Bradshaw had talked about "the magazine" and how, after it came out, "the whole building got a look" at what she had called "them." Raymond Gaydos had mentioned to Rebecca Watanabe at the clinic that "everyone" had been "rattled" by "the pictures." He had spoken about relentless calls and letters regarding "unfinished business." He had discussed "'Glamour'-something"—a contract for personal appearances by "Leigh"? Todd had told me that Bob Landiak from Kalmer had intently interrogated him about whether I had posed nude for a publication. Todd had asked me, "Have we met?" and Mitch had wondered aloud whether he had seen me on stage. Todd had complimented me on my "knack" for posing that day on the island, and my poses had felt something other than purely spontaneous. Now I knew why: A photographer with slicked-back salt-and-pepper hair and white handlebar mustache had asked me long before Todd for the very same playful shots.

Pieces of the puzzle that had been Marci Gaydos began appearing and falling together, forming the image which Mitch now held out for me to study like sheet music for an unheard symphony.

I did not feel the pride or excitement I had felt as Ajah with the copy of *Time*. Rather, I felt abject fright. The amnesia I had described to Aletha Bradshaw was not an invention. What else in Marcia Lynne Gaydos's past would come to haunt me?

“Is this you, or your sister?”

“My sister,” I said, snapping out of it. “I can guess what your next question would be if you thought you had the right to ask it. The girl you saw on TV had tiny tits to start out with and then had much bigger ones. Whether that was me or Marci doesn’t matter, because the girl in the magazine has big ones, and so do I. What gives? I’ll tell you what gives. Both pairs were done on our birthday—identical twins couldn’t have it any other way.”

“Okay-ee...” Mitch sang.

Time for a diversionary tactic.

“Exhibits ‘A’ and ‘B,’ hereby submitted as evidence.” I pulled my sweater up over my breasts. “‘Identical’ is a slight exaggeration. Look in the magazine; look at me. Look in the magazine; look at me. See the difference? Mole here; no mole there? Now look me in the eyes, Mitch. Mitch? My face is up here.”

“Airbrush. They could have...they do it all the time...they could have used an airbrush and...painted...painted out...or digitally...but....”

It worked.

“But no.” I lowered the sweater. “I’ve gotta go see my dad. I’ll think about calling you. You think about trusting me.”

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Steeling myself for the excursion into distant territory, emboldened to some degree by what I had seen in Mitch's magazine and the centerfold number I had ordered and had delivered by bicycle messenger, I embarked in a taxi one week later for Café Absinthe, a noisy, trendy restaurant in a once-downtrodden, then-gentrified and booming neighborhood.

Why I had called Mitch and why I had agreed to meet him there remain a mystery. I think I needed a night out again, the noise of people again, the eyes of people again, and a man to be seen sitting with in animated palaver.

Mitch greeted me outside the front door by means of a distended, an extended, descending-scale whistle. I could tell he wanted to kiss my cheek; I held my head high; it would have been quite a stretch.

"My, how you've grown," he said.

From my point of view so high above them, my Salvatore Ferragamo shoes were the child Patty Mattingly's Mary Janes: the rounded toe, the over-the-instep strap. Their heels, however—the diameter of a quarter, stacked like those of the shoes teenage Patty wore when first meeting David Sciubba—boosted me up to one foot shy of six...one inch shy of six feet, or possibly more. (I continued to prefer stilettos, but the fashion mavens of the mid-nineties had dictated against them. At this time, early ninety-seven, they remained hard to find outside the Frederick's of Hollywood catalog. By spring of ninety-nine they would be fighting their way back, their reemergence having been driven by magazine photographs of movie stars in Gucci "nail" shoes—so named for the four-and-a-half-inch pencil-size metal shaft that served as a heel. Priced at three-hundred ninety-five dollars and worth every penny in one-upmanship.) My newly revealed celebrity boosted me farther.

"I like the hair," Mitch said. "They say our table's not ready yet. Want to walk around? Nice weather, relatively."

"No, thank you."

"Look over there! That car has its lights on. Let's go see if we can turn them off."

“Nah, let the moron learn his lesson.” Mitch tugged at my coat. “Stop it. It’s probably alarmed. We’ll just get arrested for attempted auto theft. Oh, *please*.”

We reached the automobile. Mitch made a tentative effort to open the driver’s-side door. “Locked,” he said. “Too bad. The poor, poor guy.” I tried the other side without success. “Say, you know what? I think I’d like to leave him a message. Do you have something?” Begrudgingly I dug pen and paper from my purse. Mitch rested his elbows on the fender and began to compose, the tip of his tongue visible. Without showing the note to me, he ripped it away and placed it under the left-hand windshield-wiper blade.

“What does it say?”

“Nothin’. Let’s scram.”

I snatched the note and read aloud what Mitch had written: “Greetings. If your fucking battery is dead, you dipshit motherfucker, it’s because you locked your fucking doors. Sincerely, a friend.”

I stood in front of Mitch shaking my head. “I’m shocked!” I said, “Utterly, utterly *shocked*.” I then pulled the strip of rubber away from the glass and reinserted the paper.

“Cheese it!” Mitch exclaimed, grabbing my hand, “The coppers!”

We ran, and as we did, in spite of myself, I began to laugh.

Mitch draped my coat over a low, hinged partition and into the hands of a restaurant employee. The decibel level around us fell instantly to near zero, as though the stylus had been lifted from a sound-effects record. Seconds passed before I looked around and understood what had happened. The movie had stopped at a single frame. Patrons sat with knives and forks hovering motionlessly over plates. Those with full mouths had ceased chewing. All eyes were on me.

Of course they were.

For this evening I had chosen an ensemble of irresistibly pliable, pettable, light-brown sheepskin comprising “Eisenhower”-style jacket and matching tiny skirt from Azzedine Alaïa—an investment of seven thousand dollars. Thanks, Daddy. I think I must have looked as though I had been held by the ankles and dipped in caramel. The top I left open to showcase an organic necklace befitting Ajah—a prop left over from the Kalmer shoot.

“Mar—Martha, *Marci*,” Mitch said, “there’s someone I’d like you to meet.” He drew me over to a table at which sat two exceedingly attractive individuals, more absorbed by my appearance than all the other diners.

The woman was artificially blond, with chin-length hair a shade or two darker than my new “pixie-cut” cornsilk. She wore a black blazer over a richly thin, black, long-sleeved sweater not unlike my own and skin-skimming

pegged black pants—an approximation of the catsuit and coat I had worn to Browntown with Todd. I could not see her feet, but I supposed she was wearing chunky, clunky, mannish black loafers with heels as big around as they were tall—standard issue and not to my liking.

Striking as the woman was, it was the male half of the couple who occupied most of my attention. I was mildly jolted by his uncanny resemblance to...whom? Rising up to meet me, he did so, easily. His shoulders were marrow, were narrow but muscled, his waist slim in his pleated wool trousers. His face was his best feature—that of someone whom I thought I had seen before and whose looks I had admired. He was introduced to me as Jon.

“Pleased to meet you, Jon,” I said.

He stared at me without speaking until I began to feel thoroughly ill at ease. “Do I—”

“Jonny.”

Jonathan Samuel Gaydos.

HER BROTHER.

My brother.

I felt myself sinking.

Jonny and Mitch fought with each other for an instant in an effort to help me stay standing. Jonny said, “Are you all right?” I told him I was famished. “Then we’ll eat! Wave at the guy, Sandy.” He gave me a long—rather unbrotherly long—hug, saying, “Jesus, I’m so glad to see you! You look fantastic! It’s a miracle! Last time I saw you, you were a veg—”

The three of them cringed. Jon recovered well: Where’s Dad? Is he with you? What have you been up to? Nice duds. You’re a giant Affy Tapple.”

That is what he said: “Affy Tapple.”

He hugged me again and while doing so murmured in my ear a question or a statement which struck me as suggestive. I do not know what it was because, having studied our embrace, all surrounding males had gone back to their food and their boisterous conversations. It was something like “...dance is on me.” He added, “Well?”

I chanced, “It depends on where we end up after here.”

Eyebrows shooting up almost comically, he replied, “It won’t be easy, but I’ll think of something.”

From around Jonny’s torso, through my daze, I glared at Mitch, who returned the glare, small but feisty.

“You still look like a Playmate,” Jonny said, stepping back.

“Jon?” said the woman.

“Oh. Sorry. Marci, this is Sandy, Sandra Martinson. Sandy, Marci. We’re engaged.”

"Congratulations."

"Thanks," said Jon.

"Jon?" said Sandra.

"What now?"

"You can stop."

"Hey, she's my *sister*, for crying out loud! If a guy can't ogle his own *sister's* boobs, whose boobs *can* he ogle?"

I sat down for the first time in that minimal skirt at the four-top round. Jon took a chair too, perching sideways on it, facing away from both Mitch and Sandra. He rested one fist on the thigh of his left leg and wiggled its index finger at his right until I saw it. He must have been wearing boxer shorts, for nothing compacted a remarkable erection. It rose from beneath his trousers like a bridge over the Chicago River. I snapped up his napkin and, under the table, whipped it into his lap. Jonny smirked and slid around in his chair to join our companions, who now appeared to be strangers whom the Jon-and-Marci couple had coerced into an uncomfortable public meeting. I drew my napkin over myself, finding use for its every square inch.

Amidst the small distraction that ensued when Sandra rejected the first bottle of wine, Jonny resorted to one of the oldest books, oldest tricks in the book, as the saying goes. After openly toying with an expensive-looking writing instrument, he let it slip out of his fingers to a spot on the floor near my feet. He spent considerable moments there, ostensibly in search for it. In fact he found the pen in an instant and used the rest of his time sneaking the implement up between my legs; I did not help matters much by reflexively letting them move slightly apart. Before he was done, my napkin had drifted away, along with my interest in anything other than having him work on me with a wand more magical than Shakespeare's quill.

Thus commenced an evening of my being scrutinized like a laboratory specimen by all three and interviewed caringly but persistently by the two men. Each time I asked questions of the group—How did you find Jonny and Sandra, Mitch? When did you propose to Sandra, Jonny? What do you do for a living, Sandra?—they redirected the interrogation to me.

I was able to pick up through inference that Jonathan Gaydos had done well for himself as something like assistant vaginal...virginal...regional vice president of sales for an electric utility, or "power marketer," as he termed it. Sandra was associate director of alumni relations at The Ohio State University. I unearthed little else about them.

"Dad's fine," I said at one point, responding to an inquiry that came, now that I had thought about it, late in the night. "The nurse told me he'll be ready to be released tomorrow. He's looking forward to going home. If I'd known

you were going to be in town, if I'd had *any warning*, I could have got us in to see him before dinner."

"Why did he take you?" Jonny asked.

"Take me?"

"Go off with you, bring you here?"

"A change of scenery is all it was. It did us both good. You'll see."

"It looks that way already from where I sit," said Jonny.

"Jon?" said Sandra.

Rather than try to explain to them why I had lied to Mitch about my family background, I told the same lies again about Marci and "Martha." Jonny periodically felt required to interject and say, with an attitude of tough love, something like, "You don't have a twin sister, although you always used to say you wanted one," "That's you in the mag, 'Leigh'—you know now, don't you?" and "*Playboy's* been trying to reach you—I've got bundles of letters from them in our room."

As I heaped untruth upon untruth and the more implausible my statements became, the more they became acceptable. You see, I was perceived by all three as having suffered a shattering experience akin to a sell socked shoulder's—a shell-shocked soldier's. My ability to make intelligible conversation constructed of complete sentences, no matter how nonsensical, was thought wondrous. My jurors were helping me knit disconnected synapses back into place. With treatment and rest and food and more talk therapy I could put my life together again.

Whenever Jonny corrected me, I squeezed out a timorous "Oh, yeah," bringing an apologetic "That's all right" from the three of them in unison.

In answering questions and more questions about Raymond Gaydos and Rebecca Watanabe—whether their extramarital affair had been a long one, whether, in my opinion, the newspapers had been correct about the cause of the doctor's death and whether, in my opinion, Dad could have been in any way responsible for it, most assuredly not deliberately—I would blurt out something like "The Boy Scouts gave me three cases of chocolate," "The girl and I drove to Paradise," or "Stogy died." Replying to Jonny's pronouncements that Dad should have stayed with me, Francis and the dead woman until the police came, I told them I had dated Randell Tarpley. When Jonny stated that he would have trouble "calling off the hounds"—urging the police to bring their investigation to a speedy close and clearing Dad's name—I nodded and described my trip to Argentina. I told them I had changed bread into flesh and wine into blood. And in this way I won their tormented compassion.

As the night drew to a close, Mitch, Jonny and Sandra held no more facts about Marci's recent past and miraculous recovery, Raymond Gaydos's where-

abouts or health or the body found stewing in the hot tub than they had before dinner. Over dessert, they ran out of things to say.

"Will you excuse me?" I said to them.

"Shall I join you?" said Sandra.

"I'll be fine." I rose and strode off toward the ladies' room. I made it only halfway.

"Well, Todd Bergau!" I exclaimed. "It's Marci...Nicole!" Seated next to him was a solemn-looking Jennifer Keck. "Hello, Jennifer. We meet again. Sorry about Joel."

Todd—his once-smooth cheeks eroded, his full lips now far fuller, swollen and blistered—remained silent, as did Jennifer. He pointed his all-but-opaque goggles at me as I asked him and Jen if I might linger with them for a moment or two. "How's he doing?"

Jen began, "I'm afraid I don't know who—"

"You mean Todd hasn't told you all about us? Nicole Christine Baker is the name—the name Todd knows me by. My friends over there"—I waved and they waved back—"call me Marci. I've had lots of names. I'm a performer, a dancer—a transsexual one, I don't mind saying. I started out as Larry Hibbs. I told Todd that, but it didn't seem to deter him any. He went ahead and drugged me and raped me." Todd said nothing. Jennifer said nothing. "I have this to prove it." From my purse I removed the Polaroid that Todd had taken. I handed it to Jennifer and said, "Too bad Todd can't see it—I'm sure it would bring back many quite interesting memories. Blind as a bat, is he? Enough velvety darkness for ya? Doesn't say much. See no evil, speak no evil. Two out of three ain't bad. Well, gotta go. So long, Jen." I lowered my voice as far as I could—to near-Philip Overbaugh depths: "So long, loverboy."

By the time I finished my celebratory shimmying in the restroom, touched up my makeup and strode out, the chairs that had held Todd and Jennifer were empty.

Those that had held Mitch, Jonny and Sandra, unfortunately, were not.

"They're good friends of mine. They're going through some tough times. So," I said, seating myself among them, "I got an audition for 'Joseph'—with Donnie Osmond?"

"The girl told us she was going to a quiet place to call the cops, Marci," said Mitch.

Said Jonny, "She thinks you might know why her friend was attacked."

"I wouldn't call it an attack," I said.

"So you do know," said Sandra.

“No, I do not. I read about it. And...I see spots. Black spots coming. Closing in on me. This is awful.” I shut my eyelids and rested fingers along them, grimacing.

Sandra offered, “A migraine? That’s what happens to me when I start to get one. I usually have about thirty minutes to find a dark room if I don’t want to be sick twenty-four hours straight. Do you get migraines, Marci?”

“My, my, my graine hurts, for sure.”

This brave attempt at levity elicited from the trio a kind of keening. Within moments the bill had been ordered and paid and I was being half-carried along by my support group like an ailing member of the pod.

With one hand shading my eyes, I said to Jonny and Sandra, “Where are you staying?” then I clambered into a cab with Mitch and left them.

“What’s best, Marci, at times like this?—be alone or be with someone?”

“My upstairs neighbors sound like they’re Dutch.”

“I’m sorry—”

“Wooden shoes. Can I stay with...with...?”

“Well...” Mitch began hesitantly.

Have you not found it an interesting dichotomy that “headache” is so often used as an excuse for sunning, for shunning sex and that sex is an almost-instantaneous cure for headache? I mentioned this to Mitch as I lay my head upon his lap.

“Naturally you can stay over.”

Was Mitchel Yanahan a fool? No. Just a man. Think about it: a damsel in distress—a Playmate, no less—pleading to be helped off with her clothes and into bed. What would have been your reply? Do not intellectualize: Think about it with your other brain.

Despite all he had heard from me, despite his likely sense of guilt in contemplating intercourse with an invalid, despite his suspicion that I might prove to be a pathological liar or worse, despite his lack of “protection,” to use his word, and despite his fear of exacerbating rather than alleviating my agony, Mitch patted me and said he was ready and willing if not necessarily able to do anything that might help.

“You’ll have to do *everything*,” I replied.

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All apprehension I might have felt regarding what was to come next I lost the moment Mitch sat me down and began unbuckling my shoes. He went about undressing me with such exceedingly conscientious regard for my condition that I nearly burst out of “character” and urged him to pick up the pace—to, as I had said to Todd, skip over the honey-baby mushy stuff and just get it on. I calmed myself by imagining that the voice asking me what had happened to my poor legs and the hands tugging gently at the toes of my stockings were Cousin Rick’s and we were playing “Doctor.” I whispered Rick’s name, but by then Mitch had me naked and was in me and was, as I was, far, far past the point of caring.

This orgasm was not the rock-’em, sock-’em “shoulder to the solar plexus” kind of shift which I have previously described. For the first and only time, quite likely because Mitch moved so slowly and my orgasm therefore trickled out from me over what could have been hours, I was aware with every cell of gray matter that I was not only about to shift but was in the midst of shifting. It occurred on a sub-atomic level, one electron at a time.

I felt the consciousness which had been Marci going, going, going and being replaced by, by...Bye-bye. I was losing my mind, and I loved it.

Then I felt it returning, coming, coming, coming—no pun—having mingled, danced, become one with parts of Mitch Yanahan’s.

And my mind was in Mitch Yanahan’s body. And I was Mitch Yanahan. And I was holding Marci’s body tightly to me as had Raymond, feeling it breathe. And I was Raymond, too, in part, and I was smoothing hair and apologizing. And I was wondering whether my girl would ask for Bibbie in the morning.

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What sex I am I do not know, and it is irrelevant. I grip a pistol. I am strutting along a vast row of black-haired men and women in loose-fitting, light-blue uniforms of a sort. Prisoners, on their knees, wrists bound behind them, at the edge of a pit. As I pass, into each head I fire a single slug. I strut and fire, strut and fire, and my gun never runs out of bullets.

Reaching the end of the line, I spin around, fully expecting to see that the impact has sent each toddy stumbling into the mass grave. I am stunned to find all still kneeling. They are slumping and moaning, but they live. They are now blond.

My pistol becomes a machine gun, and I use it to rake the group. First to the left and then to the right I spray lead. The dying perform a *danse macabre*, but they do not fall.

Dropping the gun, I rush to the first in line. I am required to use far too small a knife to decapitate the body, and so I must run the blade around and around and around, digging deeper and deeper each time. I fling head over the precipice, then use the sole of a boot to push the rest in on top. I do this fifty times, as methodically and mechanically as a worker in a chicken plant.

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The next day I—Mitch Yanahan—spent hours straightening up around the apartment, dusting and vacuuming as if expecting a guest. Throughout, Marci's body did not move. It did not respond to my shaking its shoulder or my splashing its face with cold water. Nor did it respond—as I wanted—to my farewell caresses.

I held it, stroked it, squeezed it, kissed its wounded legs. Once more for the road, I ran my tongue around the areola of its left breast and tenderly nipped, nibbled the nipple, hard as a raisin on a sundae, at the center. I fingered its lower lips until wetness appeared. I favored, I savored the fragrance, which I have carried with me ever since.

Are you trying to guess what might have happened had I initiated intercourse with it yet again? How easy it would have been! How good it would have felt! How peaceful and velvety would have been the dark outcome!

"Kill, fuck and die." To die in my own bed, in the company of a lover. To not only die but perhaps to know death. To feel death. To seduce and be seduced by death; to make love to death; to live, so to speak, with death, forever.

In actuality, I did go back inside, ordering myself not to ejaculate. I needn't have worried, for I went soft within seconds. "Plum tuckered out," I said aloud as I pulled away and stood to cover the body of Marcia Lynne Gaydos from toes to neck with a sheet, "getting plum tuckered out, aren't we, kiddo?"

From the foundation I telephoned the office of the company which managed Mitchell George Yanahan's complex. "I don't know for sure," I said, "but I think there's been some foul play in number three-ten. I dunno if you should tell the cops or not."

Thereafter I called for Jonathan Samuel Gaydos at the Days Inn located just off Lake Shore Drive.

"Hello, Sandy. This is Mitch Yanahan. Can I speak to Jon? Hello Jon. Listen. Marci is fine, but sound asleep—she's been that way since we left you. On the way home in the cab, though, she started mumbling something about your dad, and I think it's important. Damn!—I can't talk now—my boss is on the other line. But I could meet you about two-thirty at a place called Oldie's, North Pier. Can you arrange to have it be only the two of us?"

At two-fifteen I jogged the few blocks from Lake Point Tower to the Days Inn. Sandra greeted me by peering out through a peep hole and exclaiming, "Holy cow!—wait a minute, Mitch!" When she opened the door she was wrapped in a pair of towels: one secured under her armpits; the other piled Ajah-style on her head.

"I'm sorry," she began, "I just got back from the—"

"Don't bother," I said, drawing from a pocket the utility knife. I extended its blade and pressed the point of it into her chin.

Underneath the towel Sandra Martinson wore a two-piece bathing suit more appropriate for the beaches of Rio than the shores of Lake Michigan.

A quarter-hour later, wearing that suit, I awaited a bellman's knock. I had ordered a wheelchair. The bellman, all eyes, helped me tuck a blanket around the seminude body of Mitchell Yanahan. I explained that my recovering "husband" loved watching children splash in the pool and that I would meet my recuperating spouse there in minutes. I might not have had to tip him, but I did, and well.

"He didn't show," cried Jonathan Samuel Gaydos upon his return to the room which he and Sandra Martinson shared at the Days Inn. I could hear him ricocheting around with unspent energy.

"Oh, no!" I called out from within the bathroom. "So you have no news?" I listened as Jonny plodded toward me.

"Nothing. He left a message saying he'd call us here."

When Jonny stepped through the doorway I actually gasped: His resemblance to Marci seemed greater than before. I said to him, "I was about to go for a dip, to cool down. Thoughts of you were getting me so hot I couldn't stand it. I'm going to take this off, if it's all right." I reached around behind myself. Jonny told me I looked like a Playmate in that pose. "And the bottoms? I need to take them off, too." I turned away and did so, bending at the waist, holding onto them until they were at my ankles. "Come touch me." I whispered. "Put your finger here. See?—I'm drooling." I was.

"Whatever has gotten into you?" Jonny asked as he located my clit. "It looks like you've survived the 'balling-your-own-sister-with-your-eyes' thing."

"Take me to bed." He did, then hurriedly undressed as I watched. Quite a specimen, he was.

"There's been a big change in you," he said. "Roll over. We're going to do it my way."

Doggy style again. I wanted it. The Sandra in me needed to pretend the ravaging knave was anyone but Jon. "You're going to make me scream."

Scream? That I did, silently, until midway through my coming.

And then I was male again, Jonathan Samuel Gaydos, leaning into a pair of fine, tight buttocks, quaking from the second half of an exquisite orgasm. While I remained inside it, the body of Sandra Martinson cried out, “What happened?” then more loudly, “What happened?” I was in an ideal position to muffle and then halt forever these unanswerable outbursts.

While dressing, I became aware that a previous version of Jonny had visited the club where Marci—the original Marci, the Marci before my Marci One—then danced, and that she had danced, so to speak, in his lap, gratis, much to the envy and bewilderment of the male friend from high school whom Jon had arranged to meet there the night before Jon’s twenty-fourth birthday.

“Little devil,” I said aloud.

Devilish it had been, and then some.

A gust of refrigerated air had greeted Jon and his friend as they slunk into the packed, raucous night spot. A half-naked hostess had directed them to a table for two at the lip of the stage. Taking away the “Reserved” sign that had been placed upon it, she had inquired as to which one of them was Jonny. “Oh yeah—now I see it. Sit down,” she had said to Jon. She had informed him that everything for the sexy birthday boy and his cute associate was theirs for the asking till closing. “Well, not everything,” she had added, disappearing into the smoke.

Another erection sprouted as I recollected just how blatantly and daringly lustful Marci had appeared to Jonathan Samuel Gaydos and the other club customers that night as she pressed her undulating pelvis down into the lucky fucker longer and deeper than was ordinarily allowed. Then she had taken his head in her hands and done something forbidden: She had pulled it into the crevasse between the capacious cups of her rhinestone-encrusted brassiere. She had tousled his hair and pushed his head away, leaving it swimming in consternation over the implied far-reaching meaning, if any, of her actions.

For whatever reason, I picked up the halves of Sandra Martinson’s swimsuit. The moment I touched them, a whole new set of memories or pseudo-memories rushed into my mind. The unusual perspective from which I now envision it—voyeur rather than participant—leads me to believe the following did occur, in the presence of an obscene, rather, unseen observer.

I need some more water.

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The upper floor of the house is permeated by the scrumptious smell of barbecuing beef. Noise from a broadcast baseball game also flows in. A woman's voice rises above the radio: "Just leave them, Francis—he said he'd be back in a second and I don't know what he had in mind. I never touch his meat—you know what I mean." Two women cackle with gusto.

A hushed conversation can be heard—just barely—emanating from a room down the hall—not the master suite and not the guest quarters or the bathroom but one of the two others. Three of the five doors are shut or nearly so; a fourth hangs fully open. This is a girl's room. The wallpaper is of a floral motif. Six stuffed animals sit at the head of the bed—including a fluffy Gund elephant—as if guarding the mostly unpacked suitcases spread out before them. Alongside the luggage sit neat stacks of lingerie. Hanging from the doorknob are the components of a bikini. This is the bikini Marci wore an hour ago beneath a T-shirt for a vigorous game of volleyball with Jon. It is the bikini that Jon said would give her an unfair advantage. It is the bikini that Marci said laughingly she would discard, as she had discarded the T-shirt, if it proved to be distracting. Raymond Gaydos picks the parts off the knob, finds them to be dill stamp, still damp, with sweat, and holds them out to focus. The mismatched sizes—the bottom so small, the top so large—cause him to chew the inside of his cheek.

He creeps away from that door to an open window. In the backyard sits Francis, hands folding and unfolding atop a picnic table, looking off, brow a-furrowed, toward a smoldering pyre as if pain and suffering were probable.

Silently, Ray moves to the door of the fourth bedroom. Purposefully or not, it has been left open a couple of inches. Through the crack he can see a bookcase containing a mishmash of scuffed paperbacks, an abraded football, a ragged fielder's mitt and an askew fleet of plastic jet airplanes. Also, he sees a mirror. Reflected in the mirror is his son, sitting on a straight-back wooden chair, talking to...no one. No one visible, that is.

"Come on over here," Jonathan Gaydos says quietly. Ray reconnoiters, triangulates and calculates that the person to whom Jon is speaking is reclining on the floor at the far side of the bed. Jon slaps his knee. "C'mere."

The person to whom Jon is speaking is, it comes as no surprise, Marci, who now rises and sidles uneasily over to her big brother.

She wears a knee-length, belted terry-cloth cover-up and, Ray assumes, fresh bra and panties. The folds of the nubby cloth amplify her already-over-amplified bustline, which also is celebrating a birthday: born again two years ago last week.

Marci does not sit as much as alight, sidesaddle, with her thighs perpendicular to Jon's, her back to the doorway through watch, through which Ray watches.

Jon engages her in a staring contest. Saying nothing, he studies her silhouette and studies more until he knows she can no longer withstand the scrutiny. She turns to him for relief. His staring continues—not with the intent of forcing her to be first to crack a smile but of forcing her to be first to deliver a kiss. He wins. She targets his cheek but he catches her mouth. Their audible smooching does not last long, but it is all Jon needs to press on.

Retreating, Marci lowers her head. Jon takes her chin in his hand and raises it till their eyes meet directly.

"Don't look at me," she says.

"Right. Everything about you *screams* 'Look at me.' Your whole life revolves around getting looked at. Getting looked at is how you can lease that twin-turbo rocketship in the driveway."

"But not like this, by you, my brother."

"Of all the things I am, 'Marcia Lynn's brother' is way down the list. At the top is 'Male.' Second comes 'red-blooded.' Third has to be 'out of his ever-lovin' mind about M.L.G.' And you know it. And you knew it last night. And you have known. And you have used it."

"I have not used it."

"Last night?"

"A joke."

"And that crack about the bathing suit?"

"Another joke."

"Here's what I would have said if we'd been alone: 'Strip volleyball, five-point game.' And I'd have let you start with the T-shirt on."

"You'd be naked. I clobbered you."

"A comeback: I scored the first two points. Hell, I'm ready to double-dare you at any time. Like now. Let's flip a coin. Three flips. Heads, I win; tails, you take something off."

"Huh? Tails *you* take something off."

"You got a deal."

"No."

“Two flips.”

“No. The world says this is wrong.”

“Do you think the world really cares? How’s the world going to know?—I’m not going to tell.” He pauses. “Hey, Fish Lips.”

“I’m beginning to think I made a very big boo-boo last night.”

“Did you get in trouble with your boss?”

“No, his wife pulled some strings for me. But...”

“Speaking of strings in need of pulling...” Jon begins. He lets his voice trail off.

“Stop it,” she says. “Stop it,” she repeats. “I don’t have a bra—”

“I like presents I can unwrap,” Jon announces, his confidence building. He partially unwraps her. “My...God...Marci!” he exclaims. “I have to feel them.”

“No. Don’t.”

“Oh, man, they’re great!”

She clutches his wrist. “Careful.”

Jon leaves her breast long enough to strip off his tank top. He beats his chest. “Let me feel them here,” he says to her. “I want a hug. I want to hug you. I want you. I need you. I love you so much.”

Raymond watches Marci point the toes of her right foot. She brings her right knee upward until, he guesses, it is pulled, so impossibly but so necessarily, far into the deep cleft of her bosom. Simultaneously twisting her torso toward Jon’s, she begins straightening that leg while swinging it swiftly up, over her brother’s head and between them and down. The pointed toes come to rest on the opposite side of the chair. This flash of *légerdejamb—s’il vous plait*—is so deft, so agile, so athletic, so feat...I mean so heatedly female and so thoroughly unexpected that it leaves Jon, and Raymond, blinking stupidly.

“Christ!”

Marci’s fingers are at her crotch, tugging with both hands diagonally at the corners of the nubby cloth. Raymond cannot see, but he can imagine how exposed her roundhouse kick has left her. Pubic hair hidden from Jon by only the thinnest layer of peek-a-boo lace, he surmises, remembering the matching camisole he had seen on the bed. He feels he should go, but he is cataleptic—an audience held captive by the performance he beholds.

Her regular routine would have her quickly follow the right leg with the left so that she would be once again sitting sidesaddle, one-hundred-eighty degrees from where she began, facing the doorway. Ray makes ready to duck away, for Marci has pointed the toes of her left foot and raised them off the floor. Jon, sensing her plan, grasps her knees and holds them down.

“Let me go,” says Marci. “I can’t stay like this. I forgot I didn’t put pants on. Jonny, I don’t have anything on down here.” She sounds horrified...or thrilled.

"You forgot? How could you forget something like that?"

"I forgot I was here. I don't take my underwear with me into the bathroom when I'm home. And then you called for me and I came running. You asked me to kill a spider for you, you big fraidy-cat."

"You shave. Did you just now? So smooth. I love this soft lump of fat. It's meant to be some kind of bumper, I think. I want to bump up against it."

Ray is consumed by a daydream image of his adult daughter's bare genitalia: labia spread, cervix taught and tensing. A finger moving there. Daddy's finger.

He jumps in fright at the sound of his name.

So do Jon and Marci.

From the backyard came a cry of great agitation: "Mister Ray, sirloin's gon' turn to charcoal!"

"Phew!" Jon says, craning his neck toward the window. "That put the fear of God in me."

"It's the fear of God we should both have right now."

"The Creator's busy sending a tornado through a trailer park in Nebraska at the moment."

"What about Mom and Dad?"

"You know: Mom's in the kitchen; Dad's in the crapper. And you're here with me. And you're getting yourself ready. I can feel you dripping onto my legs! Don't tell me you don't want this."

"Just think what would happen if I got pregnant."

"We'd have a pinhead and name him Zippy."

"That's not funny. It would destroy our whole family."

"You *are* on the Pill."

"Sure. But..."

"Want me to go get a rubber? I have some. The problem is, they're in my gym bag, out in the car. Talk about wrecking the mood."

"*Something* should wreck your mood."

"You wouldn't be here when I returned."

"Correct. And I wouldn't let you leave to get one. That would be saying I'd agreed to this, and I haven't. How could I sit here and wait for you, then watch you put it on and still say no?"

"How can you sit here now and say no? Jesus, Mar, you've got to be one of the sexiest women who ever lived. And you're my baby." He reached once again inside her robe. She collapsed against him. "My baby."

"I have a boyfriend," she said flatly.

"No shit. Only one? D'ya think you'll talk to him about us? I'll bet he doesn't even know what you do for a living. Does he? I didn't think so. What did you tell him you were?"

Marci mumbles something.

“What?”

“Concierge at the Intercontinental.”

Jon laughs sardonically and tosses her back.

“Hey!” says Marci dejectedly.

Jon slides his Speedo trunks down as far as he is able with Marci sitting on him. Up springs a cock the proportions of which have Raymond asking himself about its lineage.

“No,” says Marci, more awestruck than repulsed. “No way. Jonny, this is bad. Please let me go. But God it’s, it’s, it’s...”

“It’s what? What is the ‘it’ you’re talking about?”

“It’s...the only word I have is ‘beautiful.’ It’s...your...your penis. It’s beautiful. But I won’t let you...I won’t...”

“Stand up a bit.” Marci says no, but she stands. “Step forward. More. Now ease yourself down. I’ve got it. My aim is true.” She says no three more times, but she does as she is told.

Jon adjusts his penis as if for precise trajectory, like the cannon on an armored car. He feels around with its tip for the point of entry and finds it. Marci gasps and halts.

“I can’t do this,” she says sternly, but her legs remain bent.

In a marvel of athleticism all his own, Jon flings his buttocks off the cushion, driving his penis up, nearly lifting Marci into the air. Weakened, apparently in a faint, she collapses, forcing Jon back down and his member deeply into herself as though it was pounded from below with a mallet.

“Jonny!”

“Ow,” Jon says. “And wow!”

“Sor—sorry.” Marci’s voice cracks. Her head floats back and forth above her shoulders like a toy balloon in a breeze.

“Jesus! I can’t believe it,” Jon says breathily. “Is this real?”

“No,” breathes Marci, “no.”

“Yes it is. My cock is up inside ‘The One and Only Margay.’ Can she feel it? Does she like it? I’m squeezing her breasts and I’m kissing her and I’m in her. Will she move for me? Move. Move. Move for me, like last night.”

“No,” she says, so he moves her, around and around, as if stirring something up inside her...which is exactly what he is doing, undoubtedly, knows Raymond.

Lost in the moment, having heard her stage name spoken, Marci seems to have gone to her job in her head, convinced that the limelights have been switched on, for when Jon ceases moving her, she starts moving herself to the beat of music only she perceives. She allows her hands to glide up luxuriatingly

from her belly across her breasts and into her long hair, where they stay as her spellbound churning continues.

"Jesus!—I'm almost..." Jon says. "Find...the best...place for you. Come. You come first. I need you to come first. And fast."

Eyelids fluttering, Marci leans forward a bit, resting her hands on Jon's shoulders, then forward more until her elbows hit his chest and forehead collides with forehead and tongues connect electrically.

Jon has once again taken control of her: With his fingers at her waist he raises her up slightly and then pulls her down. She utters an "Oh!" in three syllables and Jon asks her, "Did that hit the spot?"

Again. "Now," he says to her. Again. "Now." And again. "Now!"

"Oh!"

"Yes!"

"Wait, Jonny."

"No."

"You're going to make me...oh! You're making me...oh! You're...oh! Oh, God! Please..."

"I'm gonna—"

"Don't stop! Don't stop! Don't stop! I'm—"

"Coming!" The voice is not Jon's or Marci's. It is Ray's. He has turned away from the door and is shouting. "Coming, Francis. Down in a jiffy."

From within Jonathan's bedroom there comes a crash. Jon and Marci have disappeared from view. The crash is followed by groans, then frantic whispers.

"Kids?" Raymond calls out. "You in there? You okay? Watcha up to?" He waits, knowing what he would observe if he were to open Jon's door completely before giving his son and daughter time to pull themselves together. He chooses not to let them see him seeing this. He knocks, slowly swings the door back and peers in innocently. Marci is lying off to one side of the toppled chair, trying to wrap terry cloth around her buttocks without getting up. Jon is trapped under her, fighting with her for a piece of her robe. They both stop and wait. "Now there's a compromising position if I ever saw one," Ray says to them.

"We were messing around..." Jon offers from his place on the floor while rubbing the back of his head. "I was showing Marci some karate and things got out of hand."

"I'll say," says his father. "Get dressed, both of you, and join your mother and me outside. We're going to be eating in ten minutes."

Extremely well-done steaks had been dealt and warm potato salad had been scooped before Jonathan and Marcia Gaydos tramped single-file, barefoot in shorts and T-shirts, across the concrete patio slab toward their parents, limping and wincing through their exaggerated nonchalance. Raymond saw no comedy in this.

To my knowledge he did not speak to them that day about the incident, preferring to work at forgetting it. The “kids,” however, no doubt could feel that their relationship with him had soured. At first they attempted jovial blather about sports and politics; gradually, though, over that Saturday afternoon and evening they grew more resentful than regretful. They suspected Raymond knew all and was punishing them, torturing them, by withholding his wrath. Hanging over the two was a wait-till-your-father-gets-home black cloud, and they hated him for his ability to make them squirm indefinitely.

Perhaps for that reason, perhaps in conscious spite of her father’s wishes, Marci acquiesced readily to Jon’s Sunday proposition. This time they had the house, and themselves, to themselves. And that was not the last time: They planned a sexual union, a sexual reunion, for every holiday spent at their parents’ abode.

I did not remember this; I had to be told.

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By dinnertime I had returned to the foundation, as Jonathan, well aware that Sandra Martinson's dead body had likely been found by Housekeeping at the Days Inn. I undressed and dressed again, preparing myself for a rowdy evening out.

By midweek I had shifted thrice. Additional shifts followed rapidly, for I was determined to lose Marci and Jonny and Raymond in a crowd, a crowd of my own painstaking creation, body by body.

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Jonathan Samuel Gaydos to Diane Sharon Ostercamp.
 Diane Sharon Ostercamp to Charles Mark Draper.
 Charles Mark Draper to Paulette Rita Elam.
 Paulette Rita Elam to Thomas Brook Norcross.
 Thomas Brook Norcross to Lora Jane Papazian.
 Lora Jane Papazian to Clive David Bloodworth.
 Clive David Bloodworth to Jaclyn Ann Bingham.
 Jaclyn Ann Bingham to Thomas Garrard Shelton.
 Thomas Garrard Shelton to Alissa Irene Waller.
 Alissa Irene Waller to Stephen James Balkus.
 Stephen James Balkus to Constance Janet Hutton.
 Constance Janet Hutton to Craig Harold Sutt.
 Craig Harold Sutt to Donna Lee Chunn.
 Donna Lee Chunn to Robert William Godosian.
 Robert William Godosian to Janine Ruth Behler.
 Janine Ruth Behler to Cary Robert McAllister.
 Cary Robert McAllister to Ashley Ellen Fenberg.
 Ashley Ellen Fenberg to Kenji Korosawa.
 Kenji Korosawa to Annie Sukahara.
 Annie Sukahara to Edward Earl Zull.
 Edward Earl Zull to Gloria Lee Parry.
 Gloria Lee Parry to Arland Sain Reynolds.
 Arland Sain Reynolds to Lindsey Hanna Newman.
 Lindsey Hanna Newman to Ricardo Raul Diaz.
 Ricardo Raul Diaz to Quan Nu.
 Quan Nu to Robert Mack Bertrand.

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A ravishing, raven-haired wench—I did all right with that one—sat at the bar slipping, sipping slowly from a shot glass filled with Jack Daniel’s whiskey. A half-empty bottle of the beverage stood within easy reach. Playing on the jukebox was “The Battle of New Orleans.” What was it?—a jig?

“Would you like to dance?” I asked her from two seats down. “I’ll let you lead.”

“Clever but nonetheless immensely ineffective.” She refilled the glass.

Staring into the mirror behind the bar, the woman watched herself take another sip and watched Robert Mack Bertrand make needful faces.

I gazed at her without speaking—a staring contest like Jonathan Gaydos’s with Marci—for a full minute, amazed by her stylized, idealized, “Betty and Veronica” profile and saddened by the thickness of her eyeglass lenses.

She turned to me and spoke. I did not hear what she said, for I was thrown off balance by the frontal view. Through the huge deep circles her dark eyes resembled two black olives on a pair of plink patters.

“Would that be a correct assumption?”

“What?” I thought I had picked up an accent of some kind, and I was right.

“You believe I cannot see well, especially when intoxicated?” The woman’s sparkling red lips were pursed—whether in appraisal or displeasure I could not tell. “You are thinking I might not drive myself home safely.”

“No.”

“I must assure you, I do not drive, drunk or otherwise.” Eastern European. A wicked smile blossomed from her lips. “And I see all too well.” She allowed her lips to part. Teeth as white as peppermint Lifesavers showed from between them.

Try as I might, I could not bar my eyes from shifting rapidly up and down from her teeth to her glasses, to her lips, to her glasses, over her teeth to her breasts, and back once more to her godawful spectacles. “Friends?” I said at last. “Could you be mine? Would you be mine? My name is Bob...*Bob*.”

“Well, Bob-Bob—”

“Bob Bertrand. Bob Bertrand.” I stuck a finger into my sternum like Tarzan and chuckled at my own behavior. My first drink had yet to arrive.

“Bob Bertrand, Bob Bertrand. Pleased to meet you. If you like, we may be friends, as time permits. I am in Chicago a month now, and preparing to soon leave. My name is Ykatarena Andreevna Popov.”

She held out a delicate hand, but did not grasp mine with it; rather, she reached for a second shot glass and filled it to the brim. Her fingernails had been attended to by a true artisan—all of them but one: The nail of the thumb of the left hand, though painted, had been abraded to the quick as if by a grinding wheel.

“My colleagues address me as Kat,” she said.

I examined her as if she were a photograph, betting she could not follow my eyes. I took in her thighs, knees, shins, ankles, shoes. On her feet, a pair of Gucci “nails” like those Marci never got to wear. An ankle bracelet which did not bother me the way Marci’s—Nicole’s—had bothered Todd Bergau. “Okay,” I said.

“Who is the one in most need of help getting home?”

“What was it again?”

“Popov.”

“The other...the nick—”

“You may call me Kat.”

Looking down at her drink, she raised her left thumbnail to her teeth.

When she uncrossed her lovely legs and announced that she was going to parade them to Bicé for dinner *al fresco*, I could do nothing but follow.

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“Any medium-priced Beaujolais will do,” Popov said. “I am, in this order, an orphan, a Russian, a recovering atheist, an enthusiastic alcoholic, a Virgo, a trained clairvoyant working on a free-lance basis as a consultant to the United States Federal Bureau of Investigation.”

I could not conceal my doubt.

Out of her briefcase she drew a laminated clipping from the *Washington Post* dated November twenty-nine, nineteen-ninety-five. It told of activities involving clairvoyants in national crime investigations. I suggest you search by publication and by date, with “ESP” as keyword. I will stand by.

HERE.

ASSOCIATED PRESS

ANN ARBOR, MICH.—FOR MORE THAN 20 YEARS, THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT HAS SECRETLY USED PSYCHICS IN EFFORTS TO ASSIST DRUG-LAW ENFORCEMENT INVESTIGATIONS, THE FBI CONFIRMED MONDAY.

RESULTS OF THE EXTRASENSORY SURVEILLANCE OPERATIONS, BEARING THE CODE NAME “FALLEN STAR,” ARE TO DATE INCONCLUSIVE, BUT A NUMBER OF THE PSYCHICS ARE BEING ASKED TO GO ON WORKING OUT OF A PSYCHOLOGY LABORATORY AT THE UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN AT LEAST THROUGH THE FALL, SAID RESEARCHERS HERE WHO ARE EVALUATING THE PROGRAM FOR THE GOVERNMENT.

THE PROGRAM HAS COST THE U.S. \$10 MILLION TO DATE, SAID PROFESSOR RALPH PATTERSON OF THE UNIVERSITY, WHO IS PREPARING A CONCLUDING REPORT.

PATTERSON SAID THE PSYCHICS TOOK PART IN WHAT IS CALLED REMOTE VIEWING—EFFORTS TO COLLECT INFORMATION FROM A DISTANCE USING THEIR POWERS OF ESP ALONE.

Did you find it?

Replacing the clipping, Popov said to me, “I include always a copy of that with my résumé.”

I began contemplating the power I would have, given all I had been, if I were to acquire Kat Popov's claimed skills. To perceive the future before creating the present. To read the mind of each new acquaintance prior to a shift and thereby determine his or her intellectual and emotional suitability. To use extrasensory perception in seeking out specific character traits and viewpoints. Most significant: to never again fall into a trap like Todd Bergau's; to never again be caught off guard by a manipulative Mitch Yanahan. To reduce the element of surprise to elemental size. More than before I would be the master of my fate. Destiny?—mine to choreograph. No soggy paper to smack me in the face. I would become a deity—a myopic one, perhaps—but a deity nonetheless.

"Are you on a case now?"

"Yes, sadly. A long string of students left dead or dying in the vicinity of the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. The alleged 'Campus Vampire'? I sense a Chicago connection. And I sense it is within my reach."

My head snapped back though I had been hit on the nape of the neck with Susan Campanello's bat. "Uh, listen: I'm not feeling well, suddenly. I hope you will excuse me—"

Kat Popov patted the back of my hand, as if to say, "There, there." Instantaneously, her attitude went from empathy to something approximating restrained terror.

As if she had been assassinated in a drive-by with a silencer-fitted Uzi, she slumped down in her chair, her mouth hanging half open, her eyes half closed, her head tilted to one side. She removed her glasses. "Sit back down!" she commanded me, and in order to avoid a scene, I did, summoning the waiter with my free hand at the same time.

"Who are you?" She opened her eyes and blared, stared blindly toward mine. "*What* are you?" she said, more loudly. I insisted I did not understand her question; I had told her everything I could say about Bob Bertrand. She informed me that I was not Bob Bertrand. "You are less...and more. You are much more. *Unacceptably* more. *Inexplicably* more. I see in you others...many others. How can this be?" I shrugged, hoping to extricate my hand. She told me we would have to talk at length about this, and without a moment's hesitation.

When the check arrived, her grip tightened further. "Who are you?" she demanded. I stood. "Who *are* you?" The loudness was increasing, becoming publicly disruptive. "Who *are* you? Who *are* you? Who *are* you?" I ripped my wrist away.

She continued selling, yelling from the sidewalk in front of the restaurant, long after I had crossed the street at a full run.

I chanced one glance and one glance only backward as I loped off, in time to see her pantomime more than hear her speak—or, perhaps, *feel* her *emit*—the word “Marriott.”

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Using the phone at the foundation I called the Marriott Hotel on Michigan Avenue and asked for a guest named Popov, Y.

“WHY?” IS THE QUESTION. DID HE THINK SHE'D FIND HIM SOONER OR LATER NO MATTER WHAT? WHAT'S HIS MOTIVATION? RISKING A LOT FOR JUST ANOTHE

She was receptive to any invitation, so long as it meant she would be allowed to ask me questions and I would answer each one fully. I chose to meet her at her room.

Always maintaining physical contact, Popov explored the personalities she found in me as if turning the pages of a moldering family album. She knew something of nearly everyone I had met and/or been—in many cases, more than I knew myself. Some of these factoids she absorbed from me while we talked; others she “saw” without my help.

Here are a few updates, at the risk of boring you, in chronological order:

Hippie-chick Theodora Pappatheodoropoulos, ten months after my shift out of her body, had given birth in an alley to a daughter, whom she had wrapped in newspaper and left there. The child had died. Theodora had been tracked down and tried for manslaughter...and in a landmark case had been found by reason of hallucinogen-induced insanity to be not guilty.

Father Jerome O'Neill prior to his romp with Lori Griffin had been reprimanded by his bishop for gambling as well as gamboling and other behavior unbecoming the priesthood and had been threatened with transfer to a church whose congregation comprised mostly hayseed retirees. Diocese officials had kept to themselves their theory that O'Neill's killing at the Libertyville Holiday Inn had been in some way related to a bad debt, a bad date and a “hit” by organized crime.

Gene Campanello had hanged himself or had been hanged in his prison cell.

Annabelle Overbaugh had escaped no fewer than five times from the West Coast institution to which she had been sent by husband Philip. Quite likely, Popov told me after I inquired, it had been Annabelle whom Todd Bergau had

seen running naked through the streets of San Francisco, for this is what Annabelle above all else had seemed intent on doing each time she broke free.

"I wonder whatever happened to Clas Li," I said. Popov told me. Li had been arrested for indecent exposure late the evening after leaving Marci and Raymond, but with help from family and friends had been able to avoid further trouble with the law and had gone humbly back to work.

The airline pilot who had flown home to Chicago from Buenos Aires had reported for duty one day soon thereafter in an agitated state, had gone berserk in the cockpit after takeoff and had sent his aircraft tumbling end over end like a boomerang. The loss of life had remained the worst in O'Hare history.

Todd Bergau, after dinner with friend Jennifer Keck at Café Absinthe, had force-fed himself sufficient Rohypnol to bring down a mastodon and had never awakened. All his photographs were now the property of Miss Keck, whom Popov said she had interrogated. It had been from Jennifer that Popov had obtained several pictures of Marcia Lynne Gaydos, which had been helpful to her in her investigation. "Do you have them with you?" I asked her. She replied that she did not.

Marci in the early Nineties, before her interview with Overbaugh, had helped put herself through school by dancing professionally, at a roadside strip club frequented by truck drivers and other lonely men crossing the border between Illinois and Indiana. This, of course, except for the location, I had determined on my own. I did not know until Popov told me, however, that the lengthy legs and hot-pink, stiletto-heeled shoes used on expressway billboards in advertising the club were Marci's. Nor did I know that Marci had leased a one-room pied-à-terre south of Chicago to be nearer her place of work and her boyfriend at the time, until the club had expanded and opened a second facility closer to Evanston. It was at the southernmost club, Popov said, where Marci had gifted Jonathan Gaydos with a special performance on the eve of his birthday and the last few hundred miles of his interstate sales trip, and this had been the starting-off point for an incestuous relationship lasting two years. It was at the northernmost location where Marci had been discovered by a free-lance "talent scout" for *Playboy*.

Following the bending and stretching of facts into a tale of "accidental alcohol poisoning" in the late Mitch Yanahan's apartment, the magazine had generously helped to pay for Marci's second and final hospitalization, including rental of extravagant life-support systems. In return, its editors had felt justified in continuing to publish old photographs of her. Once a Playmate, always a Playmate, even when comatose.

Popov told me, when I asked, that she was not only knowledgeable of Marcia Lynne Gaydos's continued existence and present address but had vis-

ited recently with her there. She said the desired interview and “deposition” of a sort had not materialized. I told her I could guess why: vegetative. I was then astonished to learn from Popov that Marci had been fully ambulatory if silent at the time. I was further astonished to realize what a “near miss,” as the airlines phrase it, Popov’s investigation itself represented. She had been closing in on me with great speed.

“I’d like to see Marci again,” I said to her with a voice that warbled.

“No, you would not,” was her brusque reply.

Popov conjured up other names. Among them were some I had forgotten entirely. One stands out as an example of the ease with which things could have gone terribly wrong.

It so happens that back in the early Nineties—pre-Marci, pre-Overbaugh—I had naively shifted into and days later fortuitously shifted out of the body of one Victor Adam De la Garza. De la Garza was an embezzler and “con artist” whose likeness had been broadcast on the television show “America’s Most Wanted,” a program which I had never seen.

I had come through that and a few other near misses, unscathed and unaware of just how mere, of how near the misses had been.

Throughout, Kat Popov seemed too immersed in the ordeal of getting an intellectual hold on my talent to analyze the life and death of any one of my acquaintances. What perplexed her most was the sheer number of things she felt I had done and the time that would have been required to do them. She could not deal with the fact that the mind behind the physiognomy of Robert Mack Bertrand was decades older than “Bob-Bob” looked.

I answered honestly all her queries, and there were many. I did not attempt to explain my shifting beyond saying it “just does,” for I had no means of explanation. I did not admit to either rape or murder, nor did I deny indirect involvement.

“Do you ever think about Gordie?” she asked. Out of the blue, as it is said.

“I don’t know a Gordie.”

“Ed? Judy? These names put important places in you. Not put. Have. Are. You get me? Gordie most particularly.”

“I don’t know.”

“A *tot*, as you say. Speaking in full sentences.”

“Asking questions in a language all his own.”

“Yes.”

“Galalla googa splithie fub?” That meant, I think, ‘Where did my ball go?’ And I could tell.”

“As you say.”

“He was quick. He walked early; he talked early. He was bound to be somebody. Straight out of the oven he showed me that. ‘Hello, Mother,’ I thought I heard him say while he was hanging in the delivery room upside-down, ‘I rather believe I should like to become an architect.’”

“He called you ‘Mother’? Who is this child?”

“Mine. Was. Could have been. Wasn’t. I packed up and drove away. Left him with...”

“Nanna?”

“Nanna. Thank you. Ed’s mom. Is he okay?”

“He? Ed?”

“I don’t give a shit about Ed. Fuck him. Gordie.”

“Deceased. Thirty-five. Car hit by train. I hear beer cans clatter.”

I once was a mother who once had a son.

Gordie.

I see your fat legs as you crawl off to do some more damage. The backs of your knees look like someone has wrapped, as they say in Massachusetts (and I do not know why I know what they say in Massachusetts), *elastics* around them, they’re so fat. I feel you living in me, moving in me, those so wondrously tiny buds of fingers stroking the insides of me, petting my...ibby. The ibby from which all ibbies come.

I once had two children—a son and a daughter.

Tina and Trixie; no, E.J. and Tracy.

And then, as a father, a daughter and boy-child: Marci, sweet Marci, and Jon.

I once had a child—son or daughter—unknown and unborn.

I once was a daughter who slept with her father.

I once had a brother who wanted my child.

“Was he okay? Before that?”

“I feel that Gordie missed his mother greatly. She never accepted. Who was this, his mother? Do you know her?”

“Yes. I do. I did. I was. I want this to stop.”

Something began smoldering in Popov’s laboring eyes.

Now I know it to have been desire. It was a desire the likes of which I had never before known.

Near five in the morning, both of us having gone without sleep and having drunk enough vodka to fuel a race car, Popov asked how a kiss from someone

like myself would feel. I showed her and she trembled...as I often had when nearing a shift. She then asked how making love with someone like myself would feel. I told her I would take her body—literally—if I fucked her. I had announced this to no other acquaintance. “Sorry,” I added, “I should have found another way to put it.”

“Will I know all you know, and all I know too,” she said with a flash of teeth, “if I let myself be fucked by you?”

“Uh, well, doubtful,” I said.

What follows will not be a verbatim quote. I cannot believe I was able to string words together so well at the time.

“Although you, or the new composite being you and I become, will look like you do now,” I said in effect, “you won’t be the presently existing you inside anymore.”

I am not doing much better now than I did then.

“Mentally,” I told Popov, in essence, “from the moment of the shift onward, you’ll be mostly what I am. Parts of the intellectual you that you know now might remain in ‘our’ new body—the body you have now—but not all. There’d be some empty spots in need of filling in.”

I shook my head.

“*Da?*”

“I think I just made a mistake. But I couldn’t help it. Even for me, there’s a first time for everything. This is the first time I’ve been able to talk about shifting with anyone of the opposite sex on this level...on any level. It’s almost as though I hope we can be partners. Kindred spirits. I guess we would be partners after the shift. I haven’t thought about it like that until now. Having your...approval could make a big difference in the way ‘we’ would operate together. I’ve carried a lot of resentment around with me. Much unwillingness. Memories of having been forced into shifting. Maybe that feeling would go away if I had your, your blessing.”

Popov made the Sign of the Cross, in the Eastern way—a mirror-image of O’Neill’s version—then crossed it out. “My approval is another matter,” she said. “The ‘you’ I see now before me?—what will happen to you, to him...physically?”

“The more of my mind that makes the shift into your body, the less of it will remain in the body I have now. So the body of Bob Bertrand will likely be unable to function completely normally after the shift. It could die. I don’t think of this as a killing but as a death from—”

“Supernatural causes.”

“Yes. Good one.”

Popov looked to be thinking what I had been thinking: What an extraordinary pairing of skills this will be if everything works out as stated.

"Do you carry a weapon?" I inquired.

"Why do you ask me this?"

"You'd need something—just in case, in self-defense—if we were to actually go through with it. The Bertrand body could hold a grudge."

"A gun. I can see well enough to hit any target at close range."

"We couldn't have a shooting here."

"It is a quiet one."

"Still..."

"I have training in several martial arts."

"Uh-huh. I figured," I said. I had not. "Too noisy. I've got a razor knife. Clumsy but effective. You would—we would—have to be prepared to use it."

"I would be, if necessary—in, as you say, self-defense. Yet I would have qualms about dispatching your body if it were to lie there quietly."

"Fine. Let it be."

"And thereafter I would be Kat Popov...I would exist in the body of Kat Popov, with parts of your mind joining mine. For how long a time? Shifting with me would not be the end of the shifting—am I correct in saying this? It would go on and on. You would want a body better than this one—one capable of eyesight superior to these, to this, yes?"

"I don't know."

"Yes, you do. Would I have any say as to what types of bodies 'we' would acquire subsequently?"

"A vote?"

"Yes. Quite."

"Uh-huh. Your thoughts would be my thoughts. My hunch is I wouldn't be able to do anything you didn't want me to do."

"Would we argue?"

"No. Inner turmoil. There's been some, but nothing to keep me from progressing. Your opinions would count, but I can't picture us disagreeing. We'd be a *blend*."

"Are you feeling well?"

"Tipsy and—I've got to say it—really, really tired. Maybe we could meet again tomorrow—"

"Your health is good?"

"As far as I know. I don't go to doctors."

"I am unaware of any illness in you, but I seldom can 'see' it in others. I know myself, however, and, apart from the eyes, I am in excellent condition."

"That I can see."

"I do not believe a word you say, you know. No. I do not believe in your 'shifting.' I do not believe in the paranormal. I doubt sometimes the existence of the extrasensory abilities I purport to possess and with which I make a living. I am not believing in heaven and hell or in life after death, although I would like to. You have tricked me in some way."

"No."

"No matter. You might say I am calling your bluff. I want to see what cards you are holding. Why I cannot see them now makes me think my analytical skills have gone—I love this Western idiom—'out of whack.'"

I nodded off. When I next saw Ykatarena Andreevna Popov, she was standing before me unsteadily, unzipping her skirt.

"I am completely out of whack, Bob Bertrand. My moral code has flown the coop. I am most assuredly drunk at last. Forgive me, Lord, for I do not know what I do. The Lord forgives those who forgive themselves, yes? I forgive me. Do you? This out-of-whack body and mind of mine are yours for the taking," Popov said, now down to her underwear, "wherever and to whatever extent you want to and can and will take it." Bra flew off across the room, somehow finding its way to the arm of a lighted brass floor lamp, its shadow reaching out eerily, as in the painting by Edvard Munch. She lay down, knees up, and spread her legs widely apart. "So take."

I tried. I failed. We slept.

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We awoke.

“Do you feel no shame?” Kat Popov asked me, one hand softly exploring my cock and balls.

“Do I feel no shame?”

“Yes.”

“No. I mean, yes, I feel no shame.”

“You live in a body for a time, perhaps growing fond of that body, coming to value the ways that body does the things it does...”

“I have felt that almost every time.”

“And then you leave.”

“Yeah.”

“At the drop of a cap.”

“Hat. Yes.”

“And there is no missing after?”

“I’ve missed some.”

“How does it feel to do this—to throw a person away?”

“How often have you moved?”

“My residence?”

“Yes.”

“Too much to count.”

“Each time you do, you go to your bookshelf thinking you’ll pack all your books. But as the boxes of things to be moved and unpacked and put away at your next address start to reach the ceiling, you reconsider. About some of your books, you say to yourself, ‘I’ll never read this again. I read it once—that’s enough.’ One you open. You see that you made notes to yourself in the margins. You frown at some of them, smile proudly at others for the insight they reveal, scratch your head at some because you can’t figure out what you were thinking. You see this was a book that consumed you for a while. It was one of those you couldn’t put down.”

“Yes.”

"But now you put it down. You put it down deep into a trash bag, hiding it under coffee grounds and banana peels so you won't feel guilty when you return to the bag to dump in some more trash."

"But we are not talking books. We are talking persons."

"Have you ever been married?"

"Yes."

"How long?"

"Eight years."

"Happily?"

"At first."

"Did you make big plans? Big promises? Of course. No ring. Divorced?"

"Yes."

"Clean break? No going back? Haven't seen him since?"

"Correct. He is in Moscow, I believe."

"Now you know."

"But he lives. He is fine."

"Are you sure? Aren't you curious? Do you want to go find out? Maybe the divorce crushed him. Maybe he is a ruined man. An empty shell. You worked at becoming his biggest reason for living, and then you took off."

"He was strong individual. I doubt—"

"But you don't know. When you were contemplating that divorce, did you run to friends for guidance? 'Woe is me! What should I do? What should I do?'"

"Yes."

"Did they say, 'You have to do what's right for you?'"

"Yes. They were caring."

"Caring? 'If you must destroy someone else's life to be happy,' they told you, 'go ahead and destroy it.' Do you see? Assume he's dead. Do you feel no shame?"

"No."

"Bingo."

"But so many."

"Only a few hundred. A fire in a tenement building or the sinking of a cruise ship would put an end to more in seconds."

"That does not justify—"

"Look here: I'm not asking for your justification, or anybody else's. If I'm asking for anything—and I'm not, really—I'm asking for perspective. Everything is relative."

"So, relative to an earthquake in Mexico City you are not so bad."

“If you want to question why so many people die, question God. In our culture, we’re taught that God is all-powerful but all-good. He *loves* us. Those who believe put all their trust and faith in Him, long to be with Him. And when, in His Divine Providence, he sends a busload of six-year-olds off a cliff, we shrug and say, ‘Oh well, that’s just His way—he must have had a good reason.’ That happens every day. Hundreds and thousands and millions of people are dying right now at the hand of God. What’s one more?”

“Are you God?”

“I don’t think so. Not yet. Maybe someday.” I climbed atop her. “Maybe today.”

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Beverly Ellenwood.

Once more hung over and exhausted, I was lying in bed next to the body of a man and reaching for a pair of glasses. This time, though, I needed it...desperately. Without the glasses, I perceived only areas of light and dark—no detail. I became so frightened I began to shake, imagining I would not be able to find my spectacles in the one big smudge of the hotel room before the body of Robert Mack Bertrand began to fidget.

The knife. I remembered. It was there somewhere. So was a gun. Perhaps the martial-arts expertise.

But the glasses were my first priority.

I floundered about, bumping into tables and dressers, tripping over the legs of chairs, scraping my shins as I went, toddling, sniveling, sniveling like Gordie lost in Ed's factory.

Then I thought, Wait.

I felt for and sat down on a couch and slowed my breathing. I closed my nearly sightless eyes, relaxed my neck and let my mouth hang open.

And there they were: I "saw" my glasses, folded carefully and secreted out of harm's way behind a ceramic lamp at the side of the bed.

Was this "seeing" in a clairvoyant sense or something as commonplace as memory? I cannot say. But I can say that the pair of eyeglasses behind the lamp appeared to me as if through the one clear spot in a spud mattered, in a mud-spattered windshield.

I moved to them directly and put them on.

I was both overjoyed to find I had absorbed some if not all of Kat Popov's clairvoyance and irked by the need for her painfully heavy lenses.

Lifting the nose piece out of two deep wine-red depressions, I turned about in place, searching without searching for other things I might be able to home in on by virtue of extrasensory perception. In this way I discovered that Bob Bertrand's body was near death: I "saw" its heart failing. I "saw" that my handbag indeed held a pistol—a compact, chrome-plated, ivory-handled automatic. Inside my attaché case I found a computer diskette, which I "saw"

containing much data regarding the travels and atrocities of the Campus Vampire. I broke it in two.

With suitcase and briefcase strapped to their cart, making ready to embark, I went to the mirror to smooth my blouse and skirt, check for runs.

I wanted so badly to see my face without the glasses! I removed them and leaned in until my nose touched the surface. I leaned back.

I heard a woman's scream.

It was mine.

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Quickly as I could—handicapped by the poor eyesight and ungainly spectacles but empowered by the clairvoyance—I went, as it is said, trolling. My efforts to purge myself were impulsive, impetuous.

The first few individuals I selected were hardly adequate, but I forged ahead, yearning to use new personalities and experiences like plaster in entombing, as it were, the horrific hotel-room image.

Migrating from body to body, I gradually lost every iota of ESP. But the memory of that dreadful apparition—Kat Popov, with pus the color and thickness of anchovy paste oozing out from between her legs, puddling at her feet—remained.

I did not know then, but I know all too well now: Its cause stayed with me too.

You might say it was a shifter.

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Your term for it?—what was it?—”The outbreak of a parasitic microbe which has the potential to make Human Immunodeficiency Virus look like the mumps”? Do I come close? I read your comprehensive account of research into the physical condition of the Campus Vampire’s victims with great enthusiasm...and a growing sense of purpose, or, rather, a commitment to developing one.

For the first time I began to ponder my mortality. Up to the moment I perused your two-thousand-three story about signs of an always lethal venereal infection discovered in numerous late-Nineties-era University of Illinois students, I had assumed I would be able to live, if I took care, in any body of my choosing, for as long as I desired.

I believe I am correct when I say you quoted a physician and researcher from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in Atlanta as part of your story. I do not now recall her name. But I do remember her description of the malady as being “a cross between HIV, gonorrhea and syphilis, with a bit of ebola thrown in for good—or, I suppose, bad—measure.” The researcher continued on to say that it appeared to be a “cross”—a hybridization. “It is as if,” she concluded, “all sexually transmitted ailments known to man have joined forces and become a sort of ‘super venereal disease.’” It was either you or she who gave it the abbreviation by which it would be known for these past thirty-some years: UVD, with the “U” representing “Ultra.”

In your series of articles you perpetuated a falsehood, I feel I must tell you—that the CDC had traced the first case of UVD in the United States back to Randell Tarpley. In a rather ratiocentric, a rather racist fashion, if you ask me, health officials had informed the press that the virus had come to North America in the body of the basketball star following his mid-Eighties post-season tour of Africa. No one seemed to notice or care that the peoples of the Dark Continent were free of the disease before Tarpley arrived and remained so after he left. I had not visited that part of the world.

The CDC did not know and could not have known where and when the disease came into being, although the literature contained clues dating back to the nineteen-seventies and earlier.

The former U of I students, many of whom had lived into their late twenties though institutionalized for various psychological problems, had begun dying off rapidly, as a group—as *my* group—around the turn of the century. Then the clustered deaths had abruptly ceased, but other separated cases of UVD continued to be discovered, still largely concentrated in the Midwest. This fit my *modus operandi* like a latex condom.

Researchers believed, you stated, that use of a condom could help halt transmission of the UVD virus. Women I had been had not requested this; men I had been had not offered. In fact, I had consistently argued against the use of prophylactics, for they had seemed to impede performance. I decided after reading your articles that I would not begin using them. I would rather know I had UVD than live a life of uncertainty. Before the disease could overtake any one body, I would shift and start again in another.

That was possible, because, as you reported, the UVD virus was HIV-like in its need for time after being transmitted to a new human home to “rest,” to grow strong, to incubate.

Prior to its “hatching,” as it were, it would manifest its deadly presence not in the least: Its host would display no symptoms of serious illness, for the UVD bug in its period of gestation, so to speak, was able to assume the bio-chemical characteristics of any number of other microbes much more benign in nature. This, I guess, is why signs of it raised no concern at Careways MedServ while Marci Gaydos’s blood was extensively examined prior to the abortion—she was thought to have caught cold.

Only individuals already buying, already dying, or bodies already dead could be diagnosed correctly.

Once the incubation period of approximately five years was over, as you know, the virus would go on a rampage. In its wake, the cells of the infected organism would burst like bubbles. The body would seem to melt, as if being eaten by maggots in time-lapse photography.

This news gave me something I had never had before: It gave me a sense of rapidly passing time. It gave me a canvas of definite, unexpectedly small dimensions. Lines within which to stay, a meter and key within which to play. It gave me something with which you work every day.

It gave me deadlines.

CDC PHYSICIAN/RESEARCHER'S NAME NOT EASY TO FORGET:
CYNTHIA RUBBRIGHT. THE MINI-PLAGUE MADE HEADLINES ALL
AROUND THE WORLD. BUT ASIDE FROM ONE CASE REPORTED IN
ARGENTINA, IT DIDN'T SEEM TO LEAVE THE U.S.

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For the first time, there is only the future.

I must slow down. More shifts daily, weekly or monthly from here will leave a trackable trail. My movements are now predictable, I think. Which bars, which restaurants did the so-called victims frequent? Why do the dead seem so densely agglomerated geographically? I will find myself on the run. Like David Sciubba.

I must run, in a sense, in that I must begin to move around, to migrate, as difficult as migrating will be for a homebody like me. I can no longer continue to select partners from so small an area. I must, in effect, scatter. I must choose with care—specifically. I must make every count shift. Been there, done that—is that not how the saying goes? Shifting for shifting's sake is more than unappealing at the moment: It is dangerous.

The long term—things to come. What is next? What is left?

Continue the evolution, but in a measured, meaningful manner. Accomplish something not only personally fulfilling but great. I must be *someone*, not just anyone. I need a challenge.

I way as well shoot for the moon: President of the United States.

Ahh, the secrets that will be told to me, the mysteries solved.

Coups plotted and ferried out or coiled—carried out or foiled—careers bought and sold, dirty tricks on an international scale. Who killed the Kennedys? And whom did the Kennedys kill? What really happened at Roswell? How much, exactly, can our satellites see? The inner workings of the National Security Agency. Classified documents by the millions, for my eyes only. How mouth-watering!

Let me outline it for you. While I listen to myself, my disparate thoughts will coalesce.

He seems to be the type who would be open to an overture. I might have to become a harlot, rather, a Hollywood starlet. I have been that before, I think, and could do it again. (Yes. One critic referred to me then as having “the skill of a Streep in the shape of a Loren.” I had done what came naturally, having lived

for a week in the body of the screenplay's author.) Unfortunately, the President has been reduced by scandal to a timid, in a fuck—. To a timid, ineffectual *frump*.

Better: Bed a comely anchorwoman from Manhattan, then a state representative from Texas, the engaging spouse of a world-famous industrial magnate from Greater Boston, the multi-billionaire founder of the world's largest computer company in Silicon—not silicone—Valley, the smashing mogul of an international trading concern, a suave federal judge or something and finally a forty-ish former celebrity of who cares what kind—all this in preparation for the role of a lifetime. Into the goulash I will have to sprinkle a number of career politicians and an admiral or general, although I do not look forward to it. My sole remaining task will be to locate my candidate and court him.

Using all my wiles—intellectual as well as physical—I will be irrepressible. I will offer him bottomless moral support and expert advice. Over the months of our relationship, I will learn about him in all ways. I will mold myself into his perfect meat, his perfect mate and helpmeet. I will marry him, make love to him...and become him. Then I will fund with my fortune the most effective media campaign for President in American history.

Who could be more qualified? I've been an Anglo, an Asian, a woman, a man and a...pawn and a king—sing it, Frankie. I am a melting pot. I am the multitudes!

Estimated timeline: an ambitious two decades, including returns to the foundation for mail, for “walking-around” money, for rest and relaxation, and for photographic documentation.

I will try to find time to record my upcoming activities in a “datebook,” and store them in a place where you will be able to find them.

I feel the history of it in my bones. Do you not?

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In the early Twenties, Bartholomew Hardison Andrews, Democratic governor of the State of Washington, had struck up a personal friendship with Gary Alistair Paine, premier of British Columbia, and thus had been instrumental in negotiating acceptance of the Terms of Unification. With B.C. aboard, the two other theretofore recalcitrant provinces had moved forward with all due speed. Andrews was credited, along with then-United States President Zachary Lane Mullen and Canadian Prime Minister Timothy Chester Frost, for hammering the agreement home. He became a hero to all who saw more crow than pawn...more pro than con in the merger of nations.

He looked the type. A former pitcher for the Seattle Mariners, Andrews stood well over six feet tall and moved with an athlete's lithe agility.

His illustrious career on the field finished, he had taken voice lessons and gone into broadcasting as a network "color man." His rich baritone and incisive commentary had become an aural landmark on the American entertainment scene.

While in his thirties, he had been driven into politics by the death of his gorgeous young wife at the hands of a revolver-toting burglar. He had prayed that she would recover from her wounds and had been ignored.

He had declared himself a gubernatorial candidate and, unapologetically, proclaimed he had only one issue to discuss: the separation of church and state, and with it the taxing of all religious organizations.

Addressing voters, he had a tendency to hold his head low and peer up, as if analyzing a catcher's signals from under the brim of a cap. The effect was not one of shyness, coyness or insecurity but of cunning. No one shopped, topped Andrews in sheer competitive, lupine presence on the stump.

Pauline Karlsberg "Peekay" Lingenfelter was as brilliant and influential as she was winsome in an unexpected way.

CEO of a company which had brought together what had been called the wild word, the World Wide Web with the satellite transmission of radio, television and telephone, she had made interpersonal communication and all other forms of computerized data processing and transfer truly portable and mobile.

Suddenly, by oh-nine or thereabouts, there were no wires to be seen anywhere and workstations—all networked to the sky—were freed of having to “remember” anything on their own. Limited in miniaturization only by the size of human fingertips, computers became as easy to carry—to wear—as a pair of sunglasses and a deck of playing cards. (The now-passé but then-ground-breaking goggle-and-thimble text-entry system which many writers like yourself continue to employ—and which, I suppose, you are employing at this time—is one example of the many advances she championed.)

Peekay was not—or should not have tried to be—a public speaker. Given to mortifying malapropisms, spoonerisms, solecisms and catachresistic convolutions of syntax, she peppered her speech with such unique ferns, turns of phrase as, “I won’t have any more of this wringing of the heads,” “Either kit, shit or get out of the kitchen,” and “The planets are not in your court.” Once, “moral fibre” came out more closely resembling “marble foyer.” And she frequently transposed the beginning consonants of one word with those of one or more to follow, as you have heard me do to a teeth-grinding degree here. It is a burden much like a butter which I stare—you see? A burden like a stutter which I bear to this day. Exasperating. Holding it at bay is, moment by moment, exhausting.

Once, coming from her, for the briefest period of time, it was cute and effective, a conversation starter, an equalizer, an endearing tiny flaw in a being who otherwise would have been viewed as too perfect to be real. Picture the intimidating intellectualism of Microsoft’s Gil Bates emanating from the no less intimidating physical form of Hollywood’s Michelle Pfeiffer, circa early Nineties, mitigated by the charmingly vacant banter of George Burns’s Gracie Allen. What man of such a woman’s class would not have been swept away?

As Peekay Lingenfelter, I introduced myself to Bart Andrews during one of his thousand-dollar-a-plate banquets. I told him while we danced that his mere touch made my curls toe—that is how I said it. He laughed and asked me for reasons. “Don’t get me started,” I replied, “The end is listless.”

Our wedding was attended by a proverbial *Who’s Who* of pols, pundits, wags, wonks and whiz kids plus more than a few stars of stage and screen—all of whom had had the foresight to appreciate where Bart Andrews was going beyond the governorship.

Lingenfelter’s highly suspicious death during her honeymoon with Andrews would have been, under other circumstances, an obstacle to Andrews’s progress...perhaps an insurmountable one. But I—Peekay—had suggested Cuba, the nation’s fifty-second state, as our destination. This island, though quickly becoming re-Americanized, was still cloaked in dark green

mystery. We could lose ourselves in its verdant hills and vales, out of sight and out of reach of our bodyguards. That is exactly what we set out to do.

The twisted and lacerated body of Pauline Lingenfelter Andrews was found at the bottom of a reep, a deep ravine. Euphoric and drunk, she had pooh-poohed her husband's increasingly forlorn caws, calls of caution and gone off on her own to do some exploring. (That's the way the world heard the story.)

BECAUSE THAT'S HOW WE REPORTED IT, RIGHT-O?

The infusion of much of the superlative Lingenfelter intellect, as I had rigorously cultivated it, into the absorbent mind of Bart Andrews gave me—Andrews—a greatly broadened perspective. A “world view,” you might say. If only my speedy brain and tongue could have worked more effectively in tandem. One always seemed to be racing the other. They continue to do so, as you have seen and undoubtedly will continue to see right up till the end.

After making good on the church-and-state promise, active vestiges of the Andrews mentality prompted me to take up other “left wing” issues, enabling me to present myself as a leader whose scope was as far-reaching as it was all-embracing. My endorsement of fairness, justice and racial harmony on the one hand and expensive social programs on the other brought me both kudos and constructive criticism. Boldly, I announced my intent to run for President as a Progressive and used the “L” word openly. “Do you want a Liberal in the White House?” I would boom, “Do you want a Liberal in the White House?” I also used the “A” word: “Do you want an agnostic in the White House?” Almost never did anyone shout back anything but yes. In their heart of hearts, I believe, voters were ready to embrace an atheist, but I was insufficiently brave.

I began to be considered by one political analyst after another as the time for the man at the...the man for the job at the time, a shoo-in. Poll upon poll conducted by your news service and others showed me crushing my taciturn, seventy-ish Republican incumbent opponent, who had boasted of his support from the Religious Right and spoken out against, the ignoramus, unification with godless Canada.

I decided my campaign could afford to do something creative in selecting a running mate. I tapped one United States Senator Cheri Beth LaPatin (Democrat, Louisiana), a non-practicing Jewess born of *Québécois* parents in nineteen-eighty-eight, for the purpose of balancing the ticket geographically, for her tenuous but nevertheless significant prize...I wanted to say “ties”...to the Provinces, for her lilting Cajun patois and, in no way least, for her potential to assume, with my help, the Presidency.

I see much of myself in her.

I see her with hand on any book but the Bible, being sworn in as only the second woman to occupy the Oval Office through popular vote. To that end I

have announced to the nation that if elected I will serve only one term and then wholeheartedly support LaPatin's nomination in thirty-six. This plan has not yet won unanimous approval, but more voters are for it than against it. Women generally have cheered me on; open-minded men are looking forward to the country's "date" with Cheri. Some want her as President now. Patience! In two or three years you will have her.

This is a time of experimentation. The enlarged country—now twice the geographic size it was five years ago, feels irrepressibly proud, electrically charged with optimism. It is a time of coming together. It is a time of breaking down barriers and borders. It is a time of rethinking everything, including trust in God. We have accepted the concept of being on our own, in control of our, yes, destiny, as never seems to happen in a sectarian society. The shrug of the shoulders and the excuse for lack of personal responsibility encapsulated in the statement "God works in mysterious ways" are now viewed as blasphemous to our common cause.

Perhaps even the battle of the sexes is drawing to a close, a truce.

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Cheri LaPatin's ass—. Now there was a Freudian slip if I ever heard one. My point is that her physical appearance has been an asset to our campaign. The "ass" came from "asset," you know. One and the same.

Laugh lines framing her sensuous mouth are the sole indications of her true age: In all other ways, she appears to be thirty-five. Throughout her career in politics she has been aware of looking far younger than her years and therefore has striven to maintain an artificially "mature" posture. Only now is she relaxing, selecting designer suits comprising above-the-skirt knees and gyped, rather nipped-in jackets. Hair otherwise going gray is masterfully colored strawberry-blond. She changes hairdos so often that the electorate is always guessing what she and her stylist will come up with next. She is frequently seen at formal affairs wearing slinky gowns which show off her lusty—there's another one—her busty, leggy figure. For biographical programs she has been photographed taking part in a variety of water sports, displaying a physique that prompts men and women alike to say to themselves, "This is our next President?" or simply, "Yikes!" And, following my advice, she has made a somewhat revealing photograph I took of her the official portrait of her race for the second-highest office in the land. Head and shoulders—bare shoulders—upper quadrants of her full breasts on display, with a hint of fabric below the only indication that she is in any way clothed.

Had Marci lived, she would have looked in her forties very much like Cheri does now.

I WAS JUST GOING TO SAY THAT.

Senator LaPatin meets the press with an air of supreme *savoir faire*. Other politicians evading controversy would be called obfuscators; Cheri is a tease. She flirts with the men reporters, giggles like a ghoul—no, not at all like a ghoul. She giggles like a school girl with the women, and has one and all in her pocketbook. She disarms the most jaded journalists with her wit and sex appeal.

Am I not right? Are you not an adoring fan?

That is not to say she is superficial or devoid of conviction. Irrefutably a woman of substance, the senator has made a name for herself from

Sacramento to San Juan, from Saint John's to Juneau for standing up to anyone with whom she disagrees. She is a fighter. She is a Populist *non pareil*. Never far from her heart are the poor, the downtrodden, the abused. She has dedicated her life in federal government to encouraging voters in the States, accepting the civil and comparatively generous Canadians as their model, to finally begin wearing, sharing their wealth in a big way.

Her ethnicity is not an impediment, even though anti-Semitism has not been quashed one-third of the way into the twenty-first century. In fact, her non-Christian heritage has proved beneficial, for few of your Fourth Estate compatriots seem willing to brave accusations of stinking—well, that too—of stereotypical thinking and attack her plans for sweeping change as self-serving salesmanship.

Her upbringing by transplanted French Canadians has helped her ease tensions between the United States and Provinces and the fiercely, bullheadedly independent Republic of Québec. She has been known to switch from English to *français* in the middle of a speech unrelated to the Québec problem, with the sole purpose of making headlines in Montreal. She is a bilingual punster: “These are *nous* times,” she has written, N-O-U-S; “this is the *oui* decade,” O-U-I. If anyone will be able to bring Québec into the fold, it will be Cheri Beth LaPatin.

In short, she is as electable as she is delectable.

She is single, a widow; I am single, a widower. At the convention, held in Detroit-Windsor, we clenched hands overhead in victory; then we embraced warmly. It was the tug that hopped the news, as you remember.

Popular opinion has it that we, two so attractive individuals having so much in common philosophically, could not have fought the forces of nature and remained mere colleagues throughout the campaign; we most assuredly had become lovers. No, but we have been tempted. We promised each other we would vacation separately after the election, if the vote went in our favor, to avoid the appearance of immorality; were we to lose, we would owe the public no such charade.

Your coworkers have had a heyday exploring the cultural, constitutional and national-security ramifications of what seems to be the destined matrimonial union of President and Vice President.

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Nothing compliments, accentuates and amplifies the curves of a curvaceous woman more so than lamé, which is precisely what Cheri LaPatin wore on the night of our inaugural balls. She seemed to have been fashioned from mercury as she flowed into the spotlight on stage after stage to express her gratitude, always clutching my hand.

A war of wills had been fought between my staff and the Secret Service, for I had stated adamantly that I would attend no celebratory function without Cheri Beth; our chaperones in dark glasses had argued that “Cleats” and “Bonbon” (their code names for us) should remain apart for the sake of the nation’s continued well-being.

Our speeches of thanks always included a special tribute to the voters of Ontario, who had put us over the top, as they say, at the convention. Then an orchestra would begin to play and the audience would send up a chant of “Dance, dance, dance!” Splendidly. A fox-trot, a waltz, a crowd-pleasing jitter-bug. And to enthusiastic applause and leering, cheering, a lingering kiss.

Early the next day, giddy, we sighed and laughed and hugged through a limousine ride home...to our new, unbelievable, separate, lonely beds. This seemed wrong to her, and she told me so.

Not tonight, Cheri.

Today my numbers, as the pollsters put it, are off the chart. I have yet to deliver my State of the New Union address, but my speech writers assure me it will be extremely well-received if I can...*stick*...to the...*script*.

IT WAS A DOOZY, REMEMBER? SO MUCH APPLAUSE ON POLICY FROM BOTH SIDES OF THE AISLE I THOUGHT HE'D NEVER GET TO FINISH. THERE WAS THE YOGI BERRA-LIKE GOOF, “THE FUTURE IS BRIGHTER THAN IT'S BEEN IN THE PAST,” WHICH SOME OF US CYNICS ALLEGED HAD BEEN INSERTED ON PURPOSE. AND THEN THERE WAS ONE WE FELT SURE HAD NOT BEEN INTENDED: “YOU FINALLY HAVE YOUR WHITE MAN...YOUR LIBERAL MAN IN THE WHITE HOUSE.” BUT WHEN ANDREWS STOPPED AND EXPLAINED, “I ALWAYS SEEM TO GET

THE HORSE BEFORE THE CART,” HE WAS JOVIALY FORGIVEN FOR
WHAT MIGHT HAVE BEEN A NASTY GAFFE.

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They gather around, pressing against a metal-mesh fence, reaching out, desirous of my touch. I shake hands all along the expansive receiving line; my followers give me their names, bowing slightly in respect, hopeful of recognition.

Within seconds the fence sprouts barbs—razor wire—and the attitude of the mob becomes menacing. Once in contact with me, they twist and pull. Hooks and fingers dig at me, dig into me, ripping and tearing my clothing, then my flesh.

They carry bloody pieces of me away, palmed in both cups, as a child would conceal and protect a frog. Then they stop, bring their hands to their mouth and begin to chew.

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I do not know I have filled my personal, portable septic tank with bile until I smell it. I smell it now, but I will not press the buzzer. I can stare, bear the stench until I am done with this.

With your connections, you might already have come to know that I am not suffering from a hernia complicated by a mild gas of, case of gastroenteritis. No, it is UVD which is doing me in, devouring me alive—ahead of schedule, so to speak, by many months.

The virus, appropriately enough, first migrates *en masse* to and attacks the genitals, eating them away. Next it invades the large intestine and works on up. Although my doctors have been hesitant to describe in full what has happened to me, I know: The unrecognizable contents of my entire lower abdomen have been spooned out like the pump of a, the pulp of a pumpkin being readied for Halloween.

Now, the field of medicine has come far over the past couple of decades. Both cancer and AIDS have gone the way of smallpox. But I do not suffer from either. A lot has been accomplished in recent years with neuro-cellular regeneration (former paraplegics are winning marathons) but that does not apply to me. In the cavity where once existed urinary and digestive tracts there are now a few kilograms of synthetic tissue, not dead and not alive, placed there for purely cosmetic reasons: to give me and my visitors a sense that my body remains for the post mart intact.

Poetic justice, you say. Do I hear laughter? Go ahead—I think it rather comic, too.

Hah!

HAH! HA, HA, HA.

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Do I have any regrets? Well, if you are wondering whether my regrets amount to remorse, stop. I have no remorse. The way I view it, I brought newness and adventure into the lives of my complacent acquaintances. Think what I was able to do to speed the evolution of Jerome O'Neill, Raymond Gaydos and all the others. I fulfilled their fantasies, made their sexual dreams come true. They went out into that velvety darkness not with a whimper, as one can spend a lifetime in fear one might, but a bang. Would you not choose over all other possible deaths to die between the legs of a lover such as Cheri Beth LaPatin, for example, your lips on her lips, your tongue in her mouth, your hands brawling over her crests, your penis begging to come in and in return being begged to do just that?

You would have ceased being what you had been, but you would have become something different—quite likely something better. Today some part of you would live inside me, experiencing what I experience, snug as a rug, snug as a bug in a rug.

I do have regrets.

I regret that I did not do more than touch thighs with Her Royal Highness, Princess of Wales. The adulation! But I had decided that shifting into—actually, it would have been the shifting out of—one so high-profile would have been more trouble than it was worth, even with millions of pounds sterling to finance a worldwide cover-up. Had I been able to draw upon Kat Popov-like clairvoyance and “see” Diana dying young, I might not have let her entourage block a rendezvous. Oh well, I take with me memories of Philip Overbaugh’s brief but almost-scandalously close waltz with her in Chicago and snippets of a funny and flirtatious cheek-to-cheek conversation. The world’s fairy princess found me attractive enough to wonder aloud—in a murmur of exaggerated despair—what she could possibly do about it given her “ratha” tight “shed-u-al.” For many, that would be more than sufficient, and it is sufficient for me.

I regret I did not see more of the world: My fear of getting injured and being scarred restricted me, perhaps unnecessarily. Yet, had I traveled, the hundreds of cases of UVD would have been wed, spread so widely around the world that they might not have been viewed collectively by health officials as in some ray,

some way related. And then, maybe, they would have gone unreported by the prop, the popular press. You would have never written your story about UVD, and I would have remained unaware of the threat. I might have stayed in the body of Marci Gaydos too long—long enough for disease to feast on it—and my existence would have come to an end without fanfare three decades past. My talk with you today would never have occurred. No, on second thought, I do not regret staying so close to home.

I do regret not doing more for Stogy, without question. I can still help his only child, who has made something of himself, despite his disadvantaged upbringing. Admirable. It could not have been easy. And he took good care of his dad for many years—on a reporter's salary, which I mow, which I know to be meager.

We did bump into each other, you and I—quite literally—about thirty-five years ago, as you might recall. At the hospice. I arriving, you departing, we collided in a way which could have been the start of something big if each of us had not been quite so preoccupied. I did not realize it was you until much later. I regret not topping to stalk, stopping to talk with you that day. I wish I had invited you on that day or on any other day to meet with me at the foundation, only to converse. You and I—you and Marci—would have hit it off, as it is said. I might have decided to tell you my fail, my tale in full, taken you into my confidence, made you my new Stogy. I needed someone to talk to then more than I had ever before, and I believe you would have listened, your tape recorder spinning, dollar signs spinning—rightfully so!—in your head. Also spinning in your head most certainly would have been images of yourself and Marci between the sheets. But I would not have involved you in a shift. Please understand: I am not saying you were—are—without potential.

Have you aged well? I want to see you again. Who would you like me to be for you on that occasion? Peekay? I think so. Good choice.

I am sorry I allowed physical appearance to influence my selections so greatly. Yet in the end I cannot say I shortchanged myself in this way. I accumulated a steady whorehouse, a heady storehouse—good God Almighty!—of wisdom and experience the likes of which the world had not seen. But I would have accumulated more had I been wore, more willing than I was to shift into the brainy but unbeautiful.

Among those I wish I could have met: the Dalai Lama. Someone who should know about shifting, yes?

Rick Mattingly, Patty's cousin. I would like to know he died instantly of gunshot wounds in combat rather than slowly of a broken heart, alone. His is the only heart that ever mattered to me. Perhaps Patty's body was never found, and therefore perhaps Rick grew old—kept himself alive—hoping she would

one day return to him. Perhaps she did, her IQ reduced by no more than a pew, a few points. Perhaps they lived happily for five or so years after that as man and wife, sharing a surname, bringing into the world a child uninfected, a child capable of shifting. My child.

I can dream.

If I could live my life over...but I have, over and over and over. Birth, death, rebirth. Tedious, actually. All things must pass. Time to bust, to become dust and blow away. I am looking forward to it.

If lack of appetite can be equated with contentment, then I am content. To live until we not only stop trying to fend off death but accept death, crave its visit, yearn for it as an infant yearns for the breast of its Marci—I mean its mother—perhaps that alone is goal enough for the human being. To last long enough to reach that point and last not an instant longer. If so, I have reached life's goal. I wish the same for you. May you live until death presents a pleasant change of pace.

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A narrow street in shadow, overhung with maturing trees. A compact house. Pale blue, like my eyes. A horse-drawn milk truck clops by.

A mailbox. Inside it, a copy of *Sir!*, a copy of *Vogue* and a letter. A stamp from a foreign land. Addressed to Patricia L. Mattingly.

I struggle to read it. Although the printing is draftsmanlike and the language is English, the characters do not form words I can recognize. Nevertheless, I understand this to be a letter of love. It is from Rick. He is coming home. He wants to me, to see me. He wants to miss, to kiss me, hug me, make love with me.

I know I am dreaming, but that realization in no way unwraps, undermines my rapture.

“Legs over my shoulders,” Rick says. In this way he knows he can push his penis in to its full length, to its root, with nothing at all left over. Patty’s expression changes from inviting, anxious expectation to agape, aghast astonishment as her partner uses a hand to guide his erection into position and smoothly inside.

Their orgasms are simultaneously, transformingly intense.

Rick rises up from the creep—the bed—and creeps over to a mirror. He is instantaneously transfixed by what he sees before him. It is the woman’s body—now his—in all its unadorned magnificence. He turns, taking himself in from every angle. His breasts are lovely things. He runs his nipple tips, his fingertips around their ripples, their nipples and feels pleasure ripple up from his crotch. For a moment Rick considers a thorough exploration of the always elusive miniature world called Clitoris. Instead he takes time enough only to run his fiddle, rather his middle finger between the folds of skin concealing it, to get an idea. It must be right about...

Patty joins Rick and gazes upon both her partner and herself. Pride displaces disbelief: The workouts have paid off; her body bulges with muscle. It is hard everywhere she touches. She clutches her penis, feels blood coursing into it with a discernible beat, blowing it up, making it point to the two o’ clock mark.

Rick observes. He stares up into his partner's eyes and whispers: "I want it."

"Sorry," Patty whispers back, "it's mine now."

"In me. I want you in here."

Patty complies.

Hours later, one of them says, "I've lost track," wiping perspiration away from a forehead. "How many times?"

"It doesn't—"

"Odd or even?"

"What?"

"Which of us is which? Am I me again or am I you?"

The other replies, "I don't know anymore. Does it matter so long as we're *us*?"

Of course that was another dream. There will be no such tidy *dénouement*, no such nice right tapping up of this package with a pretty bow, no grand finale...unless you supply it, and I hope you will.

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That is all.

Over and out.

Ashes to ashes.

Do with this what you want.

I am really very tired.

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Is anybody out there? Want to hear my story?

I had one chum and one chum only, the size and shape of a hunting town's hound's turd. One day stick silk stockings and a slick silk ordered him to enlist in the navy. Orgasm without penetration tried and tried. I never got this garbage. But comb home cooking? She flapped woefully scream cream and sugar up and down along my roller coaster. He cried out in the dewy weeds the Body of Christ. Her slippery beek beckoning penis took in the wafer and held a solid performance after another and then straight home. Gaudy, dangly earrings don't protect anything, don't keep anything warm. One after another career girl waiting for animals. Know what I mean? *Omne ignotum pro magnifico*. Scared. Damage? We have work to do. Rest in peace. Five-foot seven. Eleven ankles—of a thoroughbred. A telltale sign of elective overbite, which I find enticing. Negroid waist. You will not believe it. Uncle Walt, population thick six thousand. Please shake it make it short. Some things sly die more slowly. I should not be hasping clasping my hands to tide slide my tongue with your jumbo jam-packed helium sticking out like cotton candy without the twelve ways. Whipped up and puffed up guys walking around yelling jeepers. Then she took the handle of a bash bath brush and said loud enough for me to hear I don't have a mustache. Half an inch of pancakes. Two-inch miniskirt. I'm repellent. But I digress. I've put lovey-dovey on hold. Don't touch me. What did I tell you? These big mockers knockers of mine are going downtown. First, though, I have to eat hundred-peso notes as though they were. I flirt at them with everything we are to discuss. But how does it feel to live without *fasudo fudo*. And believe it or not, as falls Wichita, so falls Wichita Falls.

As Falls Wichita, So Falls Wichita Falls.

As Falls Wichita, So Falls Wichita Falls.

Okie-dokie.

As Falls Wichita, So Falls Wichita Falls.

As Falls Wichita, So Falls Wichita Falls.

Preposterous.

Hooters and knockers and woofers and clits and cunts and twats and dicks
and rods and cocks and boners and hand jobs and blowjobs...and the smell.
And the smell. The smell.

Snip, snip, snip.

What a gimmick.

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THAT'S IT?

NOPE—NOT SO FAST. UGH! HE JUST COUGHED UP SOMETHING REALLY GROSS, LIKE ANCHOVY PASTE. THE LONG GOOD-BYE. TALKING AGAIN.

Velvety.
Darkness.
Proto.
Proto nova.
No.
Protozoa.
Supernova.
Fluids of yellow, magenta, cyan.
Particles spin and loop.
Pube, pube, tubular passageways.
Faces.
Names.
Too many.
Go away.

Cheri?
Mon Cheri?
Marci?
Is that you?
Who's there? Let me see. Show yourself. No games—I'm...
Patty?
Rick?
Stogy?
Walt? Walt Ratliff?
Hey, you stupid...
Will you be my Valentine?

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[SYSTEM AUTO TIMEOUT—11/20/33 15:51 CST]

[COMMUNICATION RESUMES—11/20/33 17:16 CST]

I'M BACK. SORRY ABOUT THAT DEAD AIR.

SO THERE YOU HAVE IT, GREG, BUDDY.

GUESS I CAN TURN OFF THE SMALL CAPS.

It's over and done. He's gone. No asshole, no prick. (I hope to go to my maker with people saying the same of me.)

My hunch is while you and I were doing this, LaPatin was being rushed back to Washington from Ottawa and has already taken the oath and the spin doctors have already started their spinning. You probably know more about that than I do by now.

You can consider this my resignation. I know, so close to retirement...

It's the story of a lifetime. What could I ever do to top this? Whatever it would take, I don't have in me.

The most powerful man on earth, and the most popular, just made a confession of mass murder and mayhem so unbelievable my sense of reality and trust in human nature and morality and everything else is in tatters. To make matters worse for me, this was a guy—or being—who had been the only real friend my dad ever had. Sent him money and stuff, you know? Helped me pay the bills when Dad got sick.

I and I alone saw Andrews, all by himself in his suite, switch off his micro-cam, ending the video feed. Maybe he thought he had shut down the audio as well. I don't know.

I kept listening. Minutes passed with nothing but wheezing from him.

I decided to take a chance—what did I have to lose? I turned up the sound on my raycharles and kept the balance so the Andrews audio went into only the left-side ear piece. I used the right-side screen and speaker to look up and dial the Gloomis number. Only an hour before closing. Nervously, I adjusted and readjusted my cam.

I went through the whole getting-bumped-up-the-stairs shtick, tapping my foot, introducing myself to one after another gum-chewing bimbo with increasingly better bazooms. Finally I reached a Courtney Elise Appleton, the big maraschino. Best knockers of the bunch. Made of ice, though. I said, "This is Walter Ratliff"—my dad's name. She said, "Yes?" I told her, as I had told all the others, I wanted to

talk to someone about the Patricia Lorraine Mattingly Memorial Foundation. I was instructed to continue. I began, feeling pretty ridiculous, “*Hey you stupid shit...*” She didn’t say anything, so I added, “*are you a Turtle?*”

The right side of my goggles went transparent.

What had I missed? I really thought Andrews had been trying to tell me the password, you know? Think about how many times he repeated that “nonsensical,” “10-syllable” sentence in his transmission. It was as though he was trying to pound it into me—like the heel of one of those “nail” shoes.

I called Gloomis again. I reached Appleton again, and I said, “It’s really Fred—*Fred* Ratliff. Back at ya.” Extending one finger at a time from my fists as I spoke, I said to her, “*You bet your sweet ass I am, you piss face.*”

“I have an FBI tap on this line, Mr. Ratliff, and a recorder. Your image and voiceprint have been on file with the bureau since the first instant of your first call. This is your second call with an incorrect password. One more bad guess from any phone in the world will result in your inevitable apprehension for attempted larceny. So what will it be?”

I switched off the right channel.

Yeah, OK. Wasn’t supposed to happen. My blood began to boil.

I heard a low moan. I raised the volume. I moved the balance to the middle and turned it up some more. What I heard was Andrews’s death rattle.

I lost it. I yelled at him—I yelled at the dead guy, Bartholomew Hardison Andrews, President of the USPA, the guy I thought was going to open those big mahogany doors for me, like in a payback for my dad’s friendship or something, but who didn’t, who let it slip his mind or didn’t get around to it—“So, whoop-de-do, you motherfucking cocksucker! May you roast in hell.”

I threw off the goggles and thimbles and got up. I paced. I fixed a drink.

I reviewed my notes. I did a keyword search. I made long lists of 10-syllable phrases I thought might prove successful. Talk about nonsensical! I thought of Theodora Poppadoopadopalop, clueless; of miss Marci, standing in front of the keypad with only one more strike to go before being called “out.”

Shikata-ga-nai, hey?

Christ! If the Gloomis babe wants it in French, *j’ai un probleme*. Or Latin. “*Omne ignotum pro magnifico*,” he had said. I looked it up. What?—we place too much importance on the unknown? The unknown *is* important, maybe the most important thing in life. It’s all we’ve got to work with, right? Number of syllables correct. But I wasn’t prepared to take a chance.

I worked with the unknown until my brains started coming out my ears. I thought about his tendency to move letters and whole syllables around: “You sweet your bet...” and that kind of thing. I went back to the anagram idea. But which name? Marcia Lynne Gaydos, the real centerpiece of this yarn: congen-

ial army days, many godly canaries, coy layman readings. There were dozens more. And dozens for Patricia Lorraine Mattingly, too. But nothing I came up with had ten syllables. Nothing I tried seemed worth another bone-chilling trek to the snow-capped peaks of Appleton.

Ajaya Monique Dufauchard. No anagrams. Did that mean something? Doubtful. Heyyoustupidshitareyouaturtle. Nothing—no anagrams. A red her-ring? Doubtful. I didn't think he was trying to trick me, I really didn't. He meant to reveal all—he wanted to—but he simply ran out of time.

Back to the top. Start over.

Hey.

Stone-faced Courtney Elise was obviously not pleased to find my mug on her screen again, but she didn't disconnect. I guess her company's agreement with the foundation made her have to accept a third try from any one caller, no matter what kind of goofball he or she appeared to be.

"Howdy," I said to her you-know-whats, outstanding—pun most definitely intended—in all their 3-D glory. "Frederick Strickland Ratliff." She took a big breath and held it. Oh, my goodness. "Nice tits you got going there—keep it up."

Omagawd! I went to my fingers.

Courtney-poo, rapidly developing a mad crush on me, I could see, remained in view. She hadn't checked that off as a guess...yet.

"Is that what you called to say? I must inform you: What you are viewing is a previously recorded representation of myself. A realistic one, but..."

Sure, sure, sure. Hasn't been embellished an itsy-bitsy bit? What do you think, Todd? Cleaned up some? Bisected and stretched?

"...a recording. You are speaking to an interactive hologram, Mr. Ratliff. Therefore, comments such as the one you just made will not bring you closer to your goal. Nothing other than the password at this point—"

"Shut up, bitch," I said to the thing. "Here it is. Start counting now."

Oh, shit!

Fake Courtney didn't check that off, either. The program allowed some amount of banter, oddly enough.

"Ready? This is the password, coming up, right here," I said.

And then I said it.

I spoke the password. I did it. I got it right.

Any guesses?

This is what I said:

"Happy anniversary, Cosmic Sponge."

Count 'em, man, count 'em.

—F.