

WHAT IS VISIBLE

I was so fortunate to hear of the child [Laura Bridgman], and immediately hastened to Hanover to see her...The parents were easily induced to consent to her coming to Boston, and [soon] they brought her to the Institution.

--Dr. Samuel Gridley Howe,
quoted in Charles Dickens,
American Notes, 1842

Miss Wight says that Julia will be here any minute, and that I must dress to see her. Julia has returned from New York today a month early, the cook told Miss Wight, *and without Doctor*. I wish that I could have a cameo of Doctor's head to wear as a brooch on the lace collar of my black day dress, above my silver cross. No, no, to wear on all my collars, on all my dresses, every day. And then at night, alone in my bed in my room, I would push the pin of the brooch right through the skin in the hollow of my neck so that his dear face would stay with me the whole night long and I could run my fingers over his raised likeness and never sleep. My companion, Miss Wight, who lives with me here at The Institute, says they almost never make cameos of men, but I don't understand why not. Everyone says that Doctor is the handsomest man in Boston—who would not want him as an ornament? I would carve the cameo myself if I could procure the ivory and a good small knife, and then I might not suffer as unbearably when he's away—six months this time!

I know his features as well as my own: the strong, wide brow and bushy eyebrows; the long prow of his nose between the deep-set eyes; the bristly fur of mustache half covering his upper lip, and the plump lower lip that I have traced with my finger a thousand times, but never met with mine. And his beard, Doctor's beard—I would spend an hour curling each hair with my blade all the way up to the prominent ridge of his cheekbones. Maybe I could get a large block of ivory with the money I've saved from my sewing and crochet work people buy on Exhibition Days (oh, look: handkerchiefs embroidered by Laura Bridgman, the deaf, mute, blind girl--we *must* buy a whole set!) and carve a life-size cameo of Doctor's head, large enough to sleep beside me on my pillow. It would be cold to the touch, but it would be something.

Before I work the thick masses of curls for his hair, I might please him with my learning of phrenology—his decade-old passion—by rendering expertly each bump on his skull. Ah, there it is: the well-developed veneration bump right at the top between firmness and benevolence, evidencing the faculties of his divine creative spirit and his quest for the sublime. I round the twin bumps of ideality at his temples that display the disposition towards perfection, towards beauty and refinement in all things, and then notch the bulge of individuality between his eyebrows that sets them so far apart and him so far apart from lesser men. And the affection bump situated on the upper back of his

head, so prodigious that the famous phrenologist, Dr. Combe, cautioned him at thirty-five that he must find an appropriate object on which to indulge its vast benefits—dare I carve that affection with my little knife?

If I had been twenty as I am now, I think Doctor might have chosen me instead of Julia. Dr. Gallaudet and Mr. Clerc at the Hartford Asylum for the Deaf, both married their students, and they were just silly deaf girls—nothing like me, the star pupil of Dr. Samuel Gridley Howe, my own dear Doctor, of the world-famous Perkins Institute for the Blind, taught to read with Doctor's miraculous raised-letter books and to write with the finger alphabet (Doctor and I do not believe in Sign). I have been visited by thousands, including Mr. Charles Darwin, and given an entire chapter in Mr. Dickens' "American Notes." Mr. Dickens says that I am the second wonder of North America; apparently, only the roar of Niagara Falls is more impressive than what I have achieved in silence. But I was only thirteen when Doctor's affection bump forced him to choose an object, and look who he chose: Julia Ward, known for being in possession of all five senses and then some, and as the composer of "The Battle Hymn of the Republic," an anthem that I understand from Miss Wight and others might be a fitting accompaniment for their married life! And anyone who has eyes to see confirms that Julia has not lost the weight from her last child, and that the fabled blonde locks are now tricked out with gray. Gossip flies into my hands as easily as it does into the ears of others, and lands buzzing on my palm like flies.

Miss Wight shakes my arm. "Hurry," she spells into my palm. "Julia is waiting for you."

I would like to make her wait, but I am too anxious for news of Doctor. I tap my way exactly thirty-eight lady's steps down the corridor, then a sharp right, and twelve more through the foyer to the public room. My movements are very precise. I enter the room slowly, my head held so high that my bun almost slides down the back of my head, and am about to take the twenty-eight steps from the door to my visiting chair when the air directly in front of me is suddenly and violently disturbed. Julia has rushed me; she hugs me against her bosom. Though she has three children of her own, I think she fancies herself as some sort of mother to me—does she not realize how I have blossomed and flourished so long and so far without my own mother, with only Doctor to meet my needs? And Miss Wight, a little, I suppose. I pull away from Julia quickly, holding her hand in mine, but at a full arm's-length. Thank God she is no longer staying here at Perkins often, now that she is off waging campaigns with the suffragists and the abolitionists. I gather my skirts and settle into my chair by the hearth, angling it just so to catch the last of the November afternoon's warmth on my back.

"How was your journey?" I spell into her hand, but before she can switch hands with me, I push on. "How is Doctor? When does he arrive?"

Julia writes into my hand with her stubby fingers not half the length of mine a few words about her trip. The fingers feel thicker than last visit, and it is curious to me that her palms always sport light calluses; even Miss Wight, a lady of much lesser station, has no calluses. Julia spells as slowly as my uneducated visitors from the country, and it is clear she should stick to writing only songs because it would take her twenty years to write a book at this slug's pace.

And then finally, in answer to my question: "Doctor Howe will be arriving a week from tomorrow."

"Only a week, not a month?" I quiz her palm, thrilled that I might touch him so soon but anxious that I have so little time to prepare.

Yes, a week tomorrow, she assures me, and now she is scratching on about her projects. I am Doctor's pet, and so she must have her own: repressed women and slaves. I feel a simultaneous affinity and disgust for both.

"Laura, you should speak out on these important humanist topics on Exhibition Days; you have a grand platform from which to share your views. You can write on your chalkboard for the crowds who come to see you, and influence people from all over the world."

"On Exhibition Days," I scribble as fast as I can, knowing she can't keep up and will only understand the half of it, "Doctor likes for me to demonstrate my knowledge of geography,—SAUSAGE—reading comprehension—FINGERS—, and to show my penmanship, needlework, and ability to recognize people by their hands."

"But, L," she spells now, using only an "L" for "Laura" because either she is lazy or mistakenly believes that I must hold her in affection (only Doctor and Miss Wight do I *allow* to diminute me that way), "surely you care that women and Negroes should be free."

"I AM NOT FREE," I write, pushing down so hard that my nails press into her palm. "I am not free to even BE a woman like you."

"Of course you are a woman," Julia's fingers press equally hard, and slide on the valleys of my palm, which has begun to sweat. This almost never happens; I use a dusting of powder to keep my hands fresh and dry, and take pride in my coolness to the touch. No, it is Julia's hands that are wet and polluting mine! I pull my hands away and wipe them slowly and deliberately on the folds of my skirt.

"You are all black to me," I write. "Everything is dark to me, and everyone is the same. I think it is the same for God."

Julia is excited, the tips of her fingers nearly dripping. "You could write that next week for the visitors," she spells. "Exactly that."

"Ask your husband," I telegraph back, and her hand waits, and then falls away. I wonder about the bumps on her head, if Doctor finds them all pleasing in their causality. I reach up suddenly toward where I think the top of her head will be, but instead my fingers catch her on the ear, and I hold it for a second, bending the soft, pliable rim up and down, marveling that through this sweet little maze she is able to hear: to let in the whole world, and most of all, the multitude of Doctor's sounds, his laughs and sighs. I know how to laugh, too—I laugh a lot—it is apparently the one thing I learned to do well as a baby before the scarlet fever robbed me of four of my five senses. And Doctor says my laughter is a beautiful sound, like angels' beating wings, but as I hold Julia's ear, I make one of my other sounds, the ugly ones I am not supposed to make, that Mr. Dickens wrote "are painful to listen to." Now I make one of those sounds, pushing it up from the back of my throat like Pozzo, the asylum's dog, when I have felt with my hand the thrumming in the cords of his neck, and I push my index finger hard into Julia's ear. I push it in again and again, and her hands are on my shoulders and on my elbow and so are Miss Wight's, and I could do it harder still, but I take my finger out of her ear and allow them to push me back into my chair. I feel the vibration in the floor as the guest chair is moved away from me, out of reach. I slow my breathing and extend both my arms into the air in front of me, my palms facing up in supplication.

I know I have been bad and that Miss Wight has gone to get the gloves, but I am sure Julia is still in the room, waiting. Yes, she takes my hands in hers, trembling, and I let her hold them before I tap on her knuckles to let me spell. I have slapped my teachers many times but never, ever, Doctor or Julia. I have slapped even poor, dear Miss Wight twice this year and I have grown accustomed, probably too accustomed, to asking for forgiveness from both the persons I have hurt and from God. My friends always forgive me, and so too, I am certain, does God, but He absolves me only on the occasions when I am truly sorry. This is not yet one of those occasions.

“I am sorry if I hurt you,” I write. “I pray I did not hurt your ear.”

“A little,” she spells back, “but I am fine. I didn’t mean to upset you.” Julia is taking this extremely well; I suppose that suffragists and abolitionists also get their dander up from time to time.

“I only wanted to feel for the bumps on your head,” I tell her, and there is a pause before she answers.

“I do not much believe in the science of phrenology, as my husband does,” she writes.

I am shocked; to my knowledge, no one has disagreed with Doctor on this, though I myself have had some doubts.

“If we are born with these bumps that govern our character, then how are we to grow and change?” she fills my hand and waits.

I take a long time to gather my thoughts, unsure if I want to share them with Julia. “I think maybe,” I pause and qualify myself further, this time careful to form each letter slowly and precisely so she will understand me fully, “maybe it is possible that phrenology interferes with the idea of free will.”

“Yes, yes,” Julia writes so emphatically and in letters so large that she traces the stem of the first “Y” on my wrist.

“Did Doctor give you the phrenological examination before you were married?” I ask her.

“Before we were even pledged,” she writes back. Her fingertips bounce lightly up and down on my palm and I know she is laughing. “Dr. Combe said that my self-esteem was far too elevated. That was the bump of ‘destructiveness’ you were going for just above my ear, but don’t worry, it was not destroyed.”

I laugh too, but then Miss Wight takes my hands from Julia’s and all I have time to spell is “Don’t tell Doctor” without even a “please” before Miss Wight is pulling the gloves on my hands. Of course I have to be punished for what I did to Julia, but still she kisses me long on the cheek before she goes and I grab at her skirt as she’s walking away. Just a touch, if only of her scratchy serge, before the glove isolates that hand.

“Tonight and all tomorrow,” Miss Wight taps through the thick cotton of the glove. Everyone knows, even the little blind girls when they come sidling up and reach for my hands, that I am not allowed conversation when I am wearing the gloves. Though my punishment is deserved, it is worse than the solitary confinement cells in which they punish criminals: not only am I cut off from all human contact, I lose all but the roughest impressions of the world itself. Touch, my one intact sense, and now it is thickened and furred almost to nullity by the gloves, an item which on other young ladies my age would mean they’re going out for a stroll. They cannot comprehend, any of them, the multitude of pleasures I receive from my fingertips, the hours I can spend stroking Pozzo’s wiry,

tangled fur, careening my fingers down the long whip of his tail, rubbing the softness of his firm belly. And the ladies' clothes!: their silks and satins, even the roughness of the out-of-towner's cotton broadcloths; the deep crush of velvet collars and the short, nappy rub of their felt hats, and I am never more stirred than when I find the sharp quill of a plume on a hat, and can run my fingers up and down the feather.

Miss Wight taps me on the shoulder, and I know I'm being sent to bed early as further punishment. She takes my arm in hers and walks me down the hallway to my room, but she writes nothing to me tonight, not a word, and I know it's useless to ask her to spell out Doctor's last letter again into my palm; of course, I have largely memorized all his letters, anyway (*L—Yet another phrenologists' conference today—I ought to have my head examined!* and *The Parisians feed their dogs at table*, but most of all: *Dear L, I miss you so.*).

I'm left alone to change into my nightgown; it is the rule that I cannot remove the gloves even for bed. For my worst punishment, four years ago, I had to wear the gloves in bed every night for a month, because someone—I am still not sure who, Miss Wight, or to my greatest horror, maybe Julia, who was staying here because the Institute was short of help for a few weeks—caught me in the act of self-exploration. It wasn't the first time, and it certainly wasn't the last, no matter how many times they've gloved me. I was on my stomach (Tessy, one of the blind girls, let me in on that trick) since of course I can't hear anyone coming, and if I am mightily preoccupied—both hands down, as they were that night—then I won't even feel the slight vibrations of movement from the wooden floor creaking. A sudden smack on my upper arm, and I pushed down my nightgown and turned over, my hands up, waiting for the intruder to write upon them. Instead, a fist came down on my forehead and "NO" was rapped across my brow by hard knuckles. I pulled the blankets up under my chin, and a minute later, a cold, dripping washcloth was flung at my face. Every night for the next month, the thick cotton gloves were left on top of my nightgown, and taken away again the next morning after I'd changed into my day dress. I made sure that the gloves were spotless, unspoiled each morning, but it was a struggle.

Though Doctor had delayed my religious education until I was thirteen because he was away often in Europe and did not want me tainted by the doctrines of Calvinism (he is an ardent Unitarian and does not go in much for the actual words of the Holy Bible), I begged him to raise the Bible for me, and after months of labor by the Institute's publishers for the blind, I was given the Bible entire, except for Revelation, which he has still refused to let me read. I have devoured that great book (I am a very fast reader), and have never found anything that I believe speaks against my explorations of my body. The spilling of seed is written against, but I don't see how that applies to me. And even if it does (Tessy is the only one who has ever explained the relations between men and women to me, and her effusive ramblings might have left me ill-informed, so I could be wrong on this point), I still contend that the unique condition which my Maker has forced upon me for His own unintelligible reasons might also grant me an exception—a special pardon, if you will—when it comes to touching. The sensitive, peaking nipples of my breasts, and that whole silken netherworld are God's gifts to me. My universe is manifest only through touching, and I refuse to be a stranger to it.

So if Doctor can't ever see his way clear of Julia and the trouble she causes him, then he must at least find me a suitable young man, soft-skinned and well-spelled, from

among his vast acquaintance. Miss Wight has been promised to the Unitarian minister who has been visiting me; she will leave me soon for this man with deeply ridged fingernails. I am fair to pleasing, I think, dark-haired and pale; my features regular, only my nose a little long. "Petite," I have had spelled into my palm many times by visitors, and Mama says I am like a little bird. Who might not love a little bird, I am hopeful, even if it is locked in a dark and silent cage?

But I must remember to eat, to eat more; I vow to chew and swallow all three meals every day to fatten myself for Doctor. My bones poke through my skin, and I think it is much nicer to touch the soft plump pillows of Miss Wight's hands than to feel my birdy bones. It is so hard to eat, though, when I taste almost nothing; the fever that took my eyes and ears took even the senses of taste and smell. I move my jaws and grind my teeth and pass my tongue over the lumps of whatever it is that slides from the forks and spoons, but it seems a meaningless exercise. I would much rather dip my fingers into the warm pond of the soup and plumb its depths for legumes; rend the slick skin from the chicken and peel away the sheaves of muscle until I reach the hardness of the bone; tear the bread into a hundred tiny pieces and roll them into buttered balls I juggle over my plate; squish through the pliant mounds of the potatoes; ravage the soft pulp of the baked aubergines and burrow both fists into the pie I will never know the sweetness of. Soak the whole feast in milk. The only delights of food for me are in its destruction, and it so disappoints me that I can no longer indulge my play now--not at my age, not at my station in life as the world's most famous woman, second only to Queen Victoria, (second only to *Julia!*), and certainly not with Doctor coming next week.

Yes, yes, he will see me fatter, and I will fatten my affection bump too. I tried once before to elevate its standing at the top of my head by beating on it several nights with the ends of my knitting needles, but that increased it hardly at all. Now I have a whole week, and this time I will not shy from employing the best tools at my disposal: my boots, the heels of my Sunday lace-up dress boots! I slide from my bed and crawl along the floor to my closet, and there it is: one boot for my affection. Doctor arranged for Julia, after all, to undergo a thorough phrenological examination by the famed Dr. Combe before they were pledged, and so I will make certain that even to Doctor's less trained eye, the enormity of my capacity for love will be impossible to miss. He hasn't seen me for almost six months, so I think he will not perceive my faculties as greatly changed, but only rendered more pronounced by his acute perception on the matter.

I take one boot with me to bed and pull up the blankets, leaving only the top of my head uncovered. I hit myself hard on the spot I have studied from the raised charts he has given me. Harder, harder, and it hurts, yes, it hurts, but it will be worth it. While I do not believe that my character, especially my ability to love faithfully and well, is sealed within the physiognomy of my skull, Doctor does, and so I rally my cause—Love! Love!—with each shuddering vibration through my temples and down my jaw. I move the heel of the boot closer to the front of my head and strike at the positions of benevolence and veneration, because I know that these are the qualities that impress Doctor most and that he reports are his own largest visible faculties.

Today, today, Doctor arrives today, and I am ready! I have eaten all my meals this week, even asking for seconds on several occasions, much to the surprise and delight of Miss Wight and of the cook. I feel very cheerful and plump, no little bird, but a downy hen. I have been careful, ever so careful, to wear my cotton bonnet with the tie strings all week so that no one might observe the heightening of my bumps. I have used the excuse of helping to clean and scrub the premises for Doctor's arrival, because I always wear my bonnet when I clean so that no strands of my long hair might escape from my bun and be dirtied. Miss Wight was pleased because I am a very good cleaner and she likes to see me clean. I cannot see the dirt, of course, but if you sit me down in an area and give me some good rags and a bucket of soapy water, I will scrub and scrub until you tell me it is spotless. This quality will also prove me a good wife; the only bad thing is wearing the heavy cleaning gloves, but they are necessary to protect the softness of my hands, which Doctor will soon be touching, again and again.

I run the duster over the top of my armoire and let the feathers stroke the heads of my Laura dolls, all sixteen of them, the twelve-inch likenesses of me that were sold—with their eyes poked out and little green grosgrain ribbons tied over the eyeholes—across the country, and even in England, in the days when Doctor's educational exhibitions drew standing-room crowds. As I tickle the tiny molded toes of my Lauras, it occurs to me that if I am to have a *real* life—the *realest* life—then I must no longer allow myself to quicken with these constant reminders of my fame, and besides, I am too old to play with dolls, to hold mock teas for all my sixteen selves. The little girls who cuddled me are all grown up, and most of them probably have their own babies to play with now, as I intend to. Carefully, I take the dolls down from the armoire, and place them in a heap on the bed beside me. One at a time, I rock each Laura to sleep, humming a tuneless lullaby I'm sure would make a real baby cry, and before I push the dolls into the dark beneath my bed, I untie the ribbon from the sightless eyes of each porcelain head. I braid the ribbons into a thick, soft plait, and then fold it beneath my pillow because green will bring me luck.

Green is the color I remember with the most pleasure: green from the grass outside our house in New Hampshire. Blue still spills from that square of sky visible over the bed where I lay ill for almost a year. Mama says my eyes were bright blue before they shrank behind my lids. Red I have a strong and disagreeable sense of, from when they bled me with leeches. And black, black I know the longest and best because it is my constant companion. These are the only colors I can recall or imagine with any clarity. It is yearning alone that shimmers in my darkness, and the shades of my deepest desires cannot be described, just as I am certain that the color that is God is not known to any man.

I pat the hands of my clock's glassless face over the armoire—Doctor will soon be here. The bonnet comes off and I check the bumps. They are raised and sore, the veneration one, especially; I hope they are not red. I've woken every morning with a headache from the boot's work, but the pain is nothing compared to gaining my share of life's affections. I arrange my hair in a low bun on the back of my head so that the bumps are shown to their best advantage. I have even taken the additional charge of plucking a few hairs from the tops of each of them, so that they might be seen more clearly. I change into my best Sunday dress, my only silk one—a rose pink *robe l'anglaise* that Miss Wight says gives me color—and lace up the dress boots that have

nearly knocked me senseless. I slip the green fillet over my eyes and go to meet Doctor, as nervous as I have ever been.

I know that Doctor is not here yet; I can always tell when he is in a room—the air warms and condenses almost imperceptibly and its weight tilts me gently in his direction, as if I were borne aloft on the high end of a seesaw, but losing balance, sliding slowly toward him on the ground. I sit in my chair by the hearth pinching at my cheeks to redden them, and wave away Miss Wight's attempts at conversation. I am almost faint with worry when suddenly the air shimmies with heat and I feel the floorboards tense and then shift heavily—Doctor at last! But he doesn't come near to me for a good ten minutes, probably talking with Miss Wight, and I force myself to wait patiently for him like a lady. I used to run whimpering to him like a puppy whenever he came in, but I have learned to wait, no matter how painful. Finally, the chair beside me is pulled out, and his hand takes mine.

"L," he writes, "you're looking very well."

I am shaking—he must notice—but I write the next line of our customary greeting. "Thank you, Doctor. And you?" It is our little joke, our routine, and now he lifts my hand to his face so that I may feel myself how well he is looking.

"Oh, yes," I write as I limn the familiar perfections of his profile, "you look very well." I round the tip of his nose just as he snorts out a laugh, and my fingers catch his delight. "How was your trip?"

He fills my hand with his travels even as he mouths them, allowing my fingers to float in front of his lips so that I can feel the different forces and velocities of the puffs of air as he exhales the names of places I will never touch: New York, London, and then in a warm fluff of breath, "Paris." "Paris," he says again—he knows the exquisite pleasure that the rushing air of any "P" gives me—and in my excitement, I rub my fingers against his lips. They are soft, but slightly dry--chapped, maybe, from riding in the wind. I am pulling open the lower lip with two fingers when he grasps my wrist firmly and pushes my hand down into my lap. I am too bold today; I have never tried to open Doctor's mouth before. I can tell from the movement of his arm holding mine that he is leaning back and away from me.

"L," he writes, "what has happened to your head?"

"Nothing," I reply. "It is fine, as always."

"It looks like a woodpecker got loose on it. Maybe you have banged it on the bedframe."

That is what he sees—an *accident*? I cannot write a thing. My hand is limp under his heavy one and I don't even let my fingers stray across the beloved hairs on his knuckles.

"Dear L," he writes, as if composing a letter to me, as if we were still corresponding from a long distance apart, when I am trembling right here in his hands, "I have made a special trip back here just to speak with you."

And not to see your beloved wife? I want to write.

"After I returned from Europe, I took a train from New York to New Hampshire to see your family." There is a stiffening in his fingers, as if he's finding it difficult to write, and I worry that he might have contracted the rheumatism. Mama has it and she can scarcely bend her fingers to converse with me.

"Mama and Papa are well?" I ask.

"Of course," he spells. "They miss you very much, and we all think. . ." His fingers stop, only the heat of them hovering above my palm, and then he etches the words into my soul, firmly and furiously. "We all think it best if you go back to New Hampshire to live with them now."

What happened? Did Julia tell him I questioned phrenology, or that I hurt her ear? Did Miss Wight tell him? My fingers panic; they scrabble all over his palm, paw at his arm; I am squeezing his hands, reaching for his face. Doctor pulls himself away until I stop moving and sit perfectly still, my hands shaking, but folded in my lap. After an eternity, he reaches for my hand again and spells into it very slowly.

"Your education is finished here, L. We have nothing else to teach you."

I write as deliberately as he does, though usually we are both so quick with each other that no one can possibly keep up. "Do you not see that I am ready, Doctor, that I am fit for finer things?"

"Do you mean a convent?" he writes, and I realize that he does not see me at all. I shake my head violently "no" and wipe at the wetness soaking through my fillet.

He pats my hand. "Good. I think you have too much temper for a convent."

His fingers strike again in the hollow of my palm, but I am thinking about my favorite Bible passage, Mark 7:32-35: "And they bring to Jesus a man who was deaf and dumb; and taking him aside from the multitude privately, Jesus put his fingers into his ears, and he spat and touched his tongue; and looking up to heaven, he sighed, and saith to him, 'Eph-phatha,' that is, 'Be opened.'"

Every night before I go to sleep, I put my fingers in my ears; I spit and touch my tongue, and looking up to heaven, I sigh and I write those ancient Hebrew words into my hand, I spell them across my forehead, I open my thighs and write the letters down that slope, against that place, the only place, that is as dark and silent as the cave inside my head.

I pull my hands away from Doctor and stand up. "Eph-phatha," I write across the width of Doctor's forehead, between the temples of his ideality, and I laugh because I have finally spelled words he does not know. I run across the sitting room—it is far fewer steps than twenty-eight when I am running—and down the hallway to my room.

I want to write this all out, but I am denied the pleasure--or pain--of ever being able to read my own words again. Doctor will be able to read them, others will be able to read them, but I will not. So I write this out into the air, in a grand and looping cursive, and what is invisible to man will be visible to God.

RELIQUARY

I looked up from my desk in Dr. Browning's office as a Mrs. Mandel announced herself, but for months she had been Mirabelle to me: Mirabelle with the two bitchy daughters, one of whom had just broken an engagement to the heir to an abrasive sponge fortune; Mirabelle with the husband who had a seat on the stock exchange but not at the dinner table, and a nineteen-year-old Russian mistress; Mirabelle who had quaffed vodka gimlets and champagne from glass slippers for thirty years, and popped more pills than a Jacqueline Susann heroine, but hadn't touched anything for the last ten; Mirabelle who smoked the rainbow-hued Nat Sherman's Fantasia Lights, but only the colored cigarette that matched that day's outfit. On the church steps she'd pick through the two layers of the Sherman's box and pull out all the, say, pink, cigarettes for that day--there were five of each color in a pack of twenty--and then she'd let the rest of us choose our colors, and we'd go our separate ways up or down Park Avenue, the green, blue and lavender stems glowing against the sparkling gray spring dusk, our respective lights moving slowly outward like radii from a circle the center of which was the Marble Presbyterian Church, where the 6:15 women's AA meeting, the DIVAs meeting--an acronym for Divinely Inspired Vivacious Alcoholics--was held in the smaller sanctuary. What a pleasure to stand under the awning of Le Sel et Poivre and cup my hand against the wind and light a long, thin lavender cigarette and stroll west toward home: This is what I thought when I looked up and found myself in the shadow of Mirabelle's enormous pink-brimmed hat as she leaned over the ledge of the reception desk.

"Mrs. Mandel here to see Dr. Browning. I have a five o'clock consult. You're new here?"

"Yes," I said. "Poppy," and I extended my hand. I waited for her to wink or smile or draw her barely there tawny eyebrow up to the alarming height I had seen it reach in meeting after meeting where she sat at the front, passing judgment with her face. I don't know if she was aware that her forehead plowed itself into furrows of indictment; maybe she believed she kept her thoughts to herself and her expression neutral, which might explain some of the problems she'd had with her daughters. She insisted she really didn't meddle in their lives, but maybe her face intervened without her knowledge. Clearly, she hadn't gotten the Botox injections in her forehead that most of our clients had every six months. For her the injections would be useful beyond the masking and prevention of wrinkles; the Botox could mask her great ranges of sanction, and she would look as serene and neutral as she did pretending not to know me. She, of course, did not want to be known--the heralded anonymity clause---so I acknowledged her only as a client, my own face frozen.

I buzzed Dr. Browning, and when he cut Pammy Blaisewell short, Pammy of the 38DD implants at the end of which were stretched nipples that in their hardening and encapsulation, had ceased to tingle (she told me her boyfriend, Lorca, was biting them as hard as he could and still she felt nothing), when Dr. Browning cut this little moneymaker short to come out and usher Mrs. Mandel back to his consulting room, I knew that he had been her longtime Pygmalion, the architect of her image. He must have tried like hell to get her to have a rhinoplasty. Her nose was a project. Watching her profile in meetings, in the fine fettle of my new cosmetic knowledge, the way she held her head, her nose regal and pointing out, I realized she was actually proud of that long and crooked beak, imbued with a Diana Vreeland, this-is-my-heirloom, this-is-my-calling-card kind of pride, and I admired her allowing nature this one glorious point. She'd obviously had a lot of other work done, her face was taut as if pinions spiked behind her ears, and her breasts were so discrete, separate, that they appeared to be only distant cousins, not sisters, certainly not part of anything I would consider a bosom. My own breasts are not substantial, they're medium, they're fine, a respectable B. I hadn't come to work here for a boobjob, and besides employees are not eligible for that procedure as a bonus until they've been here two years, one for each boob, I guess, but I did have a plan, an ulterior motive beyond paying the back rent I owed after the month in rehab upstate, and the month I took to cool out when I came back before looking for a new job.

It's my chin. I'm getting a double chin, premature, and not because I'm a pound overweight. My father has one, or maybe it's just the way he sets his face, drawing it back into his head like a turtle, fixing it for maximum sternness, his jaw lowered and the skin beneath it pouched. Maybe it's his expression I've inherited, maybe that's all it is, his penchant for sternness. I've practiced in the mirror trying to push my face forward, upward, away from my neck, but it's too hard to sustain. Besides, this is not the face I need to deal with men, not the kind of men I might meet now in sobriety, and so the handbag of fat has to go while my skin is still reasonably elastic, ideally before the age of thirty, and I'm close to straddling that gray fence. The holdup is I've only worked here six months. I've been waiting for the right moment to discuss an early intervention with Dr. Browning, and I think it's about time. We get along great, the flirt is there, that undertow--he is recently divorced, after all. *Tickle, tickle under the chin, if you like butter, you will grin.*

Maybe Mirabelle could put in a good word for me. She's been stopping in to consult with Dr. Browning every couple of weeks on this or that. She's at greater risk for his art, with the diabetes and high blood pressure, but she's very committed. After the initial shock of seeing her in the office, at the intersection of our public and private lives, I've reconciled myself to her being Mrs. Mandel, not Mirabelle, here. This week, she decided on liposuction for her lateral, medial and anterior thighs. As I keyed in her surgery for Thursday, she seemed to be studying me, drumming the fingers of her gloved hands on the ledge, the diamonds lumping like tumors under the iridescent pink silk. I wonder if she pities me because she can tell, with her keen eye for physiognomy, that, at least for the moment, I am all natural, a thing of the past, unremade. In the office doorway she turned and waved, her beige head framed by the long, lean perfectly proportioned legs of the Amazon Dr. Browning had had painted on the wall by the Noho artist, Le Klego.

The office mural got great press, made the nightly news and the cover of The Post under the heading, "Wall to Wall Women." Dr. Browning, looking remarkably like a more professional and well-groomed Harvey Keitel, posed for the photo standing in the doorway like Mrs. Mandel, but his head was raised, his eyes lifted reverentially upward to where the gleaming bronzed legs met, to the vagina that he had not allowed Le Klego to paint above the frame. Le Klego had pitched a fit about his artistic integrity--"You want like a Barbie, fake and smooth between the legs?" Velise the anesthesiologist said he had roared in his Hungarian accent. "I must be painting the pubus, the cradle of man. I owe the world to show the origin of the world."

It's been done, Dr. Browning told him, and pulled him by his hairy arm out of the shimmering gold waiting room--he was upsetting the ladies who weren't sedated yet. Everyone in the office knew that Le Klego had finally agreed to paint the mural without the origin of the world because Dr. Browning had thrown in his services gratis to rid the artist of his male breasts. Le Klego was fond of tight and grievously patterned shirts in synthetic fabrics through which his plump had jiggled like a teenaged girl's. He'd shown me the original mock-up for the mural, which I have to admit I preferred, with curlicues of lush golden pubes festooning the crown of the door, almost like trompe l'oeil, but it wouldn't have flown in this office, anyway, because most of these women are Brazilian waxed, Velise says, the crack and everything. I wouldn't go in for that myself, even if I had the money.

One whole wall, the east wall with the windows facing Madison, is decorated with breasts. From the vantage point of my desk at the front, I have counted forty-seven nipples (an odd number because Le Klego had the cute idea of making the door buzzer a nipple too), in shades from petal pink to umber against a background of metallic, Klimtian gold. Breasts of every size, not every shape, but every size. Dr. Browning says he doesn't want the smaller endowed women to feel self-conscious, that's the way he talks, everything is an *endowment*, as if he were the grand executor of a philanthropic estate, the estate of the body.

I don't mind when he speaks like this, gets carried away, because I think basically he's a good man, I certainly wouldn't want him wielding a knife beneath my chin if I didn't think so, and I believe he tries to rationalize his moral and ethical perspective on the work he does more than the women who come in for it. But how do you *spiritually* justify getting D-cup saline implants--"I'm a stripper with six kids to feed"--or the third facelift--is it to keep the husband down on the farm, away from the stripper and from the girl with the perfect chin? I want to ask the clients these questions, especially Mrs. Mandel. The implications nettle me, because I am a very spiritual person now, not necessarily because I want to be, but because I can't stay sober without prayer and great attention to my motives in everything (I know this because I have tried seven, count 'em seven, times, before to stay sober) and I am having a hell of a time with my own chin dilemma. I don't believe God wants me to look so stern, so forbidding even if it's genetically ordained--this is the hard part--because why would he have also given me laughing blue eyes with crinkly corners if he didn't want other people to experience pleasure when they look at me? Is it possible to become so enlightened, so attuned to the minute contractions of the universe as they tremble like aftershocks in the foundation of your soul--and hey, vice versa--that a tummytuck won't matter? You're just an envelope, after all, for a letter God has written. *Deliver me.*

I took it as a sign that the same day The Post ran the cover with Dr. Browning smiling up into the hairless Barbie dome of his doorway I saw the listing for receptionist/medical transcriptionist light up in yellow on Hotjobs.com. That couldn't be a coincidence, not after I'd already read the article in a paper left on the table where I just happened to sit down with my sausage roll at Sbarro's that day, and hadn't I warmed to the innate delicacy of Dr. Browning's speech when they quoted him on vetoing the pullchains on the derriere lamps that graced either side of the office's creamy sectional sofa as too vulgar? The reporter had tried to insinuate that by virtue of his suggestive decor Dr. Browning himself was a T&A man, but Dr. Browning swung right in there with those old standardbearers of tasteful nudity, Botticelli and Titian. Le Klego, who designed the lamps, was incensed that reference was made to Jeff Koons, the artist who'd published a whole book of paintings depicting sexual acts with his wife, the Italian porn star who won a seat in the Italian parliament by campaigning topless from a white convertible, though last week Le Klego admitted to me that he adored the giant Scottish terrier Koons had erected from fresh s an artist, as a professional renderer of the female form, of my little second chin, my doubling, because he pinched the flesh there once between his fingers, and I thought maybe he was making a point. But he just grinned and asked me had I ever seen a more perfect bellybutton than the one on the ceiling above the door, and I said no, but I declined his suggestion that I show him mine, though I personally believe it's fairly perfect as well, a taut almond alcove that I nevertheless keep hidden.

I'm not at all an exhibitionist, which, in this office, makes me a standout, because, as you might imagine, it's one big show-and-tell every day 9-6, especially among the other staffers, who like to show off the boss's work. Velise has been here twelve years so Dr. Browning's put a lot of bonus stitches into her, and she walks a little funny, like it's all pulled too tight. When I look at women like Velise, these cut-up queens, miracles of modern surgery, I imagine them trapped in the center of a string game, the kind I played in gradeschool, with different parts of their bodies, the pert and skyward breasts, the pinched noses, the concave abdomens, the cellulite-free thighs and high buttocks all attached to strings, and I wish I could believe it's God pulling those strings, marching them around in their sideshows of perfection, that it's all okay, whatever floats your boat, with the free will he gave you and a checkbook or even our generous 24-month installment plan, but I can't quite buy it, even when a woman walks out that door looking like a goddess in springtime. I understand it's just Dr. Browning pulling the strings. But then I stop and look in the mirror: *How can I modify thee? Let me count the ways.* And I only want this *one* thing, a modification so minor it could hardly be profaned as vanity, and I know I'm trying to reconfigure the third through seventh steps of my 12-step program to justify my desire for a small and girlish chin, and my AA sponsor is letting me get away with my rationalizations as long as I don't drink, but I've got six more freaking, darkening, double-chinned months to go before I'm eligible for my free procedure and I don't know if I'll make it. The pressure of my dilemma is deforming my spirit, and who the hell is going to fix that?

Night before last at the DIVA meeting, Mirabelle told the group that she would be having an absolutely necessary surgery that she could defer no longer, and murmurs of sympathy swept the pews for her upcoming forced sedation. I was last to be called on. I shared that while I considered myself to be an alcoholic, not cross-addicted, and had

never been really interested in drugs (in the past, I only did coke if someone I was dating was generous and addicted, though I had snorted a lot at The Spore, the Morningside Heights afterhours, the year I dropped out of Columbia, and of course pot--everybody except my parents smoked pot}, but now at work, I was beginning to be moved by the multiplicity of pills, painkillers, mostly, codeine to Vicodin—someone in the back of the room actually moaned when I said Vicodin—not to mention the tabula rasa of the prescription pads in the righthand corner of my desk. Last week I had palmed two Tylenol 3's with codeine because I thought I could detect the forward march of a toothache.

“I didn't take them,” I told the group, but I didn't entirely forsake them, either. They're wrapped in a napkin in my silverware drawer. I've worked in medical offices for years and never been curious about the pills until now, I guess because I was used to drinking every night, used to being suitably anesthetized in the slow and liquid way I prefer. My sponsor said my job was dangerous, far too dangerous for the newly sober.

As everyone clapped and the meeting ended, Mirabelle mouthed to me from her seat in the front, “You can quit.”

I mouthed back, slowly and emphatically, “SO CAN YOU.”

We all stood and formed a ragtag circle holding hands as we recited the Serenity Prayer: “God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change. . .”

My eyes opened and met hers across the room, and she raised her head from the supplicant's position.

“The courage to change the things I can. . .”

She lifted her head higher still.

“And the wisdom to know the difference.”

The circle broke, and she was out the door. I butted through the throng of huggers and backpatters to the exit. Mirabelle stood on the bottom step, rifling through the Sherman's box.

“I don't know which color to smoke when I wear ecru,” she said. She looked genuinely bewildered.

I took the box from her hands and picked out all the mint green cigarettes.

“These should work,” I said, pointing to her hat.

“Ah, yes,” she said, relieved. “The leaves on the flower on my hat.”

“I like that hat,” I said.

“Yes, well, this is the kind of hat worn by aristocratic French women in the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. A ‘commode’.”

“You're kidding,” I said. “It's not called that.”

“Look it up. Webster's 9th. There's even an illustration.” Mirabelle laughed. “I don't think anyone would ever shit in a man's hat without serious consequences, do you?”

Sure. The genesis of blame. She pushed the box of Fantasias into my hands--

“Here, Poppy, take all the colors you want.”

I looked up “commode” when I got home and sure enough, there it was, a woman in an enormous, beautiful hat.

Today was Mrs. Mandel's microcannular liposuction on her thighs. I tried to transcribe Dr. Browning's notes on the procedure, the Bupivacaine administered by Velise as tumescent anesthesia, but when I heard his voice cracking on "embolization," I took my hands off the keyboard and pushed off the headset. Everyone else was already gone, and it was my job when I stayed late to turn off the machines and the lights throughout the suite. I walked back through Dr. Browning's consulting room, past the nurse's station, past the anesthesiologist's locked storage cabinets I would've given my almond bellybutton to have the key to at that moment, to the procedures room. Dr. Browning didn't call it an operating room. Too technical, too scary, too Jeremy Irons in "Dead Ringers," he told me in my interview.

What cocktail of words and prayer could I possibly shake and stir to comfort me tonight, I thought, and then I saw it, the black rubberized box on the floor beside the operating table, the operating table designed to resemble a chaise longue more than a butcher block. They didn't remember to empty the box today, to haul it out back to the alley behind 68th Street and chuck it into the specially marked container our office shares with Drs. Flint and Botrecht of Body Temple, Incorporated, not today with the paramedics in and out between those long and perfect gams, the two policemen standing around the waiting room staring like hungry children at the forty-seven nipples, and Mirabelle's two daughters, both older than me but looking, of course, younger, with their tiny noses running and their high breasts heaving, and Dr. Browning and Velise in the middle of it all, sunk down low in the leather chairs. I took it on the chin, as I take all things, when the paramedics wheeled their gurney past, their ugly, unstylish, utilitarian gurney past, only the uncallused rounds of Mirabelle's heels visible.

I made sure the suction machine was off, the sucking microcannulas slack as I detached their feed from the box, and then I unfastened the small metal side panel and stuck my hand through, not looking down. I didn't have to look, it was what I thought: the waste of Mrs. Mandel, the waste of Mirabelle, released from its envelope of flesh, a letter that God had written, a letter that maybe I could read. I pointed my index finger lower and lower until it touched. I was surprised there was no human odor, just a slight whiff of bleach, and that it was cold, chilled, I guess, by the machine. It resisted at first, until I plunged my finger in up to the joint, up to my mother-of-pearl ring, and I felt a viscous, undulating suction around my knuckle. My finger felt safe, and I knelt there until my knees hurt from the tile. I slid my finger out slowly and wiped it on the wadded hem of my skirt, then I secured the panel and picked up the box. It was much heavier than I thought it would be, so heavy I had to carry it out in front of me with both arms as I walked back through the suite.

I was supposed to turn off the lights in the waiting room, but I didn't. I left the whole golden room ablaze with light from Le Klego's derriere lamps, the glow of their perfect, undimpled buttocks illuminating my way out, over the threshold through the origin of the world, the box of Mirabelle's subcutaneous fat safe in my arms.

DRIVING MEI

Charlie stared at the big, flop-eared black rabbit twitching in the carrier. He'd never seen a rabbit that big. "Nobody said anything about a rabbit."

"Frida Kahlo always travels with me," the poet said, her long blue skirts sweeping past him. She waited for him to open the car door. He let her in and walked around to his side to pop open the trunk.

"What are you doing?" Mei asked.

"I thought the rabbit could ride in the trunk."

"You'd put my muse in the trunk? Frida Kahlo will ride in the back seat."

"But it's a rental car; the Department rented the car. It's not my car and I don't have a blanket or anything."

"They told me you were an artist. They told me I was being driven to the school by an artist, and I'd think any real artist would understand the value of a muse. Are you not a real artist?" she asked.

"Third year of my MFA, Studio Art, yes ma'am," Charlie said as he tried to hoist the carrier into the backseat. It was stuck, and he pushed until he upended it in an effort to make it fit. Frida Kahlo flopped backward against the bars. He felt the icy rip of the morning mountain air whistle into the dry socket of his molar. Frida Kahlo's head banged against the lip of her water dispenser.

"My God, be careful," the poet cried, but she didn't move to help.

Charlie lay across the top of the carrier to pull it from behind his seat, and settled it in the back, right side up. He reached through the bars to stroke the rabbit's head, but she hunched as far away from his fingers as her bulk would allow in the small space, trembling. "She's okay, she's okay," Charlie murmured, the soft voice he used with his six-month-old nephew.

"He's not a she," Mei said. "Frida Kahlo is a he."

"But I thought..." He petted the top of the carrier.

Mei huffed. "Let's get on the road," she said. "You wouldn't understand if I told you."

Charlie threw his down vest to the right of the carrier and squunched in behind the wheel. Water bottle. Prescription bottle. "Bad teeth," he said as he washed down another Vicodin.

"So do you prefer Mei or Ms. Mei? It is Mei, right," he said, pronouncing it like "me." "They told me "Me," like 'I,' not 'may,' right?"

"It is me that rhymes with 'he' and 'she,' never 'may' that rhymes with 'they' and 'spay.' Okay?"

"Got it. Mei."

Mei stopped tapping her nails on the dash and jerked hard on both her long white braids as if that motion was required to start the car.

"Seatbelt?" Charlie glanced at her silver-ringed fingers folded over the small roundness of her belly. No seatbelt. She wouldn't fly and she didn't drive, but no seatbelt. Mei stared straight ahead. "We're off then," he said, and they pulled out of the

driveway. She did not look back at the sturdy little blue box house or the porch with its glider swing, or the bare oaks and maples, but Charlie did as they wheeled out of the driveway, and he wished he could have seen the inside.

If she wasn't going to talk, he sure wasn't going to talk. At least this way he had a car and a road, if he needed it; the rest was useless--a lousy two hundred bucks--no way he would've just done this for the money. He'd call his roommate, Ben, at the first stop and see if he'd heard anything about the Sherelle situation. He stared at the endless tree walls that lined the highway; it was too much the same here, only the road was flatter. He hoped the English Department would see fit to give him the Motel 6 money he hadn't spent. He'd made it from Frankfort to Durham in just over seven flat at about 70, fighting it out with tractor trailers on the highways and coal trucks on the mountain roads after Versailles. No sleep and the warm wash of the painkillers fluttered the I-85 ramp like a ribbon. Thank God he'd thought to Google up a picture of her, so he could forswear the vanity-saving pain of his contact lenses on the long drive. Academy of American Poets. American Book Award. La-ti-fuckin-die. Who the hell would call themselves "Endora Welty, Bad Witch of the South"? Even he knew she was fucking with genres.

Mei spoke to him without moving her head. "You will get off the interstate at the Marion exit and follow the signs to The Waffle House."

"We've only been on the road half an hour. You didn't eat breakfast?"

"At approximately 9:00 am, my daughter will be finishing her banana pancakes with double whipped cream, two slices of burnt bacon and order of hash browns without onions. I suggest you step on it because I don't intend to miss her licking the drying tines of her fork."

"Nobody said anything about a daughter," Charlie said. He could picture a daughter, but he couldn't picture Mei as a mother; she was more like an anti-mother, or an anti-his-mother, anyway. "Marion's a good hour out of our way."

Mei gasped as if she'd been hit. "Who farted?" She stared at Charlie, and Charlie smelled it too and knew it was her.

"Uh, maybe Frida Kahlo did," he said. "She got shook up pretty bad back there."

Mei checked her watch, a plastic green and aqua bubble whose mermaid's tail swished at the hours as Poseidon's trident speared the minutes. "We cannot allow them too much time to burn her bacon. Faster, pussycat, kill, kill."

And Charlie did, and they roared into the Waffle House parking lot at 8:50.

"Park there," Me told him, pointing to the spot by the door.

"That's the handicapped spot. I can't do that."

"Should I list my handicaps?" she asked him, folding her arms. "Should you list yours?"

The Escort rode over the yellow wheelchair sign. Signifier and signified.

"That's her. Cherry 2000." He didn't ask. Mei pointed at a wretchedly thin girl sitting in a booth by herself, sipping coffee. The plate was empty. The girl's almost white hair was pulled back in a high, severe ponytail with a big plastic gumball tie, and Charlie could see the cords in her throat move under the bluish skin as she swallowed the coffee. Why doesn't she look up?

They watched her for five minutes, until the navy and green plaid of her dress began to march, until Frida Kahlo began to bang her soft head against the bars, until

Charlie said, "Do we have to wait for her to lick the fork?"

"She's going to see me now; she's going to stare right at me now and come to me," Mei said, and Charlie believed her, and he was right to believe her. Cherry 2000 swiveled her entire torso to the window and threw both her arms over head. She froze like that until the waitress walked by, and then she slid out of the booth and walked straight out the door and over to the passenger door of the car, trailing her pink Hello Kitty parka. Charlie figured her for fifteen, maybe sixteen, younger anyway than the girls in the Twentieth Century Art History Intro he TA'ed. Younger even than Sherelle, his formerly favorite student.

"What?" She tapped the window. "Daddy's coming back to get me for Sunday school."

"Get in," her mother the poet said.

"But he won't know what happened to me." Cherry 2000 rocked back and forth in her silver patent-leather Maryjanes, and then she opened the door.

"My baby," Mei whispered as she flattened her breasts against the dash, and Cherry 2000 wriggled into the backseat.

"Where's Diego Rivera?" she asked. Her mother shrugged.

"He was a great muralist. I saw all his stuff in Mexico," Charlie said, forcing a flicker of the girl's gray-green eyes—like her mother's, but somehow even less innocent, it seemed to him.

"Those are girl's sunglasses," Cherry 2000 said. "And why are you wearing them over your real glasses?"

"Oh." He touched the lenses of the cheap sunglasses. "They're my girlfriend's." They were not; he had found them in the UKF parking lot on the hood of a Miata, or maybe a student had left them on a desk in one of his Art History sections. He couldn't remember. "I should call my girlfriend—" He searched for a name; he'd fucked a really drunk girl last year named Brenda, but that wasn't a good name even before she'd passed out. "Pam. I have to call Pam. That will give you two some time to chat."

"We don't need time. Let's move it," Mei said, and he heard for the first time her Southern lilt on "move."

"Cherry two...Cherry's going with us to Frankfort?"

"She told you that was my name? Her real name's Beverly—did she tell you that?"

"Kids." Mei actually smiled at him, at her daughter in the mirror. Her teeth looked unnaturally white, though he wouldn't have guessed her for a bleacher. He wanted desperately to bleach his own teeth, but the dentist said it didn't make sense to prettify the outsides of the teeth when the insides were crumbling, rotting away. He was almost willing to risk the forecast of endless bleeding and gum sensitivity for the power of the blinding shells.

He saw the waitress squinting at his car. "Hey, do you need me to go in and pay your bill?"

"Dan will pay it when he shows up."

Charlie started the car, then stopped. "Wait a minute--won't Dan...won't her father be worried if...?"

"Go." Mei touched the gearshift, and after a second, he backed up and pulled out of the parking lot. Sure. Everybody on the run. They had told him to do what she said;

she was the teacher, after all, the teacher they wanted so much they'd advertised for a chauffeur to bring her up for the interview. What would she teach—poetry of kidnapping, rudeness in blank verse? He pulled out of the waitress's sight line and jumped out of the car.

"Look. I have to call my girlfriend. I have to."

He didn't hear what Mei said as he slammed the door and sprinted to the pay phone. He wished he had a cellphone. He wished he had a girlfriend.

"Ben? Hey, Ben, are you there?" His roommate didn't pick up. He was probably stoned. "Ben! Pick up! Did anybody call about Sherelle? Did you check my email to see if there's anything official?"

Nothing. He got back in the car. Resolved calm. Sherelle had probably forgotten about what happened; it was nothing. Almost nothing. Well, not nothing to him, but he might as well hope that it proved nothing to her. As long as she thought it was nothing, then the University would think it was nothing too.

The poet's daughter put on her jacket and pulled up the hood, framing her face in cotton-candy pink fur. "I'm Charlie," he finally said when they turned back onto the interstate.

"Cherry 2000." Her eyes slid to the back of her mother's head. "Aka Melissa."

"He is not a poet," Mei said. "He is not a writer."

"What are you then?" the girl asked.

"I make art," Charlie said.

"What kind of art?"

"Oh, mostly boxes. Little boxes." He held up his hand, measured two inches between his fingers.

"Boxes of what?" Mei asked.

"Anything. Everything. Anything that will fit in them."

"That sounds weird," the girl said. "Anything."

He told them about his prizewinning box, the winner of the UK Visual Arts Prize five years ago—the year he'd started in grad school: the tiny brown plastic soldier drowning in a storm of velveteen pellets, pink grosgrain cuttings, and sheared twigs, almost invisible. His assemblage thesis project was on hold, his advisor disgusted with him. He'd made only one new box this year, the box for Sherelle.

"The best ones I filled with roaches from my old apartment."

"Live ones?" Mei asked.

"Alive and dead."

"That's cool," the girl said. "Do you have one with you?"

Only the special one with the translucent fuschia cover, the box Sherelle had opened and emptied onto the carpet beside his desk. Out came the matchstick bonsai tree, its red tip still intact, and with it the silky grass he'd made from his own hair dyed green. The whole scene over hardly more than a kiss. She was the one who'd brought him the Schiele nudes to pore over with her after class; she was the one who'd brought in the stills of Matthew Barney nude and painted blue as a centaur when he'd tried to steer her interests toward anything less sensual, toward even the disgusting pathology of Damian Hurst's dissected cows, anything so she would stop luring him in, pretending with art. She'd even pulled out the background of the box he'd made for her with the words he'd carefully clipped from her last paper—a redundant deconstruction of Klimt's

“Hope” he’d given an A minus—and sepia-washed over pink acrylic: *Nude. Gold. A. It.* He'd brought the desecrated box with him, wrapped in papertowels, waiting to be filled with something he had not yet dreamt, or had not yet allowed to rise all the way to the surface. He did not want to share his last box with this girl—even if she was a girl—so he answered tersely, “No,” and of the mother he asked “You’ve heard of Joseph Cornell?” Mei nodded—of course. “The reclusive dreamer of Utopia Parkway in Queens. He made much bigger boxes than I do, though. Wineglasses, corks, medieval prints. He lived with his mother.”

“They were usually gifts to individuals, right?” Mei asked.

“Yes,” Charlie said. “While mine are more private.”

“I’ll bet they are,” she said, and Charlie wondered if she was hitting on him. He had stopped considering that possibility after he’d printed out her picture; she was about fifty, he guessed, almost double his age. But her interest in his boxes was a little exciting, maybe more exciting than the girl’s.

“It sounds almost like Outsider Art,” Mei said.

Charlie’s hands froze on the wheel. “I am as much inside as you are,” he said quietly.

Cherry 2000 stuck her hand between their seats. “I want to hear this CD.”

“No music,” Mei said. “I want to rest.” She glanced at the road sign. “I want to be in Mt. Airy by 11:00 a.m.”

“You want lunch that early?” Charlie asked. “I don’t think we’ll make that.”

Mei closed her eyes and turned her head to the window. “Take care of Charlie and Frida Kahlo, dear, and wake me when we’re there.”

Charlie fished in his pocket for the Extra-strength Orajel, rubbed it around in that tender dry socket with his pinkie, massaged it into his gums. Then he took another Vicodin, two hours too soon. He wanted to call Ben again. Actually, he wanted to call Sherelle at her mother’s house to see if she was following through on her threat.

“What kind of pill was that?” Cherry 2000 asked, her eyes narrowing.

“Painkiller. My teeth.”

“She gives Frida Kahlo sleeping pills all the time, even though he hardly moves anyway.”

“Yeah, usually these would make me drowsy, but not will all this excitement driving your mother. And you.” His eyes were half-closed behind the girl glasses, and he knew soon the sun would light tiny fires in the tops of the trees in the periphery of his vision. He startled; the girl’s head had touched his shoulder. She rested her cheek against his headrest.

“Where are we going?”

“Frankfort. University of Kentucky satellite there. Good school. They want your mom.”

“How far is it?”

“We should be there by about six, if we take an hour lunch in Mt. Airy.”

“Will we beat the snow? It’s gonna snow.”

The sky was a pearly grayish blue, just trembling on the edge of a purple to come. “I think so,” he said. “You don’t have to worry. Are you warm enough—want me to turn up the heat back there?”

She pulled the pink fur so close it touched the ends of her delicate, almost

invisible eyebrows. “My dad used to be gay--do you get it?--but now he’s married to Linda and they co-pastor the Church of God in our town.” She stared at him in the mirror with that endless, unblinking teenager stare he knew so well.

He took off the sunglasses, even though the sun speared his eyes. He stared her down in the mirror, allowing his eyes off the road long enough to do the job. He was good at it when he put his mind to it. Something he was good at.

“Can we stop? I need to pee.”

“No.” His firmness sounded good to him. The dull pressure in his bladder beat as a counterpoint to the pointed ache in the back of his mouth, and helped keep him focused. “We’ll stop in Mount Airy. Now look at license plates or something so I can concentrate on the road. Your mother wants to get there by 11:00.”

“Whatev,” the girl said, and her mother twisted toward him in her sleep. She had a line of drool wobbling from her open mouth, and he almost wiped it away. He did not watch the girl in the mirror, but he was sure she was watching him. How she could be so thin if she usually ate that big a breakfast?

Mei shuddered as they turned off Exit 6-B to Mt. Airy. “I can hear you,” she said.

“We’re not talking,” said Cherry 2000, and Mei sat up straight. She rubbed her eyes, and fished a little blue book out of her purse.

“Okay, turn left on Main Street, and go down Ash til you hit Bethel, and there’s a church at 233 Bethel.”

“You’re stopping to pray?” Charlie asked. “Do they have food?”

“Mt. Airy is the town Andy and Don Knotts travel to from Mayberry RFD. It’s historic.”

“She’s going to hit an AA meeting,” her daughter said. “She finds one everywhere we go.”

“There, there, pull into the back of the church parking lot there,” Mei said. “I’ll be out promptly at noon.”

“Should we get you a sandwich or something?” Charlie called after her, and she waved her hand and took the church steps two at a time. “I guess we’ll find a McDonald’s or something. Just help me keep straight the way back to this street.”

Cherry 2000 nodded and untied the ribbons of her hood. She checked the rabbit’s carrier. “He has plenty of food and water unless we get lost.”

There was the McDonald’s he’d spotted on their way in. I’m not hungry, but I’ll go in with you and get a soda, she told him. He had to ask her for money to call Ben; it was over two bucks in change. Of course this kid had money. Of course. Ben still didn’t pick up. It was probably all fine. He had a car.

He wasn’t hungry either, and he could only chew on the left side of his mouth, but he was always careful about eating, about saving up his strength, so he got a Big Mac Value Meal super-sized with a lot of caffeine. Cherry 2000 pulled a tiny bottle of glittery pink nail polish from her mini-backpack and polished her nails while he ate. He decided not to say anything about the smell. She picked at his fries, swiped almost all of his ketchup, until the salt was indistinguishable from the glitter on her fingers.

“You look rough,” she said. “Did you drive all night?”

He nodded. “And it’s a rough time. My girlfriend was gonna come with me on this trip; she’s the English major. She loves Mei. But then she was having some personal problems, and we had this trip all planned, we were gonna stop in Abingdon,

stay at the Martha Washington Hotel. It's a big deal. I was planning to make a sort of commemorative box of our trip, filled maybe with matches, I don't know," he pulled a shred of lettuce from his burger. "Lettuce."

"Is she sick?" the girl asked, waving her hands in the air to dry her nails.

"No, not like that. She...well, it doesn't matter. You don't know her, so I guess I can tell you. She was sort of kissed and stuff by one of her professors, and she doesn't know what to do."

"Kill him," said Cherry 2000.

"I just want her to press charges so we can get on with our lives. I fully support her in every way."

"What's her name again?"

"Pam. Her name's Pam, and she is as dark as you are light." The girl's short glittery fingernails rested an inch from his upturned palm. "We should get going. I'll just call her quick and then hit the john." Ben still didn't pick up, and he was afraid to try Sherelle at her mom's.

She was sitting on the hood of the Escort when he came out. For a second, he'd thought he lost her. "Wow, you really combed your hair," she said. "It's not sticking up anymore. It's good you don't wear a baseball cap when you're going bald."

I guess, he told her, but he wished he'd brought one. Cherry 2000 got in the front seat with him, and unfolded the directions she'd scribbled down back to the church.

"When we lived at Virginia Beach, when Mom and Dad were both teaching in Norfolk, Mom brought this bald lady to stay with us for the summer. She was this big feminist writer who wrote a book about her abused childhood. She did have a really cool face with big eyes, but she shaved her head every day. I stopped going to the beach with them because she didn't shave under her arms or her legs, and it was gross. Mom would rub SPF 50 all over that big shiny head, and then oil up her body and the hair on her legs would stand up and her head would catch the sun, and people would stop and stare at us. Mom said Paquita was her muse that summer, and they both finished their books. I used to be her muse before that. That's what she said." She looked into the backseat. "Now she says Frida Kahlo inspires her to 'greatness.' What's up with that? A stupid rabbit."

"I don't know," Charlie said. "We all have our things."

"Yeah." Cherry 2000 fingered the rabbit's ears through the bars. "I think she killed Diego Rivera, that's what I think."

"Who—Frida Kahlo?"

"No. Mom."

They could see Mei's white braids shining under a twisted oak in the yard of the church as they pulled into the lot. She was talking to a pony-tailed guy in a dirty bowling shirt, but she saw them and raised her hand for them to wait. After another minute, she and the guy hugged, and patted each other on the backs. Then they shook hands.

"Wow, did you run into someone you know in Mt. Airy?" Charlie asked when she settled herself back in the car. She made Cherry 2000 get in the back.

"No, it's an AA thing," the girl explained. "They're like all buddy-buddy, touchy-feely that way all the time."

"You could stand an ACOA meeting yourself, girl," her mother said. "We'll find one for you in Frankfort, I bet."

"Yeah, I love to be hugged by strangers." She pretended to hug herself and ohed

her mouth in an imitation of ecstasy.

“I read them my new poem, my placenta poem, and they loved it. They ate it up.” She was smiling big.

“You read poetry in AA?”

“Oh God, not the placenta story. You swore you weren’t going to use that; you promised after Jack found that ‘my baby’s first tampon’ poem in that book in the library and showed it to everybody. You promised.”

“Please, it’s not about your tiny unfolding vagina this time. It’s not all about you, you know.”

“I think that the placenta would qualify as half-mine since it came out after me, don’t you think, Charlie?”

“I honestly don’t know,” Charlie said. He halfheartedly refused to remember exactly what a placenta was. “Hey, do you maybe have a cell phone I could use?”

Mei ignored him, turning to speak to Cherry 2000.

“Okay, it was half yours when it came out, but what happened afterwards is my story. I’m the one who put in the freezer, not you, you were doing nothing but bawling your brains out then, kind of like you do now.” She was talking too fast, Charlie thought, and a little too loud for the car. “And Federico, my dear, my lovely dead Federico was the one who wanted to surprise me with a romantic dinner when I got back from the reading in Taos; he’s the one who put it out to thaw.”

“My placenta going rotten in the New Mexico heat. It was mine. You shouldn’t have put it out on the roof of the apartment building.”

“We couldn’t save it; I should have had the heart, the clarity of vision to eat it, to give it back to my own body, but I couldn’t. The smell. Federico and I gave back to nature, to the sun, to the birds.”

“Until the neighbors called the police when they saw blood dripping past their window.”

He was not falling asleep. This was good. But he had to string for another Vicodin, just one more, after the rigors of the Big Mac. “Where was your dad, that guy Dan?”

“We did the wrong thing, yes,” Mei sighed. “And it was a big mess, but it was my mess and my decision and my placenta and I can write a poem about it if I want to. As a matter of fact, it’s being published in The Missouri Review next month.” She clapped.

“Nobody really reads journals,” Charlie offered. “That’s what I understand, anyway. You really don’t have a cell?”

“I write, I don’t talk,” Mei said.

“Fine, take my whole life. Use it. You will, anyway.” Cherry 2000 watched her lap.

“Yes, I will, that’s true.”

She looked up. “And one day I’ll use yours.”

“When you come up with a purpose,” her mother said. “Something that drives you, an artistic or social passion, right, Charlie?”

“Right,” he said.

“Charlie and I are artists. Teachers. We’re driven.” Mei raised her voice even louder to give her the hard sell, an almost Pentecostal rhythm. “And I pray, I really do,

that you'll be inspired, inspired to action one day like we are." She squealed, and Charlie almost slammed on the brakes. "Oh, look, my doll painted her nails while I was getting better. Let me see!" Mei took her daughter's hand. "I want you to paint mine for me before you fall asleep. I love that glitter! I love it!" Charlie couldn't believe she was so excited.

"I don't want to," Cherry 2000 said. "Not in the car."

"Oh, yes indeed, painting nails, applying beauty products in the car is the mark of a professional woman, a real woman. Feminist, yes, but allowances must be made. They must be made." She put her hand in the center of the wheel, over the horn. "Look at those nails, Charlie. Look at them. You see those high ridges, those grooves?" He looked down, saw uneven yellow nails with sloping nailbeds. "Those are the marks of my incredible life experience, life-shaping dramas. All the little earthquakes that have shaken my body, my mind, and cause me to shake the lives of others, have left these exquisite formations, these little ridges of remembrance." He looked at her eyes; they were bigger than he remembered. "The body," she whispered, close to his ear, "the body holds all memories."

He wanted that to be a lie. He would prove that was a lie, just for his own sake. He spoke very slowly. "I think it's a fungus that causes those ridges. There's an ad for an anti-fungal nail cream on TV."

She moved back to her side of the car. "That's not true. That's not true, is it, baby?"

"I'll polish your nails if you want. Here, give me your hand."

"No, let's be still now, if we can. Let's make no smells or noises and let Mr. Man concentrate on his driving. Look, you better start moving. I will be there by dark; I will get a full night's sleep, not because I give a shit about the interview, like I'd ever teach there after a semester at Duke—it's leverage, it's just for leverage--but because I want to be ready to roar back down this road in the morning."

Charlie had not thought enough about leverage. He considered it. A rental car; a poet; a girl; a rabbit, and Charlie behind the wheel, in charge of everything for everyone.

"I think it's snowing," her daughter said, and she was right. They'd just hit the Virginia line and it wasn't even one and the first flakes were falling on the windshield.

"Snow is not a remembrance. Snow is not a hindrance. Charlie will get us there. Charlie will go faster and faster and faster." Mei was almost screaming. "Go to sleep, Cherry 2000, and Momma will take care of everything."

"Look, I'm doing 70, and I'm not gonna get arrested for you."

"Drive."

By the time they reached Wytheville, the snow and the pain in his mouth had bonded into one white and blinding smack. The tapping of Mei's nails on the dash kept him alert.

"Pull over," she said suddenly. "Pull over right this minute." He glanced at the sleeping girl in the back. "Pull over."

He eased off the shoulder and put on his blinkers. He'd seen a call box a half mile or so back on the other side of the interstate. It wasn't that cold; he could let them stay in the car and he'd walk back to it. Maybe baby. Mei reached into her bag, and pulled out a vial. She didn't even look to make sure the girl was still sleeping. "You will do this, and you will do this now. And if you don't, I will snort it all and I will drive this

cheap-ass car like it should be driven.”

“But you don’t drive,” Charlie said. “You don’t have a license.”

“It’s your choice. Here,” she handed him the vial and a rolled-up bill.

“But you’re in AA.”

“Yeah, but I’m not in NA, if that’s any of your business.”

“But I thought if you don’t do one, then you shouldn’t…”

“You think I love Mt. Airy? Meetings are good for a great many things.”

He stared at the vial. He hadn’t done coke in a long time; he could usually take it or leave it. We all have our things. It would help out; Mei had known and met his need before he asked. Maybe there was something to poetry after all. She laid a careful line on the laminated map and he snorted it. Nice, bitter wake-up at the back of his throat. It would counteract the Vicodin. He snorted another line, and then one more for good measure because she kept laying them down.

“That’s a good boy,” she told him. “There’s just one thing.”

“What?” He smiled at her. “What?”

“What if you kill me?”

“What?”

“What if you’re coked up and popping pills, and I’m not wearing my seatbelt, and you slide off the road or into a Kroger truck and you kill me? Mei? The famous poet.”

And then: “I’m in the car too, Momma.”

He thought the girl was still asleep. She looked like she was going to cry, and Charlie suddenly felt he could speak for her, through her. “What if I ram into a guardrail and its sheared end impales you, but doesn’t kill you. Doesn’t kill me, or Cherry 2000. We walk away, completely unhurt, as a matter of fact, better than ever, but you are maimed for life.”

“How?” Mei asked.

“The guardrail shatters your spine and you are paralyzed. You can’t even speak. Your daughter feeds you and I take out your pails of shit, and my university still offers you the job and you graciously accept it. You have a chair named for you in the English Department, and you sit in it for the rest of your life.”

Mei leaned back. “Maxine Kumin has published two books since the horse accident, and Stanley Elkin only improved in his wheelchair. His students waited on him hand and foot.”

“And we’re all holding our breaths to see when Christopher Reeve will breathe on his own again,” Charlie offered. His dry socket had stopped hurting; his teeth tingled but they made him happy.

Cherry 2000 was really crying now.

Mei opened the car door. “Dry her off, Charlie. I’m going to take a leak in the field.”

They watched Mei walk out into the snow. She bent under a barbed wire fence and lifted her skirt without looking back. She squatted.

“Should we set Frida Kahlo free?” Charlie asked the girl. “We have leverage.” He knew now he was fully capable of this act, but she shook her head. “Okay then. I’ve got to see a man about a horse. I’ll be right back.”

He walked just over the lip of the road into the grass, in the sights of both the mother and the daughter, but he didn’t have to pee. He pulled the last empty box from

his jacket pocket, and unwrapped it from its nest of paper towels. A last green strand of hair floated into the air, and was lifted in celebration by the wind. Charlie filled the box with snow, packing it carefully with his gloveless fingers. Everything would melt away, and that was fine. He wasn't going to call Ben again for news.

He looked back at the car. At the girl in the window and the rabbit in the cage, both framed by metal and snow. If I *could* keep you in a box, my girl, my muse, would I? Could I?

SHAPESHIFTING

Oh, God, this is a bad sign. Last night I had to get up three times and turn on the light to check that my boyfriend, Luc, had not turned into a giant squid. That's every night this week I've had to check, except for Wednesday—we both got so drunk on Wednesday that if he'd been Godzilla and blown up the building with a giant flaming fart I wouldn't have noticed. I felt around on the nightstand for my glasses, then I slid out of bed and tiptoed to the doorway and eased up the light switch, the dimmer I installed three years ago for the explicit purpose of trying to catch Mohammad, the writer I was seeing, in the act of transformation, the reversion of the sleek brown beauty of his face to the scaly visage of a beetle. With each man, even the one-night stands, I've had an incontrovertibly strong intuition about what specific type of creature they might be hiding beneath the envelopes of their skins. With Luc, as I said, I'm getting the image of a squid: long, all-embracing tentacles with suction cups and enormous, wet, rolling, lidless eyes. I figure it's the light that *immediately*, literally in the blink of an eye, changes them back to human form, these metamorphosists, and so with a dimmer I have a better chance of documenting my suspicions. The first time I tried the dimmer on Mohammad, I think I caught him with a couple of extra eyes before he adjusted to the light. Three times last night I felt Luc changing in the bed beside me, but each time I missed it and found only his deceptive humanity in the light.

The night it started with Luc we'd had a bad fight about alleged flirtations, on both sides, at a party we'd been to down in Soho, but this stuff is *not* my imagination or the mere manifestation of any gender-based paranoias. I am not taking any psychotropic medications, and am no longer even in the care of a therapist. Luc woke me in the middle of the night with the sleep-altering prompt of an amazingly insistent, and inexplicably larger than usual, erection, sleeping, as we were, in our usual cozy spoon position, him curled behind me. Before I could say "jiminy cricket," he was wrapping himself around me, and then he was inside me, deeper and higher than he'd ever thrust and with a hard undulating motion that I thought at first might be some new technique—ah, but where would he suddenly have picked up a new technique? Besides the greater power and size of the thing, I also felt a distinct sucking action against the walls of my vagina, which, granted, did instigate one of the most powerful orgasms I've ever experienced, so it's not to say that the situation is completely without its merits, but there I was, still half-asleep and in a sweet post-coital daze when it hit me that it was happening: the man I loved had changed in the dark. I rolled over and felt his face, but by then it was too late. I turned on the light, but of course there was no giant, hairless squid dome; on the pillow lay his beautiful, human head, the eyes already closed. I ran to the bathroom and took out my diaphragm to see if there was some hideous haiku of squiddy passion sprayed on it in black ink, but there was nothing but the sticky trail of my boyfriend's humanity. It's all very quick and very clever with these metamorphosists; we're not supposed to know, and if we do know, we're not supposed to

acknowledge it. It has occurred to me that there's a good chance Luc himself doesn't know what's happening to him, but I don't know how I can bring it up, especially without concrete evidence.

I thought my luck had changed forever when I met Luc, the first man I wasn't afraid would change when I wasn't looking. I'd gone down to El Paso a year ago, a quarter-century birthday present to myself, to visit my friend, Claire, and she was friends with Luc's brother. I thought Luc was maybe the best-looking man I'd ever seen, tall and wolf-eyed and angular, and men this handsome usually make me behave like I've got a pole shoved up my ass, but I felt like myself around him. He seemed very accepting—of everything—grateful even, a very strange trait in a man that fine. We all went out to a lowdown bar and got drunk on beer and tequila, and by the end of the night I asked him call me by my real name, Sheileen, after Claire had introduced me as "Shei." Boy, was she surprised. She knew there hadn't been a guy since the first one in high school that I'd felt comfortable allowing the "leen" part of it.

I fucked him every night the two weeks I was there. That first night, after we'd fucked, I looked over at him sleeping, and right before I passed out, I thought: *This is real. He's no shapeshifter.* I finally got the sweet, tender peace of lying beside a man in the dark without any doubts that the face on the pillow beside me was the exact same face that, moments before, had lowered itself to mine again and again, sucking the breath in and out of my body. It was easy to let myself out and him in. What a relief that was. And now I'm afraid it's gone and I don't know how to get it back.

Today I fall asleep on the sofa in the living room and wake to a sudden, sharp cold on my belly. I gasp and open my eyes and see Luc's outstretched arm above me. A drop of liquid forms at the base of his closed fist and falls on my stomach. I look up at him, and his face is a blur. He doesn't speak. I sit up fast; I want to find my glasses so I can see if he's smiling. I pat down the coffee table with my hand, my eyes not leaving his face. He slowly lowers his fist, still leaking, until it's an inch from my mouth and then turns his hand thumb up, and opens his fist. I look down at the ice cube melting in his palm and he presses the fleshy side of his hand into the groove of my chin. He tilts his palm and I lean my head back and the ice slides into my mouth. I hold it there, sucking, happy, not wanting it to melt. I lean down and scour the mess of magazines on the coffee table for my glasses, but I don't see them.

"Here they are," Luc says, and bends to the side table. He hands me my glasses and I put them on.

"Thanks," I say, moving the last bit of the ice cube to the side of my mouth. "You're home early."

"The bookstore closed at 4:00 today so I could have the boys inventory the new stock ." I'm proud of him; he got pulled up to assistant manager at the Strand last month.

I'm suddenly aware that I'm wearing only my bra and panties. I'm caught. I pretend to look around for my robe, which I know is still in the bedroom.

"Afternoon nap?" he asks. After a year of living together, he's used to my naps—I have that midday luxury because I do all my legal editing work from home (I'm very fast so I charge by the page instead of by the hour)--but I always try to turn in for the night when he does.

"Yeah, I was reading and I guess I fell asleep." He moves out of my way as I stand up and stretch. I pick up the book from between the fat sofa pillows. The ice has melted down the back of my throat and I want to kiss him with my cold, wet mouth. I reach out my arms for him but he steps back and gives me a quick look up and down, not smiling. Here it comes. This shit again.

"You remembered to take off your glasses but you forgot to close the drapes?" he asks, but it's not a question. He sweeps his arm toward the wide expanse of the sliding glass doors. We live in an apartment, 26 floors up, across from the Flat Iron Building on 23rd Street. At least he didn't catch me out on the balcony like he did last week; I managed to distract him mid-scene with a blowjob using ice cubes. Yes, I do like to sun myself on the balcony, tan myself a little since it's already mid-May and I know we only have the money to go out to Fire Island for one week this summer. I don't consider myself an exhibitionist. I'm not sure what I'm doing exactly; testing him, I think, now that I've found what he does not accept; testing myself, showing my shape in the light.

"I'll close the drapes now," I say, and walk to the sliding glass doors. I make a show of standing outside the frame of the glass as I pull the drapes closed. I see an empty glass on the side table. Was he having a drink and watching me sleep? It was daylight—what did he expect to see? *I* hadn't changed. "What were you drinking?"

"Water," he says. "With ice."

"It's almost mimosa time," I say brightly. "You want one?"

"And you forgot to put on your robe when you took off your clothes?" he asks.

"Look, give me a break. I fell asleep in my underwear in the living room. Do you want me to fix you a drink or not?" I head to the kitchen and open the fridge.

"You must enjoy being watched by all those men in the Flat Iron offices or you wouldn't keep doing it, Sheileen. You've invited what--maybe five hundred mens' eyes into our home."

I picture the eyeballs rolling in through the sliding glass door, leaving viscous trails across the wooden floor, exchanging glances, sliding into each other as they all try to stay focused on me, asleep in my underwear, my demure, white cotton underwear. Not Victoria's Secret, more like Victoria's Open Book.

I cross to the kitchen--separated from the living room by a breakfast bar, but no wall—and get two fluted champagne glasses out of the top cabinet. I open the freezer and remove a blue plastic ice tray and put two ice cubes each in the glasses, put it back, and open the fridge. I pull out the frosted, black bottle of the cheap champagne we buy by the case--closer to sparkling wine than real champagne--and the orange juice to pummel it with, the pulpy kind. Liquid to swim through, to bathe in, during our arguments; more arguments, more alcohol. Fighting is an excuse to drink, and of course, drinking is an excuse to fight. Either way ends with fucking. I pop the cork (I'm very good at that now) and pour the champagne, overflow it. I don't wipe the glasses; I carry them dripping into the living room and hand him his.

After a first gulp that drains half, I put down my glass. "Look at this," I say, snapping the crotch of my bikini panties. "It's not like I'm prancing around in a thong and a see-through bra. This isn't even sexy." I wait for him to say, "It is to me," but he doesn't.

"Oh, I see. Like those men are just watching you in your bathing suit asleep on a towel at the beach. The creatures order in lunch and stay glued to their seats just to watch you."

"Right," I say, "lo mein hanging from their mouths. Of course, women are probably watching me too."

"You think it's all a joke," Luc says, "but you have no idea." He lights a cigarette and finishes with his usual: "You have no idea what men are like."

"Show me what you're like today," I say, walking into the bedroom with the open champagne bottle and the carton of orange juice. I put them down on the carpet by the bed.

"It's all a way in with you," Luc says and follows me into the bedroom with our glasses, where he probably believes we are protected by the heavy gray drapes standing guard. I think of the eyeballs pressed against the bedroom window, lashes flattened against the glass, frustrated that we are hidden from them. I don't take off my bra or panties; he pushes the crotch of the panties to the side and fucks me from behind, like we did in the ocean at Fire Island when I was wearing a bathing suit. He comes quickly, much quicker than usual, fueled by anger, I guess, which is an aphrodisiac for him, but not for me. Today inside me, there's only his penis. I think of the sucking, undulating tentacle I know he had last night and the way it fishtailed inside me. Today, I don't come at all. Afterwards, I take our glasses to the kitchen for more ice. When I come back to bed, his eyes are closed, his arm across his chest. Even with the drapes closed, it's still light in the room so I don't worry about him changing. There is no cover of darkness yet; I can relax. Still I put my glasses back on so I can see his face clearly. I pour more champagne from the bottle by the bed and nudge him with the wet lip of the bottle.

"Hey. Tell me a man story," I say. "A real man story since you think I don't know men." I am wide awake. I want a story. One of us usually tells a story after afternoon sex, a strategy to keep us both from falling into late naps that might throw us off and keep us up all night. It started at the beginning when we had so much to tell each other we could barely sleep. New love likes an interrogation, a call and response. Now most of the questions don't seek real answers; they're rhetorical strategies posed to underscore assumptions, make a point, and the answers are leaden blocks of justification. I put my drink on the bedside table and rest my head on his stomach, bouncing my head up and down--unlike my stomach, there is no fat on him to jiggle--until he opens his eyes. He lowers his chin and looks down at me for a long time, so long and hard that I finally look away.

"Really?" he asks finally. "You want to hear what men are really like? Because I've been wanting to tell you."

"Yes," I say, waiting for the magician smile.

"You're sure?" He doesn't smile at all. Not like he usually does before a story.

"Yes," but now I'm a little afraid. But if he doesn't fall asleep, he can't change, so I want him to keep talking.

"This is the story of how I came to you," he says.

"How you came to me?"

"How I got here. To New York."

I sit up. "I know how you got here. I invited you to come and you flew from El Paso."

"No, I didn't."

"You said you did."

"When you asked me to come, did you think I would?" he asks, lighting what I know will be the first of many cigarettes.

"I didn't know. I wanted you to." It's true.

"But were you surprised?"

"I guess so."

"I surprised you." It's a statement.

"Yes. I was surprised you showed up just two weeks later."

"Too soon?"

"Fast, that's all. You know it was fast. You were fast; you showed up so soon." I think I see, for one split-second, an undulating movement under the sheets—and then it stops..

"Man in love."

"And with almost nothing, just that bag and that knapsack. I kept waiting for your things to arrive."

"I didn't really have any things."

"But you do now."

Luc opens his arms toward me, toward the room. "Now I have things, but I don't know if they're really mine. All those eyes."

I can't let him focus on the eyes again. "You left the truck with your brother in El Paso, so you what--took Amtrak or a bus?"

"No. I hitchhiked. I had a lot less money than you thought I had."

"I never thought you had any money." What the hell is he talking about?

"I didn't even have a credit card then. And that was Frank's truck."

"I don't understand what you're telling me. That you had no money and you lied about transportation? It's okay." It's not like me to be so understanding. I don't think I want to hear anything more damning. "You got the job at the bookstore the first week and you had almost five hundred dollars to chip in on the rent."

"I had to come to you right away. That fast--I was sure I loved you. I was caught up in the romance of everything, the impulsiveness of everything. Even the cross-country trip--hitching my way to you seemed like a romantic idea."

"So why didn't you just tell me when you got here instead of pretending you flew into LaGuardia? What's the big deal?"

"This is a man story." He stops and stares at the ceiling. "You sure you want to hear it?"

"What? You fucked another woman?" The bed seems to shift; there's definite movement.

He smiles at me. "I was taking any ride that would get me north and east in a hurry. No order, no plan, a few truckers, a couple of days, and boom, I'd zigzaged all the way to Richmond. No shower, crap food, I caught a little sleep sitting up in the cabs of the trucks, but I was happy as shit. Even my stinking sweat smelled good to me. I was getting very close. And then outside Richmond, I couldn't get a ride for almost a day, probably because of the way I looked. Three am and I give up and get a cab to take me to the bus station. The ticket was \$89 one-way to New York, that high because there was no advance purchase. I'm standing outside the bus station smoking a cigarette when this

guy, an older guy with black hair and sideburns, a little like Elvis, comes up and asks me where I'm going. New York, I tell him, to see my girl, and he says, what a coincidence, me too. He told me he couldn't leave until the next day, but I could stay with him at his house. Saved me 89 bucks." He watches me; I keep my face blank until I hear whatever it is I'm waiting for.

"Go on. You go to Elvis's house..."

"We go to his house and he lets me take a shower. Gives me a clean towel out of the dryer and everything. I wanted to be all cleaned up for you."

I thought of his face when he came to the door. It was sweaty and his hair was damp and flat.

"Then he got out a bottle of Jim Beam and we sat around drinking. Smoked half a joint I had left on me from this guy in New Orleans. We got pretty wasted. There was only one bed," Luc says.

I don't understand. "What?"

"I had to get here to you. I did it for you."

"You did what?" I don't want to understand. "You did what?" I sink the glass into the hollow beneath his ribs and hold it there to see if he'll flinch from the cold. He doesn't move. "There wasn't a sofa?" I ask slowly.

"He was taking me where I wanted to go."

"To bed?"

"To you. And I saved almost a hundred dollars."

I can't think. But I can think. "You had sex with this man for a hundred dollars?"

"No. I mean... No. All he did was give me a blowjob and he didn't pay me."

I see Elvis, not the young, sleek Hounddog Elvis, but the late, monstrous, bloated Las Vegas Elvis in a white spangled jumpsuit, cramming his mouth with fried peanut butter sandwiches and my boyfriend's cock.

"It's not like I'm gay—good God, you'd know that if anyone on earth does. I can't stop fucking you for the life of me."

I tip my glass over on his stomach—not much in it for a scene. Nothing moves in the bed but me. The liquid travels down the slope of his pelvis, the orange pulp caught in his pubic hair. "You flip out because I take a nap in my underwear without closing the drapes but you sell yourself to a strange man? That's called prostitution."

"It was a blowjob. If you were a man, you'd understand. You close your eyes and it feels good, whoever's doing it."

"Really?"

"And the other thing: This is how far we'll go: for a woman, to even look at a woman, for sex, for love, for anything real."

"Real? You're telling me *this* is an education in the real?" A melting ice cube settles in his navel and he takes it. He lets it melt. Tiny rivulets of water run off both sides of his stomach onto the sheets.

"Yeah. Maybe."

My side of the bed's getting wet. I stand up. My hands are sticky.

"So Elvis drove you to New York?"

"His name's wasn't Elvis. His name..."

"I could give a fuck what his name was. Don't even say it."

I stand over him. The sheets are stained with water and champagne and orange pulp on both sides of him, and still the only thing he moves is his arm back and forth to his mouth to smoke.

“He dropped me off downstairs. He left me his girlfriend’s number. She lives in the East Village somewhere. A musician.”

“Did you call him?”

“No, I didn’t. But it’s not like he was a monster; he wanted to suck my dick, that’s all.”

“You better change these fucking sheets,” I tell him. “I’m not going to do it.” I look at the shrouded windows. It’s dark outside. I walk out of the room naked. I get the other bottle of champagne out of the refrigerator and pop it open. No, I push the cork back in, I get it half back in, and put the bottle back in the fridge and get out the cheap, hurting stuff: a Rheingold six-pack. Cans. I open the sliding glass doors to the balcony and put the six-pack, my cigarettes and a small, enameled sushi dish on the concrete. I go out and slide the door closed behind me. I sit down naked in the lawn chair we keep out here and cross my legs. I crack a beer and smoke. I tap my cigarette into the sushi dish. It’s probably 65 out here. I’m not cold. I don’t know if the neighbors can see me. I don’t care if the neighbors can see me. I wait for eyes, any eyes, but I don’t see anyone looking down at me from the offices across the street, not like all the other times. Tonight I’m the one in the dark. I watch the last lights go off in the giant crown of the Flat Iron Building. The smoke from my cigarette insinuates itself like tentacles around the iron railings of the balcony.

It’s maybe half an hour and Luc slides open the door. “What the hell do you think you’re doing?” he asks, and his voice is loud, but he sounds more scared than angry. “Get inside.”

I don’t move a hair.

“Get inside,” he says again. “You’re fucking crazy.” He walks away and then comes back with my blue robe. “At least put this on, for God’s sake. Everyone can see you. Anyone can see you.” He drapes the robe over the front of my body; I’m surprised he’s not rougher.

“Nobody’s looking,” I say. I don’t turn around.

“Are you gonna come in?” he asks.

“Was that all true?”

“I don’t know. You be the judge.”

He stands behind me for a minute and I wonder if he’s going to change his story. Then he goes back inside. He leaves the door open. I sit out here, prim and ladylike on my lawn chair, and slam back another beer, picturing in slow motion Luc’s beautiful cock sliding in and out Elvis’s mouth, the black sideburns moving as he sucks. And then Elvis’s giant head blurs, shakes, a tentacle explodes through his skull and the pompadour lifts off his head and I see the sheen of my brown hair. His head splits open and I see my mouth open wide, my lips around the throb of Luc’s cock, the throb of the squid. And then it’s Elvis again.

After that, I don’t care that the fourth, fifth, and sixth beers are sickeningly warm. I bet Luc’s drinking the other bottle of champagne. I don’t have a watch on so I don’t know what time it is when I go inside, trailing the robe behind me, but the lights are off and he seems to be asleep, snoring lightly. I crawl over him—when he passes out drunk

he sprawls out and takes up the whole bed—and lie down on the sticky sheets I knew he wouldn't change, and wait for the fear to overtake me about what kind of *thing* is lying in bed beside me. I wait, but it doesn't happen. I can't believe it—I look over at the shape of his head in the dark and it seems perfectly human to me.

I still don't want to touch him, but at least he seems human and I'm able to fall asleep.

LETTERS

Turn the unlined paper sideways, so that you have a frame for a landscape of yourself instead of the traditional portrait.

You MUST use the ballpoint pen provided. Do not use any other writing implement!

Use your own words. If you're stuck, I will provide you with a few lines to copy.

Write about something that moves you, gets you going, about which you have a strong positive or negative opinion.

Write freely and quickly.

Sign your name.

Mrs. Violet Caton-Smith plumps the mismatched cushions of my brown velvet sofa absently as she writes on the clipboard. I lounge on the chaise—the only other place to sit in my apartment/office when I have a client—and point my left foot not toward, but at, the Chrysler Building framed in a pane of my window, blue-grey through the fluttering pink sheers. Consciously or unconsciously, every external point of the body focuses on some object in the surroundings, so you might as well focus on monuments.

"Time," I say after ten minutes, and she gives me the clipboard. Two dense paragraphs on fried cod. I would've bet my panties on King Charles Spaniels or tea rose hybrids. I stereotype people, I admit, but usually I'm great at it.

"Yes," I say, "this is excellent. But to properly determine the strength of your particular emotive-motor responses—the kinetic aspect of graphoanalysis, more focused than the larger field of graphology--perhaps a few more lines on a subject even closer to your heart. What's your son's name again?"

"Oh, Rufus. Of course. I'll write about Rufus."

She readjusts her bifocals and then her blue eyes disappear beneath her enormous velvet hat, which is shaped like a World War II submarine, if the Allies had employed them in alarming shades of pink. The periscope of the lone spray of silken amaryllis watches me. The answering machine clicks—everything is turned down whenever I have a client, but still there's the tiny click. The caller ID blinks me that it's her again. Mrs. Caton-Smith is still busy, so I pick up and carry the phone into the bathroom.

"Where's the pound cake?" my mother asks, and before I can answer, "Where's the pound cake?"

"I don't know," I say, and then I repeat myself too, louder. The buzzer buzzes.

"That must be Rufus," Mrs. Caton-Smith calls out, still writing. "Early bird."

"I have to go," I tell my mother, and I will not feel guilty about letting my thoughts slide so quickly back down the hill—or is it up?—to me. What I need. She is still speaking when I replace the phone in its cradle and clatter to the hall, glad that I'm wearing my three-inch Chinese mules. I buzz him up, knowing that long legs climbing four flights, even two steps at a time, gives me time to reapply my lipgloss in the hall mirror, and to smooth behind my ears the gold-lighted curls that the August humidity has excited. I wait for the second knock, and then unbolt the three Medico locks.

“We’re not that safe in London,” he says, coming in sideways through the door. I don’t move--we’re not six inches apart in the narrow hallway. I wish I’d brushed my teeth again.

“Better safe than sorry,” I say. Mother of all cliches, but he smiles.

“Could be.” I realize he’s waiting for me to move first, so I back up and usher him into the room.

“Yes, your mother’s almost done here. Finishing up her sample. But if you want to stay for the analysis...”

“Oh, Rufus, dear, you’ll want to hear this,” his mother says, beckoning with her still-gloved hand. “Miss Ferris here did a marvelous job with Aunt Evangeline when she was over here. She hasn’t been half the nosy gnat she used to be, you know, and she’s learned to balance her checkbook without Doctor’s help.”

Rufus cocks an eyebrow in my general direction. I love a man who can cock an eyebrow.

I flatten my pout into a more professorial line. “Evangeline was cramming words right up to the edge of the page, curling them up the side, and we worked to widen her narrow right margins to increase her respect for others’ boundaries. We also tried to balance the far right-leaning slant of her handwriting, and brought attention to her oft-missed t-bar crosses.”

“You really believe all this then?” Rufus leans back easily against my fake marble fireplace.

“Don’t be rude, dear,” cries Mrs. Caton-Smith, her penciled eyebrows almost meeting beneath the brim of the submarine.

Usually, the skepticism leaches nothing from inside me, but I suddenly want this stranger to believe in it all: my fireplace, my profession. Me.

“The actual science of graphology goes back to 1622, when Alderisus Prospero first postulated his ‘Ideographa,’ followed by the German movement...”

“It’s a science, is it?” Rufus asks, leaning back further, and I fear for the fireplace, which I’ve never attached to the wall in case I ever want to move it around the room.

“The Library of Congress changed the Dewey Decimal System classification for Graphology from the Occult to the Psychology section in 1980.”

“That’s their big library in the capital, Rufus,” says Mrs. Caton-Smith.

“Ah, well, if it’s in the Psychology section.” Rufus nods.

“And there have been several studies that compared the penmanship patterns of people who have lost their arms or were partially paralyzed and were writing with the pen held with their toes or their mouths to their writing patterns before the accidents,” I am speaking much louder than I want to, and I lower myself. “So these studies found that, once the subjects adjusted to foot- or mouth-writing, almost all of their patterns reverted to the same patterns as their earlier writing by hand, proving that it is all ‘brain-writing,’ after all, a diagram of the unconscious.” I wipe my hands on my skirt.

“Well,” says Rufus. “I am impressed.” And he is; he looks from my eyes to my bare legs and back again. “I’m very relieved to know that if I have to write with my foot, I’ll still face the same psychological perils.”

I can’t resist a quick glance at his feet: wingtips, but not too polished; big, but not too big.

Mrs. Caton-Smith smiles at both of us. “Could you do the analyzing for me now? I hate to be forward, but we have a 6:00 dinner reservation at that Russian Teahouse before the theater.”

I apologize and pull up my desk chair, down to the business of reading between her lines, extracting from her treatises on the excellence of fried cod, and of her son, respectively, the threadwork of her personality and suggestions on which threads she might want to tighten, or loosen, as she sees fit. It’s not thirty seconds before Rufus is leaning over my shoulder, watching me compare the strong upper loops of the “b” in “batter” and “l” in “filet” to the weaker lower loops of the “y” in “tasty” and the three “g”s in “sogging.” His mother possesses a lot of creative energy and potential, but she is repressing something, very strongly, in her lower zone. Wildly generous flourishes at the ends of her words show the same thing about her nature. Affectionate, nurturing large “o”s and “a”s, and very healthy connective letter formations. I thought so. And now the Rufus paragraph: Cambridge, architect on downtown renovation project—Bingo! B-I-N-G-O!; was a chatty little boy with an Argyle Terrier named Lord Minton... damn, he’s thirty-two, four consequential years younger... Fuck me--I’m not supposed to be reading for content, for substance over style, but I can’t concentrate on the strokes in the Rufus paragraph with The Real Thing standing over me.

“I hate to do this,” I say, turning in my chair, “but I don’t think I can complete a really thorough analysis without making you late for dinner.” My bare knee knuckles the soft cotton of his khakis. “I could have it done by tomorrow.”

“That’s quite alright, dear,” Mrs. Caton-Smith says, and Rufus goes to help her up from the sofa. “I’ve lived almost seventy years with this personality, so I think I can wait another day or two to find out about all my... about my...”

“Underpinnings,” Rufus says. “Infrastructure.”

“Architect talk.” Mrs. Caton-Smith waves her hand. “Perhaps we can meet for tea later this week, if you have the time.”

Yes! I am dead-on about the lady’s generous flourishes and open vowels.

“Or a drink,” Rufus says. “Or dinner.”

The machine clicks on again, and we all look at it, the black box humming on the side table. She interrupts me even now.

“Dear, please take your calls. They might be important,” Mrs. Caton-Smith says. I shake my head and take a card from my cardholder on the desk.

“For you then.” I hand it to Rufus. “Your mother already has my number.”

“What—no writing sample from you, Miss Suzy Ferris, our expert?” He looks me up and down.

“No,” I tell him. “I never write by hand. I have my own computer font, based on the perfectly balanced alphabet I developed with my mentor.” The machine hasn’t clicked off. I can’t think straight until the machine clicks off until I know she’s stopped talking. “I’ll include a disc of the program with your report, Mrs. Caton-Smith, for you to model.”

“Well, I’ve never modeled myself after anyone,” Mrs. Caton-Smith says, and for the first time since we’ve met, she looks doubtful of me.

“You don’t write by hand? Ever?” Rufus is frowning.

“Checks. I sign checks and credit card receipts, if you must know, because a signature is a constant, stylized representation only.”

His lower lip squinches to the left.

“You have my card.” The machine finally clicks off. I exhale on “Please call.” I close the door behind them, and sit down on the sofa, staring at the blinking lights of the machine. Mrs. Caton-Smith has plumped my cushions perfectly, better than I could ever do. I press the button and listen to my mother’s voice. She sounds like she’s reading a grocery list for Thanksgiving dinner: bread crumbs, celery, onions, asparagus, miniature marshmallows, but Thanksgiving is three months away and I am six hundred miles away. At least. I can’t listen to this. I turn down the volume and as soon as it clicks off, I call Laura.

“I thought I told you to take my number off her speed dial.”

“No hello?” Laura asks. “I did take your number off. Yours and everybody else’s, even daddy’s at the shop.”

“What if it’s an emergency, though? What if she really needs to reach one of us?”

“If it’s an emergency, I’m here or Betty’s here. And she has emergencies all the time.”

“She’s never alone?”

“Not even in the bathroom. Last week I let her go in there alone, and three days later I found her poop in the pink toilet paper cozy.”

“I don’t want to hear the details.”

“I bet you don’t.”

“You’re the real nurse....”

“So, what’s up with you?”

“Englishman, beautiful, probable. Dinner, I think, with him and his mother.”

“His mother? Even for you....”

“She’s equally wonderful. A client with fabulously well-balanced lower loops.”

“I don’t need to hear the details.”

Kiss mother for me. Trace some comforting words across the blanketing slate. Take my number out of her head.

Two days later Rufus calls and asks if I can join him and his mother for dinner the next night at Finnio’s, near his apartment in the West Village. Yes, I’m all unqualified yes; the analysis is done and the mint green silk tank dress is on hold. The afternoon of the dinner Mrs. Caton-Smith herself calls, and I’m with a client, but when I see the name of her hotel, The Gramercy, on the ID, I pick up. She snuffles a little into the phone. Sinuses, she apologizes. Terrible sinuses. My mother has the same, I tell her, and it’s perfectly okay.

“Your mother’s sick?”

“Oh, no. She’s fine. She’s more than fine,” I hear. “We’re all fine.”

“Good. You can handle Rufus by yourself then?” she asks, and I hear almost too much--probably too much--camaraderie in her tone, but I’m glad, anyway. Regardless. Irregardless. “Just don’t let him drink too much,” she says.

Rufus is running late with an appointment with a contractor, and so my dinner is no-lactose pizza with Freesia around the corner. She wants me to make a list of the last year’s men—just the last year, she counsels—in an honest effort to determine who did what first when, and therefore, who was really the one with *issues*. Who is really the one

with issues? She is, that's what I determine, because she's still having one-night stands, a habit I'm long over, and because she has never held an engagement—which I have for over six months before relinquishing it over three bottles of bad sparkling wine. Not even champagne.

No cheese and so I'm perfectly unbloated when Rufus and I finally meet for drinks at The Epstein Bar in Tribeca. This late, and his eyes are still perfectly clear, clearer than mine. I hand over the two-paged graphoanalysis of his mother, sealed in my signature nubby-textured, cream-colored business envelope with her name typed on the front. Don't open it, I tell him, laying it across his open palms, and he holds it there for a moment, as if waiting for it to magically unseal and unfold itself, before he slips it inside the suitjacket pocket hanging on the back of his barstool. Don't ask me to do you, please please don't ask me to do you, I pray, and he doesn't. I don't want to analyze him this soon. I look away when he signs the drink tab, terrified that I might glimpse the enormous, overweening capitals of an egomaniac, or the double-looped o's that had told me Vincenzo was a liar long before I ever caught him at it. Two drinks quick—he has an early meeting and I have a late client—and then one kiss, slow and opening, in front of the cab he's hailed for me.

"I'm sorry your mother couldn't make it," I say before I get in.

"You're kidding, right?"

No, I'm not.

On Saturday night, we go to the bistro up my street on the corner of Ninth Avenue, and sit at one of the small scroll-topped tables in the back garden, our heads almost touching, his dark bangs reaching out to my lighter ones. Static or destiny.

"I love your name," I say. I don't tell him I'm already seeing it spraypainted in phosphorescent silver on the ceiling over my futon at night, or the letters encircling my wrist in delicate illuminated script as if a medieval monk has painted them there—the strong "R" meeting the seductive round back of the "S" just where my pulse beats, just where I once made a jagged cut with a nail. "ROOFUS. I want to spell it R-O-O-F-US, like the roof of the world."

"Or the roof of your mouth, where it might get stuck," he says.

I hurry on, feeling a blush. "Or maybe with a "ph" instead of an "f" to make you sound even smarter, a little pharmaceutical."

"I'd like to sound smarter," he says, wiping flecks of Guinness foam from his upper lip. Thank God this place has Guinness, even if it is in a bottle. "I'd like to *be* smarter."

"Oh, you are smart," I say, eating it up. He's proven it by pursuing the opposite strategy of most men, pre-bedding.

"You Americans always think the English sound smarter. Look at New York's theatrical imports from the West End. It's just me diction you're a sucker for."

I clink my glass against his bottle. "Cheers." He is smart and maybe honest. I picture the needling points of the "n"s that will convey the sharpness of his intellect and the round, smooth, only-once-looped "o"s that will showcase his honesty in the sentence he will write for me—on a mirror, perhaps, or in herculean crimson cursive on a white banner strung all the way across my street, from my window to the flagpole of the post office: "I could never leave you." One sharp "n" and two "o"s faithful as doves.

My cell vibrates in my tiny evening purse. It might be a client, I tell him, and peek at the display. Home. I hold up my finger to warn him and take it.

"Laura?" There is no sound. "Dad?" There's nothing, and then far away, a noise like a child lightly smacking her lips together. How can you possibly remember my cell number when you can't remember where the silverware drawer is or how to button your own blouse? I want to ask, but I don't.

"Family?" Rufus asks.

"They'll try again."

"Do you need...?"

"No. Back to you. How I can prove you're smart," I say.

"Be my guest."

"Amaryllis."

"What?"

"Spell it." I am so sure of him. It's easy.

"Right. A-M-A-R-Y-L-L-I-S. It's a flower with a long..."

"No," I shush. "It's the spelling that gets me, not the meaning of anything. It's the letters." He's watching me too closely as I struggle to explain. "I thrum on a letter-by-letter basis. I was the Tennessee State Spelling Champion in 19...something."

"Something?"

"I hope even my mother forgets the exact day I was born," I tell him, finishing off my wine spritzer. Does she remember that?

"Fair enough. So it's the letters that absorb you, and that's the connection to the handwriting analysis?"

"Something like that." Again with the somethings. "May I give you another word?"

"Sure," he says. "Give us another."

"Lagniappe."

"Good one," he nods. I have no idea what it means, but I can see it flashing on a distant neon billboard in my head. "Lagniappe. L-A-G-N-I-A-P-P-E."

Yes! My nipples are hard. "Mnemonic." I am so glad to be horny.

"Sod off," he says, pushing back his chair. I want to cry. Then he grins and nails it. "Vichyssoise" he gets before the last cold "s" has left my mouth. I take a deep breath.

"Brobdingnagian." If he gets this, I swear I'll fuck him against a lamppost before we get home.

"B-R-O-B-D..." He pauses. I can't breathe. No man has gotten this far in over five years, not since Thomas Birchfield, who had snorting, sneezing allergies nine months of the year, but could fill in my gaps, and his, with an almost endless string of long-lettered medical terminology. I put my hand on Rufus's thigh under the table.

"B-R-O-B-D-I-N-G-N..." He takes a long drag on his cigarette, squinting against the smoke. I move my hand higher. He is resolved. "A-G-I..."

And then my tongue is in his mouth before he can finish. I don't want him to get it wrong. After the long minute in which we have either embarrassed or amused the other customers, he gestures for the bill, and I stare at the mosaics of fountains on the wall while he signs. He probably thinks I'm cheap, but right now that's better than me thinking he's a block printer or worse. Ninety percent of block printers are male, and they're very defensive.

Rufus pulls away from me as we're going out the door; the eyebrow cocks. "Do you care about the meaning of that last word, Suzy?—"brobdingnagian?" he asks, pronouncing it perfectly in all its Swiftian glory, and his gaze is so direct I can't tell a lie beneath it.

"A little," I say, wincing for his sake--just in case--but he smiles, showing all his perfect, crooked teeth, and he's still smiling as we pass the lamppost.

Ride on top and toss your hair. Pretend you're in a convertible.

Do not use condoms. You started without them. Finish without them.

Oh crap. He is a responsible man, gentle but firm. It goes on.

Three weeks, five dinners, a lunch, two brunches, three independent films, and one sweaty Tibetan street fair later, and we are in my bed again. Since he's just three months into his project—the design of an AIDS memorial plaza one block from The Stock Exchange—he's still living with his expat friend, Simon, and my place, though a breadbox, is *my* breadbox.

Look up at him and widen your eyes like a teenage girl when his cock is in your mouth, like it's such a big surprise. Every time.

Kegel your pussy until your elevator can stop at all ten floors, even on the way down. Cry out over the Muzak.

Never use Muzak.

Rufus sits up in bed and reaches over me for his jacket on the chaise. Practically everything in my apartment is within arm's-reach of everything else. As I will show Rufus when the time comes, I can sit on my toilet and open the refrigerator--not that it's ever been necessary, but it's good to know.

"Here. Before I forget." He pulls a notecard-sized lavender envelope from the pocket. "A parting thank-you from my mother for your analysis. She's raving about the umbrella-stroke for the "th" thingy you suggested—self-discipline, right? She does need to lose a few pounds. Loves puddings."

"Just thank God you have a mother who connects her letters within words."

"And you don't?"

I shrug, making hedgerows with his chest hair. Fur is good, I tell him, and he says not in this heat.

Regional Spelling Finals, Oak Ridge, Tennessee, 1981. I was picturing the shapes of "nyctalopia" and "waddie" when I spotted Vivian across the auditorium. I waved, first my hand and then both arms, but she stared purposefully at the empty stage. Of course she didn't want to see me, but I could give a fuck about what she wanted.

"Vivian. Hey." She gave me a big fake smile. "You're here for the..?"

"Dramatic interpretation," she said. "'The Crucible.' You're spelling, right?"

I nodded. She really was pretty; she had her older brother's shiny auburn hair.

"Can we meet in the library after the first round?" I asked. She looked away for a second and then stood up, almost dropping "The Crucible." "I have to talk to you."

Vivian stared past me. "Look," she finally said. "I know Jimmy's my brother and all, but I can't help what happened last week."

"Please. I can't remember. You're the only other person I know who was at that party."

"All I know is.... Well, everybody knows that..." Vivian twirled her hair.

"Knows what? Knows what?"

"Ask your mom for help," she said, and walked away. My mom, I wanted to tell her, my mom didn't even take me to the hospital. My mom answered my questions with a shush.

"Good luck with fucking Arthur Miller," I shouted after her. My head was full of words, of letters arranging and rearranging themselves in jabberwocky circles.

At the end of the day, I waited for the announcement of the Dramatic Interpretation winners. Vivian placed third. I won.

Momma worked hard on the system after that, perfecting her strokes, perfecting mine. A model of clarity, of adjustment, of all the right things in all the right places. She taught me. And I teach others, and it is almost foolproof.

Rufus pulls the comforter over his head. "So Mum wants to send you an old letter of my father's for you to splash about in."

"Sure."

He closes his eyes. "Yeah, well, I think I'll try and talk her out of that one. I mean, he's dead ten years, after all. There's not much he can change about his pen pressure at this point."

"I can still see why she'd want it. And I'd be interested to examine his words myself."

Rufus slides his eyes at me, squinting one against the sudden entrance of the sun east through my far window. "But you don't want to see mine yet? The handwriting on the wall?"

I turn toward the wall as he points at it. "I want to get to know you first." Bass-ackwards from my usual. "Besides, I'm sure you can't hold a candle to your Mum." This is probably true. "

"Probably true. I will not press my script upon a lady.

"Has she tried the computer font yet?"

"She's a bit of a Luddite. Don't think she'll try that."

"She probably doesn't need it. She probably doesn't."

"Try this." he traces a large "C" on the back of my knee.

"Tickles," I say and try to jerk my leg away, but he holds my calf scizzor-locked between his stronger ones, and strokes a very slow "U" above my kneeback's crease. I hold still as he spends several seconds on each letter, and I can tell I missed a few little patches waxing midhigh. I open my legs as the last "S" in "cunnilingus" curls itself onto the landing strip I never wax, and I turn over.

I am almost asleep when I feel his fingers lightly on my back, rapid, one letter scribbled over the other, and I can't keep up. All I can feel clearly are the letters "W" and "H" followed by several more quick dashes—*Who? Where? When? Why?*-- and then

the slow, definitive last stroke, not even a letter, but punctuation. He presses several inches of a question mark into the flesh above the cleft of my buttocks, and his fingernail scrapes skin as he dots it. "What?" I try to ask, but he's gone. The door closes. I pull myself from the bed and turn naked in front of the mirror to see if I can detect the faintest prints of any of his letters, but all I can see--all I can feel--is the tiny red point of the question mark scratched between my cheeks. Wasn't there an incident like this in one of the Merchant-Ivory films? A Forster novel? He's borrowing gestures.

Does he want answers or does he want questions? I have my model.

The phone rings. Home again and I turn down the sound and press his indecipherable question back onto the sheets.

I am not returning anyone's calls. I haven't left my apartment since yesterday. I turn the lavender envelope over and over in my hands, but I can't open it. Mrs. Caton-Smith's virtues pain me. I will write a return without reading her note; surely there is nothing she might have written that I can't easily imagine. I bought a box of ten "Chagall in Nice" notecards today and I will compose a standardized teacozy of a letter. I can do that. I will handwrite it; I can handwrite a polite note to Rufus's mother. I clutch a ballpoint between my fingers. Never use a felt-tip pen; it blotches the connections between letters and partially obscures the open spaces of the loops, and the loops, we know, are the containers. Especially the vowels.

"Mrs. C," I write; I'll skip the precious "dear." I press too hard after the "C" and there's a tiny black splotch on its underside. I open another notecard. "Mrs.....C....." I begin again. The wetness of my forefinger smudges the top of the "M" into an Arc d'Triumphe.

The phone rings and I hear Rufus's voice on the answering machine. I have only one card left. I finish the note to Rufus's mother and lick the envelope closed. Put it face down on my desk.

I picture Mrs. Violet Caton-Smith showing the card to her son someday. They shake their heads together as they touch the smooth and perfect surface of my words, the font that I created. I will be far away, in another convertible, the warm wind in my hair.

I call my parent's house. Laura picks up and I ask for Momma.

"Are you sure?"

I wait and then she's breathing on the phone. I say nothing.

"Yes?" she finally says. "Yes?"

I say nothing. I keep saying nothing.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Kimberly Elkins was born in the mountains of Southwest Virginia, and attended Duke University, where she received a B.A. in English with Honors. She then moved to New York, where she had three plays produced, and worked at a variety of jobs, including legal editor and Executive Assistant to the President of Miramax Films. She has published creative nonfiction in *The Village Voice*, and fiction in *The Atlantic Monthly* and *Mudfish*, and her story "What Is Visible" will be anthologized in *The Best New American Voices 2004*. After finishing this degree, she's moving back to New York.