'Hunter S. Thompson in a miniskirt'
Wired Magazine

lisa crystal carver

drugs are nice

a memoir

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My ear is to the ground
There is movement all around
There is something going down
And I can feel it.
–*Night Fever*, Bee Gees

Prologue

I'm in the kitchen with my mother. The phone rings; she says hello and then gets kind of gray in the face. I try to read her but I can't. Finally she says: "For how long? … What am I going to do for money? … Well, you're telling her. And remember: Lisa's six." Accusatory. She passes the big green phone to me and I hold it up to my ear.

"Hi honey, it's your dad. I'm going to prison for a few years. Do you know what that means?"

I'm not used to my father's voice on the telephone; I'm used to being with him in real life, on his lap or his shoulders, or clinging to his leg. I say, "Uh-huh."

The last time I saw him, he'd pushed me out into the river in a boat I made all by myself out of an orange crate, a sheet

and some rubber from a tire. My sneakers and blue-jeaned bum were wet, and then the boat was slowly but steadily sinking. I clung to the thin wooden slats and stared mutely at my father, who looked very far away. I was falling in slow motion and I thought I was going to pee myself. Then I discovered I could stand. I stepped out of my boat and waded towards shore, where my father was laughing his head off.

As my mother claims not to know what to do with children, she hasn't done much with me so far. My father, on the other hand, has let me do everything with him: hitchhike; play poker with Reverend Bruce and the Vics—Red Vic and Black Vic—for money; get high (one time—he didn't want to stunt my growth) and listen to Pink Floyd's *Ummagumma*; steer the truck; steer a helicopter even when I aimed it straight down and the instructor, in the back seat, screamed at my father to grab the wheel from me; be his "beard" when he'd pass an afternoon with one of his "chicks." He gave me secrets to keep from my mother. When I came back from a weekend with my grandmother terrified of Hell, he explained all the religions to me, and he explained my grandmother to me. He allowed me (only me! not my mother, and not the chicks) to solve ancient philosophical dilemmas and current political crises; he'd laugh at me gently to let me know when my answer was wrong and if he said nothing, only tilted his head, I knew I was right. I knew I'd done good. He never called anything I wanted to do too dangerous and never corrected

my plans. He spread freedom out before me like a giant hole, and I fell in.

And now he's gone.

The next few years are quiet ones. I play Scrabble with my mother and mind myself for a week or two whenever doctors pull another organ out of her: spleen, gall bladder, colon, part of her small intestines, part of her large. My mother has Crohn's Disease. I'm not allowed to stay with my schoolmates' parents when she's in the hospital because then they might tell Child Protective Services that she isn't able to care for me, and I'd be taken away.

Mom and I sneak out in the middle of the night. We're three months behind in the rent. We're behind in everything. The new place has one bedroom and a kitchen/living room with a greasy couch right up next to the stove, and an attic with polka-dotted air—floating dust particles—where I spend hours and hours making costumes and puppets out of paper bags and magic markers and coat hangers, and put on plays with them for imaginary audiences. The puppets are more real to me than the kids at school, or my mother, or myself.

We move again. If only I could work up my courage and burst into the next room and turn on a light, the whispering creatures would go away. I stay put, paralysed. Sometimes I turn into other people. I am a rich, handsome orchard owner

with a heart hardened by experience but a sense of honour that cannot be corroded; or a strapping, witty time-traveller. I save the girl.

My mother takes thirty pills a day. All of them, it seems, are large, and my mother's throat, like everything else about her, is tiny. She paces the apartment with the pills held before her in her open palm. Maybe she believes that fate requires a certain amount of suffering from each of us, and she wants to be sure her full amount is seen and recognized, so no one mistakenly gives her some more.

My father calls from prison. He can only call once or twice a year, though he writes at least every month (but I can't pore over his words, because he instructs me to rip his letters up and flush them down the toilet after reading, and I do—and only the feel of his words remain, which is possibly even more enthralling then handling the actuality would be). I say into the static-y phone fast, before I can chicken out: "Do you wish I was born a boy?" The question has been weighing on me. He doesn't answer at first, and my heart is pounding and my arms get electricity in them and I can't hear what he finally does say, because it's like I've fainted even though I'm still awake. I love him so much, and maybe he doesn't love me, maybe I've disappointed him. When I can hear again, we're talking about school and my father's latest solitary confinement and his chances for parole.

After, my mother asks how he answered my boy question.

I say I don't know. She says, "Yes you do—you just got off the phone one second ago!" When she sees that I'm not going to answer, she starts ballooning up, getting tall and fat and her eyes puff up and her nose shrinks to a single line as she inhales and inhales. She's sucking all the room inside her, and there's no air for me. "Why are you so stubborn? Just like your father! You're a monster with no emotions! You can't have secrets from me, I'm your mother. You answer me!" She's totally worked up now. She grabs my shoulders and tries to shake the secret out of me. Her eyes are balloons floating away from her face; her nose is their string. I stare at her and let my hate out of my eyes. I can't wait to write all about her in my diary. At last she sees my hate. It punctures her; she sinks to the floor, defeated. She pulls me down into her lap, wraps her deflated arms around me. She's sobbing and smiling and saying I'm her best friend and it's me and her against the world and she changed her mind—I can stay up late and watch Jesus Christ, Superstar with her.

At my new school (fourth grade), Lynette Norton sits on her hands and doesn't seem to ever brush her hair, and she writes teeny-tiny, which we eventually learn is because she only has one notebook for the whole year, for all subjects, that her uncle gave her, and when that one's used up, there will be no more. They say that Lynette's mother has a real fur coat, and here it is November and Lynette doesn't have any good coat at

all. She wears two, too-small spring coats. No one will sit next to Lynette on the bus, as she has cooties. One morning, David, the foreign kid with gigantic lips, throws a spitball at Lynette, and several boys copy him, littering her hair with wet, rude wads of paper, like pins in a pincushion. Lynette doesn't even turn around to look. The bus driver glances in his rear-view mirror but simply sighs. I lunge out of my seat and, glaring myopically at Lynette's tormentors (vanity precludes me from wearing my new, pink glasses to school), flop down next to her. Lynette gives me a single, tight smile and then turns back to her window, to stare some more at the abandoned brick factories and orange and yellow and red trees like walls of fire that our bus hurtles through.

At fifteen (I'm a young fifteen), at last, I lose my virginity. The boy is older and he has a car, but he was a virgin too. He asks me to marry him. He lays it all out for me: He has a life insurance policy, and eventually he'll inherit his parents' furniture store, home, and summer home too. Even though that's nothing I want, is nothing like my dreams, still I can't think of any reasons to give for turning him down. My classmates are a year older than me. They're all pairing up and deciding on being hairdressers and store managers and mothers. I still want to be a kamikaze or an arctic explorer or The Second Coming.

* * *

My father sends the ticket. I run my finger over the departure time and flight number so many times I'm afraid they'll get rubbed off. My mother makes an attempt to say I can't go, but she is too sick and I am too determined. I'm saved.

Lompoc, California is a prison town dripping with flowers all different colours and as big as in dreams. I feel so lost and excited. People walk down the street with surfboards under their arms. Low-riders cruise. There are bonfires. Mexicans. Strangers offer you marijuana and cocaine.

My father teaches me refrigeration repair in the landlady's dirt driveway. I love to solder copper tubing—fire up a blowtorch and watch the metal turn to liquid and drip. In school, I'm assigned two gym classes: swimming and weightlifting. I move through the water and under the tiny barbells silently and then solve equations I already solved two years earlier back east. I find myself using parts of my body other than the two that were always useful before (the brain and the eyes).

Walking home from a game of racquetball with my father in the outdoor courts, the sun drops and a chilly wind picks up. I shiver. "You don't have to be cold," my father tells me. "First, walk like you're warm. No, not like that. You look like a beetle! You look like your mother. Good—now feel how warm it is." I take longer and looser strides, like him, until

my arms and legs feel like the pink, stretchy tendrils hanging from a bitten Russell Stover chocolate—and they're as warm as if they were just in someone's mouth, too. My east coast beetle shell lays discarded in a dusty alley behind us.

Our front door is just a piece of wood with another piece of wood nailed over the hole a previous tenant cut out for a window. Someone covered the floors as well as the walls with purplish-brown wood panelling, so even at noon it's dark inside, and exaggeratedly intimate. It's like hibernating inside a tree. This is where my father and I talk—well, where he talks, and I try to memorize everything he says as he says it. He teaches me how to slow down my heartbeat and hold my breath for a very long time, how to mentally survive torture, how to ask someone questions until my way of thinking comes out of their lips as if it were their own, and then they will do what I want while thinking it was their idea all along; they'll even think they're getting one over on me!

"In prison," he says, "you don't want people to fear you, because then they'll try to hurt you, and one of those times, you won't see it coming; you can't keep your defences up at all times from all people. You want them to think you're their friend, and have them fear only your anger. Similarly, when you're trying to conquer a nation, if you're completely merciless and everybody that comes in contact with you dies, they're all gonna gang up on you. There has to be a way that it's to

their advantage to be conquered—they have to have a way to get out of it so they can be your friends, or it's not gonna work. Same thing with seducing women. A lot of men try to work on their appearance, when it's not about that. All you do is tell a woman she lights up a room, and she's the only one—the only anything—and suddenly the most hideous Mongoloid is very attractive."

"Get behind the wheel," my father says. "It's about time you learned to drive. We're going to the beach!" He tells the neighbour's kids to get in the back of the van. I've only driven in parking lots before, and the van is hiccupy. I go twenty miles an hour, hunched over the wheel like a starving eagle keeping a mouse in sight. The road to the beach is a winding pass down a cliffside. There are no seats in the back; the kids are sliding around back there with the spare refrigerator parts and tools, screaming and sobbing for me to slow down, but it's so steep the worn brakes are useless. People are walking across the sand at the bottom of the road, unaware that a non-driver is at the wheel of the giant rusted vehicle. "Am I hitting the brakes or the gas?" I yell, looking at my father instead of at the sea rushing towards the windshield. "You gotta take over—take the wheel!" But my father stays still, his eyes bright, his mouth happy. When the road turns to sand, the van shudders and sinks, and my father throws his head back and roars like a lion with pure, evil joy. I'm sweating and

angry and alive in every inch of my body. I start laughing, too. I can't stop.

The thing he's most proud of, my father says, is that he never beat me—though he often wanted to, badly. Still wants to, he lets me know. It will be easy for me, he predicts, to not hurt my kids; it'll come naturally. He was the one to break a cycle that went back at least a hundred years, and probably much longer.

I've only seen one photo of him as a little boy. He had a goofy grin and a cowlick. When my father told me what happened to him, I pictured that goofy boy locked in his room for days at a time, or all in a pile at the bottom of some stairs, then getting leaned over in the ambulance by my grandfather whispering to him what "really happened," and what's going to happen to him next if he doesn't remember it the right way.

On my sixteenth birthday, I get a card from my grandparents. My father never instructed me to cut off contact with them; like everything else, I was supposed to complete my mission without ever being told what my mission was. He doesn't say a word about the card, but the whole time we're driving around doing refrigeration repairs, he makes jokes about me to me and to the restaurant managers: I'm never going to be good at sex because I don't like to get dirty and I'm never going to be good at writing because I don't notice anything going on around me. When we pull into the driveway

at the end of the day, he faces me in the quiet of the turned off engine clicking and hissing and the California crickets singing and he's not joking any more. He says: "You're wishy-washy. I can't believe my blood runs in your veins."

My face gets hot and then my eyes are hot and then my whole body is hot and I have to leap out of the truck. I power-walk away from it, away from him—he doesn't call after me—downtown where I try to figure out where I can live, and apply for a job at every single store that is still open but not one of them hires me on the spot. Possibly because I'm crying and—due to my day of crawling in and under broken refrigeration units—my hair is snarled and I smell like rotted food.

It's very late and very black out when I finally go home. My father is reading. He lifts one eyebrow, which I know means he's glad I'm back. I lay beside him on the pull-out couch (we're always careful never to accidentally touch), and I plot against him all night long.

By morning, my silent storm is over. I see his point. I kept my grandparents just because that's what one does with grandparents, and because they were sweet to me, no matter what they once did to my father when he was small and at their mercy; I accepted without question the grandparent-granddaughter relationship dictated by society.

My father is whistling. The smell of bacon fills the house. I feel happy. I think I know how to make everything right now.

(I don't speak to my grandparents for almost twenty years.)

After breakfast—home fries, bacon, eggs, toast, orange juice (from oranges, not a box), and blueberry pancakes—my father is looking at me across the table, breathing in through his nostrils and pulling on his beard, and I know he's trying to judge if I'm ready for something. I try to look ready. He says let's go into the other room. The wood-panelled room. I perch on the edge of the un-made-up couch-bed. My father takes the duct-taped (so foam won't come out of the tears) easy chair. And then he starts telling me about killing people.

"The first time, it was over just two-hundred dollars. This nineteen-year-old guy ripped me off in a deal and bragged about it. That was his mistake: talking. I went into his bedroom through the window with a rifle. I wasn't quiet. I wanted everyone to know it was me. Smuggling is a violent business, and your only protection is your reputation. If I hadn't killed him, my reputation would have been worth nothing, and anyone could have come in and taken whatever they wanted from me: my money, my stash, you…."

He tells me about the others. I don't look at his eyes. I watch his lips moving, and they're the same as mine … pale, a little turned-down at the corners. I'm thinking, This is a murderer … this is what a murderer looks like, and he looks like me. He never got caught—all they got him on in Mexico was drugs and guns; and in America, conspiracy. "You're the only

one who knows," he says. His words are like a caress, and I tremble beneath them.

My mother calls. She's broken her hip and says I need to come take care of her. My father gives me a long, careful look. "Are you going to do everything people say you 'need' to do in life?" It's a test, and I'm up to it—I could tell my invalid mother to fuck off—but I pretend I can't. I concentrate on keeping the feeling I have off of my face—the same one I had about leaving my old home almost year ago: I'm saved.

Only, home wasn't home any more. I'd gotten used to my father's pace, used to being nervous to do something scary and doing it anyway, and the rush that followed. Used to California's colours and smells and sexuality and noises at night; I'd forgotten how black and white and gray and brown and slushy New Hampshire is, and scentless and shut down from 10 p.m. till dawn. I was a fish out of water who discovers she can breathe air and then finds herself put back in the bowl. I thrashed all about, trying to escape. I knew now that there were different ways to be, and I wanted to try all of them. Everything I experienced over the next ten years—bizarre lovers, different states of consciousness, different countries, meeting famous people, becoming a famous person, meeting Rachel—none of that would have happened had my father not had me to himself long enough the year I was fifteen

to shame and shock me out of everything I knew to be and think, leaving me empty and scrambling. Rachel and I went to school together for years without noticing each other, until I came back from my stay in California all cocky with borrowed false warmth and see-through clothes and hair in my eyes, and I walked right up to that weird, hostile girl, gave her my lollipop and told her we were going to be best friends forever. I never could have said that, I never would have done that, before my father taught me that nothing about me or my life was worth preserving. I had nothing to lose.

Chapter One

She's hunched over her food tray with her back to me, somehow feline despite her olive and brown old man rags. She turns to scowl at someone and I see how pretty she is under the dyed gray hair. My skinny legs in fishnets propel me like a marionette down the cafeteria centre row right up to her, and, in front of everybody, I take my lollipop out of my mouth and hand it to her. She sticks it in her mouth and crunches it. I say very solemnly, "You are going to be my best friend forever, I know it already." And then I somehow knock into a chair. I can feel the goose egg forming on my shin, and I run away into the bathroom.

"Don't talk to her, man," the jean jacket, high-hair smoker perched on a sink warns me. She looks like she lives in this bathroom—I don't know how she was able to witness what just happened out there. "That's Rachel Johnson. She's fuckin' nuts."

"Well so is this one," another smoker says, gesturing towards me.

Rachel, I think to myself.

We tell each other everything, sitting on my saggy bed or on hers, until finally I stop going home. Her house is better. For my 10 p.m. to 6 a.m. shifts at Dunkin' Donuts, she waits for me at the counter, sipping five or ten hot chocolates, getting a bigger and bigger sugar buzz and making odder and odder comments until dawn just so we can walk home together. The Dunkin' Donuts parking lot is where all the grizzled schizophrenics of Dover like to hang out and then follow girls with night shifts and no cars, saying things like they're going to chew the girl's brain.

"You girls twins?" this morning's weirdo asks. Regular people keep mistaking us for twins too, despite me being blue-eyed and tall and jerky and kind of delicate-faced, and her being dark-eyed and hourglass-y and menacing. It must be the way we act together, that makes people think two such opposites look exactly alike. My mother says our relationship is unnatural. She says we're a cult.

Then Rachel strays from the cult with her new boyfriend, doing things I can't understand. Nature things: hiking, digging for lizard bones, planning eco-terrorism. I stay in her bedroom waiting for her, trying to be quiet so maybe her parents won't know I'm here. I have a lot of time on my hands to contemplate my place in society. Rachel's forests move at

too slow a pace for me. Yet I know nothing about cities. So, geographically, this world is a bust for me. The local punks rather formally rejected me, and the goths never laugh at my jokes. There's not much chance of me making it in the real world, either. I don't have even one skill, and I can't take the thought of going to college to get one. I look for how to live in magazines. People had an article about Karen Finley pouring ketchup on her head and shoving yams up her business, but she received a National Endowment for the Arts grant to do so. Applying for one of those seems as mysterious and laborious a process to me as going to college. I want to shock people too, but performance art seems so out of context. Why did Karen Finley put those yams up there? There should be a story. And stories should be about real things, even if they aren't real. And the stories should be big.

I wonder what Rachel would be doing, if she were alone in this room. Sometimes she dances naked. Rachel lives in the moment, in pleasure, inside her own body. While I'm not sure where I live, it's definitely not in any of those places. I accept that I look half-formed and silly compared to Rachel; anyone can tell that she has the more dominant personality. But I also know I am going to do something big with my terrible uncomfortableness. Life feels to me like a tidal wave right over my head, and lonesome as I am, I'm ready now to throw myself in—drown myself on purpose before it (life) can take me against my will.

I start taking buses. To New York, to Virginia.

"Who do you know there?" Rachel asks, not understanding, disapproving.

"Nobody."

"And what are you thinking is going to happen?"

"I don't know. But it always feels like something is just about to."

"Yeah—you getting mugged and dismembered in some alley."

In Rachel's world, I can't believe there's even one person left with all their limbs and both eyes.

But from the moment I decided to stop waiting for whatever's going to happen, for whoever I'm going to become, and start hunting it down instead, I feel all this suction. My whole body, my whole intent, is pulled into the hunt. Still there's no answer whenever a relative tucks money into my pocket and asks what I'm going to do after graduation. I can't very well tell them I'm going to have a destiny.

On this trip, I wander Kenmore Square, talking to bums who talk about stuff just as boring as non-bums: what time it is, where the good clubs are, who I could buy pot from, the weather, gossip. And government conspiracies. And now this travel too is over: an uninflected voice announces over the South Station intercom that the bus to Dover has pulled into lot seven. A handful of people gather their bags. I have nothing to gather. I stand up, pigeon-toed. I'm depressed.

And like a drunken miracle, into the station GG Allin lurches. It's as if he stepped right off of my GG Allin seven-inch record sleeve ("Hard Candy Cock" backed with "Drink, Fight and Fuck"): tall in a leather jacket and no shirt, covered in home-made tattoos. The king of the scum-rockers. He's balanced between the double glass doors, one in each hand. Everyone is looking at him instead of at their tiny TVs (a quarter for ten minutes' viewing), wondering who he is. Some of them are scared. GG looks around the station and comes straight for me (no doubt because of my shirt, which I made out of tinfoil and clingfilm).

"I live in New Hampshire too," I blurt out. I read in a fanzine that he lives in Hooksett. I pause. "Are you just getting off tour?"

"Yeah … fucking Texas!"

We laugh and laugh at that, as if the existence of Texas is both the most magical and the most stupid thing there could be.

"Here," he says, and pulls a cassette out of an inside pocket of his leather. "It's the last show—I made a copy on some asshole's double-tape deck where me and the boys stayed."

I take the tape. We try to think of something else to say.

I say, "My bus is leaving." I notice I'm swaying. He's obviously uncomfortable too, now that he's close to me, even though he's older, and bigger, and a king. I guess finding your destiny doesn't cure you of personal problems! I'm already

framing in memory, like something from the distant past, how he burst through the double glass station doors as if he were daring us all. And yet, upon closer inspection, his swaggering approach contains an element of cowering. We are the same, I think: needing attention but at the same time fearing detection. GG looks down, coughs into his fist. It's hard to believe this is the guy who exposes and cuts himself on stage, bashing himself bloody with a microphone, and even takes X-lax and shits up there!

I'm going to do things too, I can feel it. Even terrible things. But I'm glad of that. All my life I've been a dreamer, a cringer—the type of person who doesn't do any terrible thing at all.

I ask GG which bus he's waiting for. He's not waiting for any bus at all. He came in here "for no reason" and he leaves for apparently the same no reason. I check the schedule. Two hours till the next bus to Dover. Later I'll go over our dialogue in the mirror with a watch. It keeps coming out to sixty seconds. And yet my life is completely different! It's all real now. He, too, is attracted to people and yet doesn't know what to do with them once one of them talks to him. He was just walking around, like me. And yet he has records out, and he tours, and he's GG Allin. He has translated his vague desire into something physical. Into a career! On the tape he gave me, more than actual songs, there's funny heckling back and forth, degenerating into verbal abuse and confusion. At

one point it sounds like he got off the stage and there was some sort of altercation involving a mic stand. The humour makes the threat bearable; the threat makes the humour more than just ridiculous. One of the songs is called "Get To The Point—I Have To Take A Shit." That's like the half-songs Rachel and I make up together all the time. I had no idea this could be a lifestyle! I don't have to wait for my life any more. It's already here.

I mail GG a tape of Rachel and me singing Christmas songs on her parents' piano. When his reply comes, I can barely breathe. He liked the tape, he writes, but what he really wants is my shit in a baggie. I don't think he really wants my shit in a baggie, but I think he's wild for asking. I wax my legs, and instead of sending him something bloody or poopy like he requested, I send him my used wax. I'm sassing him. He sends back a squiggly outline of his penis. It's little. Rachel's all excited because GG is famous and crazy, and we immediately set about making a second tape to send him, naming our "band" Suckdog. Our very first song is a cover of "Wild Thing," substituting the word "Swampthing." We can't get past the first verse due to laughing so much. I say, "C'mon! If Jimi Hendrix can do it, we can do it!" I saw a documentary on Jimi Hendrix, so I know that he practised guitar twelve hours a day for his whole life and we've practised our vocal scales zero hours a day. Yet suddenly I am under the impression that everything in the world is easy, and most people simply don't

understand that, and that is why they don't do much—because they mistakenly believe things are hard. I leave the song just as it is—our twenty-three unsuccessful attempts to get past the first lyric and all our laughs and me yelling at Rachel to quit laughing and Rachel cussing at me with her sailor mouth, and send it to GG just like that. He says he'll come play a show with us, if I set it up, and that's how it really begins.

Chapter Two

Both men are so old their noses look like stairs. Maybe they had their noses shot in a war, but more likely it's age—some of your nose caves in while other parts grow humps. "How old are you?" the taller one asks suspiciously. "Sixteen?"

"Seventeen!" I assure him. "But I graduated." Sensing they still don't believe me, I add: "Dover High, Class of '86." As if that's privileged information that only a true high school graduate could know. I laugh; they don't. In an attempt to look like a responsible citizen, I'm wearing an ugly, print dress of my mother's, but my mother is half-a-foot shorter than me. I tug at the hem, move around on my cold metal foldout chair. No matter what I do, the whole length of my legs stick out. A chunk of red-, black- and white-streaked hair falls out of the beret I tried to hide it under, causing the shorter old man

to cough up phlegm into his handkerchief accusatorily. But in the end, the $75 cash deposit I flash mesmerizes them, and against their better judgment, they let me have their Veteran's Hall for a night.

Rachel and I arrive five hours before show time to decorate the hall—which is really a hall, just one long rectangle with a bathroom at one end and four wooden planks that make the stage at the other. The American flag, a giant New Hampshire state seal flag (a bobbing ship in a blue circle), and a black and white P.O.W. flag hang on one wall. We transform it into a "nightspot" by tacking up our show flyers (featuring a black, lingeried she-male we got out of a dirty magazine we stole, along with red, hand-stamped little Masters of the Universe muscle men) wherever there's no flag. That takes about ten minutes, leaving us four hours and fifty minutes to stare at each other and wonder what will happen. I was scared the Portsmouth punks would boycott the show if they knew I organized it, since they deemed me a poseur for wearing too much pink. The leader Al Barr complained: "What does she have to be so happy about anyway?" It seems I grin indiscriminately. So we claimed publicly that Rachel is in charge. I have to give seventy-five more dollars to the VFW guys, and without enough audience members paying four dollars, I don't have it. But one by one—or rather five by five, as these punks never travel singularly—they come. I'm running the door, and some of Enoch Kennett's friends actually spit on the

ground when they see me. Enoch, not wanting to admit that his adored, decade-older-than-us girlfriend gave him crabs, accused me instead. Ever since then, word on the street is not only am I an inanely cheerful person who wears altogether too much pink and white, I'm also a stupid whore.

The Dahlmer kid from school shows up—his name is, coincidentally, Jeff. He has his blonde girlfriend Angela with him, who he imported from Colorado. No one can figure out how he got her. Jeff always looks like he just crawled out from under a rock. I thought that expression meant someone hasn't been seen in a while, but recently I turned over a big rock, and everything under it was slimy and colourless and larval. That's how Jeff looks. Unhealthy and unwashed. He's in a handmade Dahlmer T-shirt as usual, and a wool overcoat, even though it must be eighty degrees inside the hall. He flashes me a knowing grin. He looks pretty cocky for someone whose skin is just about the closest a human being can get to green. His hair might be light brown, but it's so greasy it appears black under the fluorescent VFW lights. I surprise myself by finding him attractive. Jeff hands me eight dollars, and then presses two pills into my sweating palm. Grateful that someone is being kind to me, I immediately swallow them. "Speed," he says simply, and goes to hang out in the least lit corner he can find, beautiful Angela trailing behind.

GG was supposed to arrive for sound check two hours ago. I only booked one other band: Insanicide, three twenty-year-

old conspiracy theorists from Maine who tape down the annoying notes on keyboards, and scream. The hall is packed and I don't know what to do, so I tell Insanicide to go ahead and play. I know their set lasts only twenty minutes. I don't know what will happen after that.

My intestines are doing something very similar to the noises Insanicide produce. I go to the bathroom five times during their set. Rachel has been in there from the very start, so between the two of us we've kept all the Portsmouth punks from peeing all night. She and I converse over the stall wall, telling terrible jokes, reminding each other of all our terrible times in bathrooms across the nation. There was that Washington, D.C. bus station where one poor traveller was making noise in her stall, and a homeless woman yelled at her for it: "Piu! You stink! This is my home you're stinking up, you rude woman!" I was mortified for the woman who'd been caught, and so was Rachel when I told her about it. If that were us, we agreed, we'd never do number two again. Rachel and I once took a trip together to Hayward, California, and we drank the water. For a week straight, at all times there would be one of us filling the motel toilet with green stuff while the other pounded on the door, sobbing, begging to have a turn. There was a painfully recent incident in Boston visiting a boy, and I held it all weekend. Finally, as he walked me to my bus, I had to make a break for it and ran into a mostly abandoned office building and found a bathroom but someone was in there

putting on make-up and wouldn't get out, and when I finally got in, I couldn't unknot the string I was using as a belt. I was sweating and shaking. Frantically I searched the medicine cabinet, but there was only ant-killer, which I sprayed on the knot, hoping to loosen it—and it did! But too late. It was all running down my legs like soup inside my skintight jeans—a whole weekend's worth. I peeled the jeans off and threw them away and cleaned my legs as best I could with the ant-killer (there was no soap). Thank God I had two shirts on, so I was able to convert one into a skirt and breeze downstairs to meet the mystified boy. "It's going to be hot today," I told him. "I decided to switch my wardrobe." I prayed he didn't catch a whiff of the ant-killer and figure it out.

Insanicide's growling finale drifts into the bathroom—something about the singer's head is going to explode.

"That's better than your ass exploding," Rachel says philosophically, and we both zip up and go out.

Insanicide's set is over and still no GG. I call my mother's house, and she sniffs that "someone" called there and said that "the cunt bitch gave me the wrong directions and we're in some fucking town I don't even know the name of, and me and the band are just gonna get drunk."

I knew I should have had Rachel give him the directions.

Fifty people watch me hang up the phone. They've figured out by now that I'm the one who set up the show, and they all want to know where GG is. I go to the bathroom.

* * *

The temperature suddenly jumps twenty degrees. I'm trembling—even more than one would anyway, with half-a-hundred young people angry and two suspicious veterans who threatened to show up at any moment and "see what all this is about." My tongue and eyes feel dried out and crumbling, like leaves underfoot at the end of fall. Objects are bright; they're everywhere! And, I discover, I can perform four actions in the time it always before took me to do just one. I try out a couple kung-fu moves in my metal stall, and it turns out I'm a master! So this is what speed is. I decide to just be on speed forever. Regular life is for the birds! A Henry Rollins song plays over the loudspeaker: "You have to be part animal, part machine! If you take a look around, I think you'll see what I mean!" I leap out of my stall and train my new X-ray eyes on my stomach in the bathroom mirror. I see a hot-cold need/fear thing like an engine in there, purring and coughing. Tonight, I'm gonna unfold my metal wings and fly.

I find Rachel, and tell her my plan. She has a tape of the Saturday Night Fever soundtrack in her bag. The lead screamer for Insanicide, Jim Hildreth, tells me we can feed that through his amp, and he has a bass in his van that Rachel can play. She never played bass before, nor has she ever smoked a cigar, but those are the things she decides she will do on stage. I will sing. Suckdog is taking GG Allin's place as headliners. As we

don't have any songs, we'll make them up as we go along. Thinking maybe the crowd hasn't had enough of annoying keyboards, we ask Jim to add more of that to our mix. He says he'll be happy to. We don't announce our name or that we're going on or anything. We just plug in, Rachel takes off her wifebeater (she used the black electrical tape that Jim used on his keys on her nipples, like Wendy O Williams), and we are on.

I step onto the stage and look out at the crowd. A throng of Barrington bikers shuffle in at the last minute—grown men with hair on their chests and leather vests, women with brown, sun-hardened faces and bleached hair falling straight down their backs. I want to call the whole thing off, go live in some peaceful place, maybe Jamaica, and stick a pinwheel into a pot on my windowsill and watch seagulls. But then I look out again at all these people, at the waiting on their faces, and I know that I'm the one who can take their waiting away. I realize that being up here is the best thing in the world; this is where I had to end up. My torso disappears from my body—there's just a pocket of air between my arms and my legs—and I'm sure I could walk on fire if only there was fire to walk on. I wish very much that someone would set a fire. Rachel slaps her bass, Jim stabs one index finger viciously at a key, and the Bee Gees wail tinnily about nobody getting too much heaven no more. I yank my dress over my head and jump into the crowd and started slapping people's faces.

Boys, girls. The bikers. I'm swearing and yelling. People are shocked; some laughing, some angry. I give Enoch Kennett two slaps. My hand feels hot, like a thumb that flicked the metal wheel of a lighter over and over. "How's this for chipper, motherfuckers?" I yell into the mic, and that's something I would never say. I've never slapped even one person in my life; nor do I swear. I've always felt that violence and drugs and nasty language are the provinces of my father. But now I don't care who lives in this land—I'm moving in. I'm taking over.

Chapter Three

I'm standing in Jeff's basement apartment, from which he deals drugs, not knowing what to do with my hands. Or my feet. Or my head. The silence is buzzing. Skulls—candles, silk screens and plastic models—are everywhere. Angela stands out like a cherub amidst the sea of skulls. "You okay, babe?" she says to Jeff. "You need anything?" She's one of these people who always has in her purse what you need—in my case, a needle and thread, to sew up my dress I tore wide open, even though I just slapped her soft and bloodless (pure white) cheek at the show. It was that needle and thread that convinced me to slip away with Jeff and Angela at the end of Suckdog's set, letting Rachel and Jim deal with the clean-up.

Bunches of glass grapes with little light bulbs inside hang from the corners of Jeff's basement. They make us glow purple. We sit cross-legged on the floor, being stared at by dozens

of empty eye sockets. Jeff's scoliosis causes him to hang over his own lap like The Old Man of the Mountain and almost fall into mine. In our youthful foolish love of the world we don't know, both Rachel and I wish we had AIDS. We don't really want AIDS—and since she's a virgin and I'm a tease, and neither of us uses needles, our chances of getting it are quite low. What we want is for something to spread through us, to take us over, and that's what diseases do. Being on stage despite my stage fright felt that way, and it was probably the most exhilarating moment of my life thus far. Leaning into creepy, prematurely aged Jeff is a close second.

Angela wants to be a photographer, and Jeff is criticizing her for handling her photos. "The acid from your fingers will ruin them over time, baby, I told you that. You know that, Lisa. Tell her." Jeff and I took a photography class together. I feel that it's a terrible thing to criticize Angela, who is watching me with big brown eyes, on her own turf, but Jeff is right, and reluctantly I admit it.

"Oh," Angela says, and lets those big, cream-coloured lids fall slowly down over the two melting milk chocolate balls she has for eyes.

"Lisa's famous," says Jeff, tapping the floor between us. "She was the first out-and-out freak in Dover. Before she came back from California all weird-looking and weird-acting, everyone at school hated me."

"And how did everyone feel about you after Lisa came back

from California all weird-acting, Jeffy?" Angela drawls.

"They still hated me!" We all laugh. "But Rachel hated me most of all. She won't even look at me. What's with that chick?"

"She's just an angry person," I say with pride. "Don't take it personally. She fasts a lot. Being hungry makes people mean."

"Have you ever had a threeway?" Jeff asks.

I look sideways at Angela's face. She has that little smile she always has. I say no, I never have. I don't mention that I've only had any sex at all two and a half times before.

"I'd like you girls to lie down side by side, blindfolded with your hands tied behind your back," Jeff proposes, "and I want you to tell each other everything that's happening to the other as it happens. Would you like that?"

I peek at Angela again and I say yes I would.

I take a taxi to Rachel's, and put on a long nightgown despite the heat so that Rachel won't see any of my marks. I don't tell her anything. I just say that I was confused with the events of the show and somehow I wandered off. We lay under her gold, embroidered bedspread—the one her great-uncle brought back from France after The War—and the night lays on top of it, purple-black and comfortable. I smell her familiar smell of crushed seashells (from Desitin, applied to the face for complexion reasons), and feel a rush of love.

Rachel and I make plans in the dark. Now that we are a band, we'll have to record an album and tour, and then we'll move to Philadelphia and get an apartment together.

"Can we have a tortoise?" I say. "I've always wanted a tortoise."

"There's a problem," Rachel says. "Whenever I see a tortoise I can't figure out how it's put together and I want to pull its head off so I can look inside."

"It's easy, Rache—it's just a regular animal. But it has a shell."

"No, I still don't understand it. I would look at its neck and think of how scaly and disgusting it would feel as I ripped it with my hand."

I don't think Rachel's being allegorical—letting me know she knows I'm the tortoise with the secret life she'll find a way to pry into and tear open. But I feel a thrill of fear anyway, as I often do with her. There's something just not right about that girl, I think to myself for the millionth time, and sigh happily.

"Bones is bones!" Rachel hisses, startling me. I must have fallen asleep.

"Bones is bones!" I hiss back. We don't want to wake her parents.

"This is our first friend who died."

"Well, he wasn't our friend. He said Hi to us one day. With no shirt on."

"We saw his tiny, pink nipples!"

"We heard his gravely voice. 'Hey, girls.' "

"Leese—we're going to die too." She says it with wonder.

"Not now, we're not." Our skin is glowing under the covers. The car that hit Bones the other day missed us, and we feel like we are about to burst with light.

"Don't say it!" she warns, even though I didn't say anything. "We have to be careful. We might be making a living monster out of this … this … out of what we are together. We can never talk about this again."

We pull the covers tighter. "Rache … what if we already made the living monster, and he's in the room with us right now?"

We are completely, totally creeped out. We clutch at each other and then we both scream, as if someone else grabbed us. Rachel's mom thumps the wall.

"Sorry!" Rachel calls. Then she whispers: "You know what this is, right? Hysteria. Hysteria can produce palpable, quantifiable results! Those girls in Salem in the 1600s got all worked up and they'd pass out and have bite marks and stuff." Oh my god—did she peek under my nightgown when I fell asleep and see a bite mark?! "People died, Lisa! They got hung and burned because of those girls getting all worked up. That's the living monster."

"Well, that's the bad side of the living monster. The good side is —"

"— the power and the precariousness of flesh."

"Our young, succulent flesh!"

"Which is why I want to be a cannibal." Rachel snaps her teeth close to my neck. "Out of intense appreciation."

"Hm. Couldn't you just, I don't know, have sex with people? Or give them a vigorous massage?"

"No."

"Well, okay. I'll still love you if you're a cannibal."

Chapter Four

"They're bugs!" Rachel is saying backstage at the Destroy All Music festival, minutes before we're due to go on, gesturing to the curtain behind which the crowd packs the bleachers rising away from the stage. "They're hissing and clacking, staring with their bug eyes! I'm not going to perform for bugs!"

"They're not bugs, Rache—they're Atlantans. You drank ten bottles of wine, that's all. They're just saying 'sh.' " I look at Jim Hildreth, who's playing the prince, to back me up. "C'mon, we came all the way to Georgia … eleven hours of driving. You can't back out now!"

"I'm sorry, Lisa, she's right," Jim says. "There's something really strange about these people. I'm with Rachel—I got a bad feeling about tonight."

"OK," I say. "Forget it. I don't care. I'll get someone else to

play the queen of the tundra and the prince."

"But it's five minutes till show time!" Jim says. "You're not going to find anyone, and how are they going to learn their lines?"

"I'll feed them to them as we go along. Who cares? It's not your problem! Just give me your sausage."

Jim unhooks the giant sausage hanging off a bent-out coat hanger around his waist, and reluctantly hands it over.

"The cape, too," I bark.

"I'm sorry, Lisa," he says again. "I really am."

Rachel looks really angry, like she always does when she knows she's wrong. "You shouldn't go out there," she says. "I mean it. Something bad is going to happen."

I run with the flopping sausage and cape out into the parking lot looking for my new friends Debbey Puff and Benjamin. "Do you want to be in my show?" I pant.

"The one that's happening, like, now?" says Debbey.

"Yes!" I hold the sausage out as enticement. "You get to wear this," I say to Benjie.

"Well in that case…."

I whisper their parts to them on stage as we go along: "Now Benjie, you're dead, tied to the tree and dickless—look agonized. Okay Debbey, I'm raping you with the prince's cut-off dick, but you like it because you've always loved me and you know this is the only way to be with me. Sing a sad song about your tainted love!"

Suckdog has received exactly two reviews so far, and both called us "childlike." It's true! People think of children as innocent, but if you really listen to one—especially girls—they're bossy and morbid and just awful. If their daddy doll comes up missing a foot, they automatically assume there was a shark attack and will launch into a gory account of it, or else The Devil shot up out of Hell with the express purpose of absconding with Daddy Doll's left foot. And they love weddings and feudalism and talking about genitals. That's our show!

Halfway through, Debbey, Benjie and I realize we're totally lost, and I shout to the man in the sound booth to stop our backing track tape and rewind. We start the whole "opera" over, to catcalls and laughter from the "bugs."

In the end, all three of us are high on making this impassioned, wild performance out of nothing, fighting against both my own band who chickened out and a hostile audience—and, as it turned out, our fates. The opera that I wrote in one afternoon weirdly mirrors the events of our real lives. Debbey suffers with forbidden love for Benjie, who is gay. And Benjie, though I don't think he knows it yet, has AIDS, and in a few years really will be dead. And I really do want to be a man with a big flopping sausage I can force on ladies. Then Rachel could be my girlfriend and I could drag her with me all the way into an unknown and sharp-edged world, or maybe I could submit to being pulled back into her velvety, majestically falling apart one. People seem able to let huge

chunks of themselves die, if it gets them even a tiny bit closer to the one whose body they get to lay on top of. But much as we want to be, Rachel and I are not real lesbians. Rachel suggested drawing a moustache on me, but that wouldn't do. Neither would a sausage on a coat hanger. It has to be a true flesh-penis, and all that goes with it.

"If we had our own apartment and you took out the garbage," Rachel explains, "it would just be you taking out the garbage, not all sexy and mysterious and manly."

"Yeah," I sigh, "I know."

We're staying at my mother's, which we do whenever we want to stay up all night, as we don't want to worry Rachel's mom. We take glee, however, in worrying mine. Our fast and no-sleep has a purpose this time: Since neither of us possesses any musical talent, the plan is to open the doors to the artistic centres of our brains with the dementia resulting from hunger and fatigue. We will record at dawn. If Suckdog isn't good, at least we can make it unique.

Approximately five hours into our experiment, at midnight, I wake up and realize we both accidentally fell asleep. "Oh Rachel," I whisper. "I see it! I see the Chicken Indonesia—boneless breast swimming in orange glaze with crisp, flavourful bacon hats."

"I want bread. French bread. A whole loaf of it! The hard, crusty kind with the chewy innards."

"Banana splits…."

We list all the foods we know until we get tired of talking to each other about it and make crank calls to discuss tasty delicacies with strangers, none of whom prove interested. Then we hear a strange, clicking noise coming from the telephone, and we're afraid the police are tracing the calls. "If you want to arrest us, you'll find us at Stop-N-Shop 24-hour Market!" I shout into the chirping mouthpiece.

"What are you two doing in there?" my mother calls from outside my door, her voice quavering with horror and accusation, as if probably Rachel and I are slicing off kidnap victims' noses with razors—and as if her slate is totally spotless just because she isn't razoring noses.

"Tell her you're going to name your firstborn Lucifer," Rachel whispers.

"I'm going to name your grandchild Lucifer," I yell, and my mother mutters that we are going to drive her to drink and that my priorities are shit, and she shuffles away on her caved-in slippers.

"Well, it doesn't matter anyway," Rachel says after thinking it over for a minute, "because I'm going to eat your firstborn."

A few hours later, having accidentally eaten every single thing in my mother's refrigerator and cupboards, Rachel and I are climbing past the corroding DANGER! DO NOT CLIMB!

sign on the fence that closes off the Cocheco waterfall. At the bottom of what seems like a mile-long fire escape, under the fall, we smoke unfiltered Camels till our eyes hurt (we don't smoke, normally), and try to figure out what to record. About four thousand mosquitoes hum. "Look at that!" Rachel cries, pointing to the "Dover Cops Suck" graffiti, glowing red in the dawn. I hit Record on my boombox and we start growling the line over and over: "Dover cops suck! Dover cops suck!" "They keep grabbing me and sucking me!" I add, and Rachel slurps threateningly into the mic hole. I try to explain my trees equal time theory, but Rachel, who really does not care for any of my theories, interrupts me by biting me. Hard! (Later I'll splice, from my twenty-five-cent bargain bin LPs, a row of various "ow"s—it is surprising how many back-up singers say "ow"—after my own "ow!" at Rachel's bite. It will be our masochistic masterpiece!)

We need to make the promo photo for our band. We sneak into an eerily silent abandoned mill and take pictures of each other with all the dust swirling and no clothes on, a sheer curtain over the lens to make us look like ghosts. When the pictures come back from Dover Drug, we just look out-of-focus. I go ahead and use them exactly like that. Anything well done has the feeling of death to me, of being finished. I don't want to "master" anything. I want to spy, and sneak, and capture things just as they are … record all that comes before and after the song—jokes and fights and private moments.

Over the weeks that we record the album—we decide to name it Drugs Are Nice—our relationship changes. We fight more. Rachel is starting to feel sneaked up on, captured. Why do I have to document everything, she wonders. She feels as if I'm stealing something from her or from us, what we are together, and giving it to just anyone. She also suspects me of doing things and not telling her, which I am. I had to fill in the forty minutes an album takes by recording with Jeff and Angela and Jeff's band, and Rachel found out through a third party. She gave me the silent treatment for days, finally saying, "Sometimes I think I'm just an experience to you—the best friend experience, and once you figure it out you're going to move on to something else. Like you're some kind of alien taking reports on us all!"

"Rache, you're the one who—" I protest haltingly. "Ever since you got a boyfriend, you won't—" I start again: "We were going to hack our way out of ourselves, remember? That's what you said."

"No, that's what you said. I was just sitting there. I can't help it you took that for agreement. The real world is not an experiment, Leese. You better learn that, or you're going to lose everything."

She doesn't have the same stage-thing I have; her real life doesn't begin only when she transforms into someone unreal. We can't meet there just like we can't meet in … I stumble in my mind over the word … in sex-light. And so the electricity

between us hovers with no place to pour into, and singes indiscriminately. I can't talk about it, because she feels insulted whenever I point out any difference between us.

And besides, I don't really know that that's what I think at all! I'm not sure what kind of person I am, so I can't refute any of what Rachel has accused me of. It might be exactly like she says! So I just sigh, and rewind my music box, the one I won with 650 skiball tickets at Salisbury Beach years ago. We're in a field behind Rachel's house, a two-headed monster with one blanket-body, the music box and the recorder balanced on our knees. We've been trying to record the last song of our album.

The spinning music box girl leans against a tree; the boy plays mandolin at her feet. They both lost their heads in separate accidents, and she has had one arm amputated. Their exposed, chalky, hollow necks (and her hollow shoulder) make everything even more romantic and sad. The theme of Romeo and Juliet plays on the dying music box and there's the "shush-shush" of the dreary winter rain—a curtain of quiet rather than a wall of noise—and we record just that: our soft, low moment before heading in, where Rachel's mother will be waiting with onion soup and kind patter that fills up our not saying anything to each other. When the final, creaky note has played, Rachel and I simultaneously, without planning to, start humming the headless lovers' tune.

Chapter Five

My father flies in from California with the idea of re-wooing my ex-common-law-stepmother Linda, despite her having just married a man named Mamud.

My father gets a job at a gas station and establishes headquarters on my mother's nappy plaid couch, to her enormous vexation. On the very first night—the first hour, actually—he claims her chilli isn't chilli because there are no chillies in it. My mother shoots back that it's been chilli enough for us the ten years she raised me without him. My father replies that if he had raised me, he would have been able to get me to eat vegetables, and then leaps up to make me a bowl of warm butter with ten little green beans in it. They both glare at me, waiting to see what I'll do. When I eat all ten, there's so much laughing joy in my father, it buoys him right off the couch.

"A poor man's Machiavelli," my mother mutters, "that's what you are," and skulks off.

One opponent destroyed so easily, with only ten green beans, my father moves onto his real objective: to depose Mamud.

As I've kept in touch with Linda, I know that Mamud told her he would treat her like a queen, but instead he makes her cook nine-course meals for him and his Egyptian friends at all-night parties conducted in Linda's trailer. They get food all over the walls and even on the ceiling. My father takes to wearing shorts no matter the weather—the better to show off his scraped-up knees: The only safe place for my father and Mamud's bride to meet is the rocky coast of a closed beach, in the morning while Mamud sleeps off his revelry.

I'm still at Dunkin' Donuts and Rachel works at a butcher's shop. Whenever my father isn't pumping gas or pumping Linda on a cliff and I'm not filling doughnuts and Rachel isn't hacking huge carcasses, we three do everything together. Rachel distrusts my father—and my father, I know, is studying Rachel, searching for this new enemy's weakness. And I worry that one of these days, the foes—one hot and young, one cold and old—will realize they could just skip the middleman (me), and run off together. All this tension adds a kind of frantic glee to every activity. After going to a Clint Eastwood movie, my father and Rachel and I hide from each other behind bushes and benches all the way to the car, leaping out to aim finger guns at each other's heads.

* * *

At last my father has found his young rival's flaw, the one that will make me stop loving her. I know it's his big, carefully chosen moment, when we're alone on the couch and he speaks too casually. "Rachel's a bit of a prude, isn't she?"

I have to agree. She's not like us, my father and me—divers in. In virtually all the adventures we've had together, I dragged her there against her will. All this time, I've docilely taken Rachel getting mad at me for no reason, rejecting me for an hour here, an hour there just because she can. I had no idea how aggressive I felt towards her till just now.

"She's been tired lately," my father adds. "Hay fever."

My father and I aren't tired lately. We don't resist activities, and blame it on grass and flowers. It's all clear to me now, how Rachel is holding me back.

"I wonder when she's going to blow up that chemical plant, like she's been talking about," my father says. The final nail in Rachel's coffin. She doesn't do the things she says she'll do. That is sure. "I have better things to do than keep my promises," she once said, so unapologetically that eschewing promises looked cool, and I wished then that I had thought of it first. But now, away from her influence, I wonder exactly what these "better things to do" are—maybe she's off doing nothing. I, however, am the youngest ever member of the Libertarian Party of New Hampshire, or so the bearded

leader told me at the one and only meeting I attended. And I did organize a protest parade of one against the mandatory seatbelt law when it was proposed to the legislature. "It's the Live Free But Don't Die state!" my father laughed, approving of the cardboard "No Mandatory Seatbelts!" sandwich board with helium "Get Well Soon" balloons from the grocery store tied on that I'd constructed to wear for my march on Dover's City Hall.

"Well, Rachel did go with me to a couple Positive Direction meetings at UNH," I say in half-hearted defence of my best friend.

"Oh yeah, you told me about that," my father chuckles. "The one all the fat girls went to. What was the action they proposed again?"

I grimace. "They wanted to throw Ding-Dongs at cop cars."

That night as Rachel and I brush our teeth and put on our pyjamas (despite both my parents now residing under one roof, I'm still living with her family), she senses the wedge my father has driven between us. She says, "Now I want to show you something." It's a brown paper bag shoved into the back of one of her dresser drawers.

"What is it?" I ask.

"Oh, just one of my fetishes."

I take a quick peek. It's fluffy white stuffing with brown

and black markings. "Oh!" I cry. "Is this?"

"It is. I keep them here so my family won't know I got my periods. We don't really talk about sex. I didn't want to upset them. Look at this." She pokes around further back in the drawer and takes out a Barbie doll with no clothes on. There are holes, surrounded by teeth marks, where the breasts should have been. "And there's this." It's a hairbrush. "That's what I used to masturbate with. The bristly end. Now I hurt all the time. I can't even put a tampon in."

"Wow, you're … you're … idiosyncratic!"

I'm back on Rachel's side. She isn't a prude—she is totally special. Even her hay fever is special, sexy, weird. My father doesn't understand. I'm in love. I admit to her what my father said, and my own infidelity.

"Your father's a creep," Rachel decides. "He's unnatural!"

"This from the girl who bites boobs off dolls!"

"No, but he butts in on all our conversations. Even when we're talking about fashion! That man doesn't care about fashion! He's a grown man jealous of a seventeen year old. That is creepy."

I don't know how to tell him to butt out of my friendship with Rachel, or to quit asking about my sex and drug life, or to quit telling me about his. He never cut me out of interesting things he was doing due to my age. He's in me, anyway. He's in my arms and legs sawing up a tree (always keeping three limbs on, like he taught me), and my blood and my eyes

(constantly searching the horizon for possible kidnappers/torturers) and my gangly gait and my purposely accent-free voice (to make me untraceable) and my need to see for myself, never trusting anyone else's experiences. Because of my childhood, all kinds of situations and people and ideas seem normal to me, seem do-able. Maybe we've grown too protective in this century; we isolate children from everything "bad"—which is about ninety percent of life! Maybe my father's kid-inclusive ways were normal in some century or other. He's always been out of kilter with the times. Back when we were an agricultural society, intergenerational interaction all life long was the norm.

I don't mention any of this to Rachel. Right now, it's her arm under my neck in the dark, her sweet Desitin smell in my nose. I snuggle closer. These are not agricultural times, and she is my future.

Chapter Six

It's not that I don't have a boyfriend—it's that I keep forgetting the poor guy exists.

Andrew goes to philosophy school. He has a one-room apartment in a building that used to be a hotel. The elegant black and white tiled floors remain, though tiles keep coming up and no one replaces them. There's an enormous gold-flecked mirror in which you can watch yourself mount the marble staircase leading up to Andrew's locked, overheated, cracking room (The biggest crack, down the middle of the ceiling, is the subject of many of Andrew's paintings. He calls it his "monochromatic death glyph."). Inside Andrew's room is: a narrow bed, which our narrow bodies fit on fine as long as we lay sideways; a hot plate and one pot, in which Andrew cooks me his one meal—spaghetti with a jar of spaghetti sauce

dumped over it; and one little dresser, a kid's dresser really, housing Andrew's interchangeable smelly gray long-sleeved shirts and pants, which he wears in all seasons—never more in the winter, never less in the summer. A bookshelf that goes to the ceiling is brimming with William S. Burroughs, J. G. Ballard, Huysmans, Foucault, Antonin Artaud, Otto Muel, a book about artists who did their art by cutting their penises open.

Over the last two years, since I was sixteen, I have read, surreptitiously when he's out, at least some of every one of those books and listened to his records: Ornette Coleman, The Swans, Sonic Youth, The Slits, Throbbing Gristle, Non. I've learned so much from Andrew, and I resent him for it. I resent his eruditeness along with his use of the word "erudite."

"You're just stealing from the Dadaists," I say after recognizing just about every element from his Tristin Tzara book in a confusing performance he did with his band The Eunuchs Of Industry. "Yeah, and they were stealing from the futurists, who were stealing from the…" He lists all the "ists" in the order that they come in. It's a cage of quotes in here, of other people's observations: a full-scale simulacrum of life rather than life itself. He footnotes my every move. I want to at least feel like I'm the first to ever do something. Instead, if I'm proud of the homosexual porn I smuggled out of the Combat Zone one blushing afternoon—glossy, oversized, quite erect penises under utility belts, he trumps me with the

more extreme Andrea Dworkin's quote about the only good penis being a limp penis on a laying-down man.

It's not Andrew I'm so mad at. It's his reverence of knowledge. It reminds me of Rachel's occultish fascination with all things anachronistic … like of course she likes Native Americans better than Americans, the crass ones … us. I'm surrounded by fatalists! By historians. I want to destroy history to make way for something that doesn't yet exist! Rachel and Andrew are guardians, defenders, getting in my way. I don't try to hurt Rachel, because I'm afraid of her, but I do hurt Andrew.

One day, after cheating on Andrew again, I arrive at his room and there is a startling new painting on the wall. There often is. But most of them merely hint at violent emotions in their abstract way. This one—a big red hole taking up almost all of a three feet by four foot canvas—employs language in its clearer message. It's titled, in slashy black at the bottom: "Slut."

"Is that for me?" I ask.

"That's for every woman I've ever known."

"Slut" looks remarkably similar to the portrait of me he did last year, when things were going better. That one too was completely red, swirled, with a little red rubber band glued or painted into the centre, which, he said, represents my magic eye.

While he's at band practice (consisting of four men playing distorted tapes for each other and then agreeing about

murder being the ultimate art form), I draw something that looks from afar like a beaver shot, with all the vaginal creases and squiggles, but upon closer inspection is a woman curled up in a fetal position, eyes closed tight, trying to hide in her hair. I, too, title my work "Slut" and tack my puny piece next to Andrew's.

"I like that," he says softly when he comes home and sees it. He runs a finger down the wallpaper next to it, careful not to smudge the drawing. "May I keep it?"

Andrew and the Eunuchs are influenced by Boyd Rice out in San Francisco, a prankster who befriended Charles Manson and created industrial music—an atonal attack on everything melodic music has ever been. Boyd does a lot of interesting things, but I sense something just plain mean about that guy. Andrew likes mean people. Like Lydia Lunch. She is neither atonal nor tonal. There's only one note she can sing in. A loud, sexy, whiny note. Lydia makes albums and videos and books with loads of brutality and black eyeliner. She describes picking up a hitchhiker who had just been date-raped, and then assaulting her, saying that girl got what she deserved. It's exciting because she turns her violent impulses outward rather than back on herself, like most troubled girls do. Plus she looks so good. But I still feel bad for the date-raped hitchhiker. Lydia is not fair. Then there's Richard Kern and Nick Zedd, filmmakers for whom sullenness is sexuality, where victim trades place with victimizer and then back again, all

in a background quite grainy—by design or lack of funds, it's never clear. I find their androgynous, ultra-harsh imagery alluring. I have ambivalent feelings about feminism: naturally women deserve equal pay, but I don't want to accept any doctrine wholesale. Still, there's a hint of hatred or fear of women to all these people's work that disturbs me. I feel that hatred and fear should be explored boldly, not hinted at conspiratorially—that's seedy. And people should have a sense of humour. Annie Sprinkle has plenty of humour about herself. She opens her legs and lets audience members peer into her cervix. She is accepting of everyone, especially the transgendered and the whore-y, and she proclaims herself, and pretty much anyone else, a goddess. She reminds me of Glinda, the good witch of the east. But while I don't think I have the cruelty in me that a lot of the performers I admire seem to have, I also can't find within me any shining goodness. Annie is not the role model for me either. I wish she were my aunt, though.

One Saturday at Andrew's I wake up by surprise with my period. Blood is coming out all over the place. "I'm gonna take a shower," I tell him. "Can you go downstairs and get some tampons for me?"

"I'm not buying tampons. I have to go to that store all the time."

"What? You have photographs of split-open vaginas all over your walls, and books about rapist-cannibals, and you won't buy a cotton stopper for my regular, normal, monthly,

biological period?"

"Right."

"Well you're, you're a prude! I'm covered in blood; I can't put my clothes on and buy them myself. These are all the clothes I have here! You really, seriously, won't go? Fine, I'll go." I snatch my ten-dollar bill off the table and flounce out the door. I crouch naked and bloody in the hallway, hoping no neighbours will happen to go out for a coffee just now, but stubborn Andrew refuses to come out and say, "Oh, all right, I'll buy them." I go back in. Bright red blood pours continuously out of me. I step into the shower. When I come out, the box of tampons is on the bed.

"I knew you'd get them!" I cry, hugging Andrew.

"I wasn't going to," he says in his low, mumbly voice that should be coming out of someone twice his size and four times his age … and who is probably black, too. He sounds like that all the time, though—not just as a result of the horrific experience of having to purchase publicly a method of feminine hygiene control. He explains how the purchase came to happen: "When you went into the shower, I saw a cockroach, so I went downstairs to buy some poison. It wasn't on the shelf, and I knew the lady at the counter kept it behind the counter. So I asked for it, and she said she didn't have it. I said, 'I know you keep the poison back there.' She said no, and got nasty, so I said, 'Fine—I'll take these then!'—and I grabbed the box of tampons and threw it down."

* * *

After our last break-up, Andrew goes off to live in the forest and work on this 33rd soundwave-emitter that aliens can hear. Why he wants to communicate with space creatures, I don't know. I'd be scared to be out there in the woods, sending out intergalactic invites to a party where only one of the attendees would be human. I guess, objectively, I have to say Andrew is crazy. But Andrew always does what he wants, what he believes, while millions of other people never do, even once in their lives. It's too hard. And they don't give you health insurance for that—for living your dream. Andrew is brave and odd, and I do appreciate that—from afar. Every time he's near, I get so hostile. I guess I want all the bravery for me.

Chapter Seven

Before he left for the forest, Andrew introduced me to the DIY (Do It Yourself) underground. People around the world trade cassettes for free of their own music, and play for audiences of ten or twenty in each other's living rooms, knocking out the need for producers, managers, agents, bookers, distributors, seed money, melody or even talent. Pirate radio stations operate under the FCC's radar. It's a whole other society, operating under the regular world's radar. There's so much going on! You won't make a lot of money, but what you can do is … anything!

Psycodrama are two beerbellied, bearded men who long ago went to art school and then went on to Virginia, where they "died." Listening to their music—a cat wailing over disco beats and songs about Jesus and asses (sticking cocks up them and poop coming out of them)—is for me like looking in a

mirror, if only I were a redneck homosexual in my thirties. I write them a fan letter—their only one, I believe, and they immediately invite me to join the troupe. I spend my eighteenth birthday with Gator and Bubba (Brett and Jim) in Virginia making a video where we all eat bacon and sausage and drink whiskey at a restaurant called Grandma's, and laugh about terrible things until I think I'm going to be sick. And then they drive me around the hills of Virginia drunk, talking over and over about "twee" instead of "three" (I don't get it, but it cracks both of them up every single time) and their plans to beat up our friend Wha whose mother did heroin so he has very long arms and very tiny legs and their next tape which they will call Nigger. They swerve all over the gravelly road until I'm so scared I start crying. On the train home the next day, I feel like I hate them, but a letter from Brett explaining that what they did to me was "theatre" convinces me that I got what I claimed to want. My favourite authors (all stolen from Andrew) theorize on terror and absurdity, but it was my drive with the hairy, horrible men through the backwoods that was fast and real, with taste (the bacon and sausage kept coming back up) and touch and sound. Suckdog are feral. Psycodrama—the way they play with racism, sexism and homophobia—are more seasoned, more dangerous. I want in.

The plan for our debut live show together, in New York, is for me to wash dishes on-stage while they sing about bitches

and coons, and if I don't wash fast enough, they'll beat me. This seems to me like it will really get a reaction, even from a New York audience.

Once I'm on-stage, however, with the distorted backing tape shrieking, dishes in hand, and an audience all in black staring, I forget all about my ideas—that portraying woman as subjugated at this time and place is reaction-causing. Just because I have a plan is no reason to stick to it! I throw the dishes at people and I jump from the stage onto one of the rickety little tables, because I can. We get these impulses and we don't do them because there are all these invisible walls up everywhere, but they're not real. There aren't really any walls at all. I leap from table to table until finally I fall onto one leather-panted man's lap, knocking him off his chair. We roll around and I stick my tongue in his mouth and then I slap his face. I scramble back onto a table. Brett is singing his "Nigger" song in falsetto and Bubba is "jacking" a young man who refused to kiss his Lynyrd Skynyrd album. I think it's called "jacking"—he punched him in the jaw. The female manager comes toward me with mace in her hand. I leap off my table, knocking it and glasses to the floor, and run for the door. Brett and Bubba are already down the street, puffing and moving super fast for such fat men. We don't have to worry about collecting our equipment, since all we used was a backing tape, which was just a copy, and the cafe's own microphones. The manager and her mace are in hot pursuit and

I yell "Girl after me! Girl after me! I love girls!" at the top of my lungs and then I catch up with Brett and he yanks me behind a dumpster where we crouch down panting and try to suppress our giggling.

An overseas member of this cassette-trading underground is Jean Louis Costes—perhaps, Brett tells me, the only classically trained musician making these kinds of tapes, and yet his music is the most destroyed of all. With an accent thick as Brie and often startling word choice, Costes tells (in English) the sing-songy tale of a frog in a swamp and a king and the travels of a fellow who loses everything—"The Happy Go Lucky Native", accompanied by messed-up piano and a guitar so out-of-tune it's almost unrecognizable as guitar.

The second I hear it, I know that this is the man I will marry. That he lives in Paris and already has a woman and is twice my age—these are mere details. I send the Frenchman a package of little drawings, torn pieces of photos, and a letter about zebras chasing cheetahs (that's about the oppressed rising), the flying cats of the stars, Joan of Arc, and a football team named "Hogs." He writes back, and I start recording my "letters" on my shiny new four-track from Radio Shack, drunk (I have recorder-fright along with stage-fright), adding music made of samples of records played at the wrong RPM or a blender with a spoon stuck in it, or Rachel's four cats fighting each other. The message of my nonsensical

tales, which I trust Jean Louis to understand, is that all these things are symbols for him and me: Instead of actually living in our respective, separate countries, he and I fly about time and space and form, having love and death together in many ways. He records for me his masturbation with a needle, and it's very strange to hear in my Walkman headphones a grown man screaming as a method of courtship!

"Like a hunter, I study your tracks," he writes, "the traces of you. Some days there is nothing. You are very mysterious; you don't want to be found so easy. I know you are the most beautiful animal. I saw your tracks and you saw mine. You play with me and trick and tease, I play with you. One day, I will have you, the queen. Drag you down and put you under me. One time only, and then I will let you run away, splendid and free."

At first Rachel liked him, or the idea of him—but then she found out he was old and missing some teeth. Rachel likes old things, not old people.

"What does he want with you, anyway?" she demands.

"He wants to hunt me down and put me under him!" I say.

"Well I want a young, handsome boyfriend for you. No—he is handsome in his own weaselly way. Maybe. Let me see again. It's hard to tell from under the six-foot penis."

The only picture I have of my future husband is a live shot, where he is indeed wearing a six-foot penis outfit, battling

another giant penis—this second penis with breasts distinctly visible beneath the stretchy pink fabric.

I have to find a way to get this somewhat toothless penis-battler to my country and to the altar. That he just left for Tanzania for six months, which is even further away from me than when he was home in Paris, has dampened my resolve not at all. I do, however, acquire a new boyfriend for the extra wait, with whom Rachel and I move to Philadelphia. Chris Sakey is of Arab descent, with a dyed yellow Mohawk long after Mohawks—and yellow—were fashionable. He is also schizophrenic. Chris will be my Africa.

Rachel, Chris Sakey and I are doing aerobics in our underwear, in the living room of our asbestos-crumbling apartment in Philadelphia. Chris shaved all the hair off his body, and his eyebrows too. "I am a shark," he leers, bouncing around in his tightie whities, "watch me swim … in the water where the lights are dim!"

"Go Jane, go!" Rachel cries, ignoring Chris as usual. A Jane Fonda cassette is on our stereo. Rachel wears nude-coloured underwear and bra; I'm wearing red unders and no bra.

"Ten more reps, you can do it," Jane coerces us with her librarian's voice. I can't wait to slip away to my room—mine and Chris Sakey's—to pore over the package again that Jean Louis sent me, and eat a few more of the stale peanuts he bought for me at the African Bazaar.

"I like to put things from you in my mouth," I write, continuing the letter I plan on sending once it reaches one hundred pages. "My heart is a bloody pumping rhythmic meat in the safety prison of my rib cage. It is a pet not allowed to play outside. I feed it your peanuts." There was no letter in Jean Louis's package. Just perfume in a yellowed container in the shape of a snowman; the peanuts; a voodoo doll; a watergun; and a small, bony lump of gold in a tiny Zip-loc. All things that change shape or are not what they seem to be. Snowmen melt; peanuts get digested; the gun isn't a real gun; the voodoo doll is only a symbol of a real body; and the gold, I feel pretty sure, was melted out of a dead person's tooth. This stranger is meeting me for unreal love on an unreal plane of existence.

"It doesn't make me at all sad or impatient that you are so far away or that you send me no word," I write. "I love you and that is all. Do you love Anne?" Anne is the woman he lives with in Paris, the painter. She accompanied him to Tanzania. "I also love someone—my new boyfriend Chris. But that's different. He is someone I happened to meet. What I have for you is better than love. I wish I were your cat; I would sit and watch you all day long with big eyes, and go through your drawers when you were out. I want to be your dentist so I can look down your throat to see what I can see. I want to be your shirt and rub against you while you go about your day, talking to everybody but me. I wish that you were my twin brother, so that we could have been floating in the

waters of the same womb, and signalled to each other without our mother knowing. I wish I hadn't known of you until I was seventy years old, because then I could have waited for you my whole life." I'm on page sixty-seven.

Chris goes off his medication, substituting grain alcohol and acid. He starts hearing my voice giving him commands—usually quite commonplace ones, like, "Buy two hoagies for lunch instead of one." But one sunny day, Chris—wearing no shirt over his freshly shaved torso—approaches me while I'm ironing, saying he's going to rape me. He shouldn't have said that to someone with a hissing iron in her hand—especially when that someone has been waiting and planning for eighteen years for somebody to attack her. My heartbeat slows down rather than speeding up as he moves around the ironing board towards me, and I might even be smiling. Later, I'll worry a little about my soul, that I felt such calm satisfaction holding a hissing, spitting iron flush against a sick man's chest—as if I'd always dreamed of doing that, and never had a good enough excuse before.

Chris moves out of our room and into his car (still parked in front of our apartment). He quits his job, all the better to spy on Rachel and me all day and say things into his little recorder. Then he drives to Berkeley and goes to music school there.

Chapter Eight

I scan the Europeans pouring out of the gate—barrel-bellied, older men rushing to kiss the cheeks of the barrel-bellied, white- and gray-bearded men on my side of the barrier. I'm about to throw up with nervousness. At last I think I spot him, a bedraggled weed of a man among the big, hairy kissers. He walks up to me, we stare at each other.

In person, Jean Louis Costes looks inconsequential and disconnected—nothing like the flashing-eyed, fierce actor in the photograph. Of course, he's not in the body-length penis suit—that might be bringing him down a peg. Instead, he wears a rather dingy striped acrylic sweater with chewed cuffs, jeans and sneakers, and carries pink and baby blue plastic store bags rather than luggage. It's so strange to have sent my brain across the ocean to him, and having received

his for over a year, and now here he is: this short, tense, shy person with girl-coloured bags, a big sharp nose and an overly broad forehead. ("We French are proud of our big foreheads to house our big brains," he says later, when I comment on it. "Look at the King Louis's—even bigger than mine.")

"Jean Louis?" I say.

"Hi, hi," he says softly.

We walk up and down Broadway excited and bright, our arms carefully never brushing against each other. It's his first time here, and I feel that all that is New York, all that is America, is me. He's walking down me, under the lights of me, looking into glittering windows of me. And I—the non-streets-and-windows part of me—am him: I am the dirty foreigner slipping through shiny me. We've gotten so good at anthropomorphizing and shape-shifting in our year of loving postally, we can't get back into our own, un-shifted human bodies now that we're actually together. Now that I can finally touch him, I don't dare.

It gets later and later and darker and colder. We can't find a cheap hotel, so we take an expensive one and sit on the bed, watching a National Geographic Special on Africa, drinking champagne. Antelope are leaping. I lay down to sleep and I say, "Won't you put your arm around me?" His hand falls into the "S" curve of my side and in a few minutes we are asleep.

A few minutes later, we're awake. Naked, Jean Louis doesn't

look so unprepossessing. He's all sinew and gristle, with zero percent body fat. He doesn't lift weights or anything—he's wiry just from being very nervous, all the time. He holds his body so tensely, it built muscles! Plus his diet (I know from his letters) consists mainly of raw garlic, raw onions, and raw potatoes. Not for health reasons, but for political ones. His father was an army man, his mother a church lady. Together, they are one of the richest couples in France, living in a mansion in the proper zip code of Paris—the one the currents always blow the pollution away from, aiming it towards the poor people. Jean Louis's parents have lots of bushes carved into animal shapes. Jean Louis hates the tamed bushes, hates the taming parents. He is a Communist. His raw, unsauced food (and Lord knows the French love their sauces!) is meant to make him like the starving people rather than like the people he actually came from. Instead, it's made him like the statue of David!

The antelope are standing still now on the flickering screen, watching, and the sheet falls off of us like water, Jean Louis's hand moves over his own garlic-onion-potato statue-body, and my hand dives into my own newly nineteen, aerobicised form. Our faces are white, then green, then yellow in the headlights from passing cars. His eyes are closed, then half-open. A vein pulses above his right eye. He moans. I imagine he's still thinking of me as far away, studying how to reach me. His hands give off heat. My own are cool and quiet and

steady. A single contraction of his stomach as if someone kicked him, and then his head jerks upright, his eyes revealing only the whites, his mouth silently screaming. He's ugly at this moment, but I like watching him. A few spasms of the penis, as if it were trying to climb off his body, and then it's over. We haven't touched one another at all.

The next evening, walking on Broadway again, I buy two Phantom of the Opera tickets on impulse from a scalper. A gay babysitter and his friend used to always play Andrew Lloyd Weber's rock opera "Evita" while driving me for a day at the lake. I knew every word. In fact, I knew some words that were probably never even there! A caustic Che Guevara watches and narrates Evita's clawing rise from shop girl to whore to radio star to worshipped ruler and exploiter of an entire population. Evita battles everything in this world, and wins—until at last she is brought down from within: After the woman devours a nation, her body eats her alive, with cancer. Che intones mid-opera, mid-rise of the evil woman, the ominous: "A new Argentina, the chains of the masses cannot be" … what? Cannot be "pried"? My mind filled in a different word on every listen. Then all the men come in, and their voices swell and fill the whole car and spill out the windows, onto the highway: "A new Argentina, the voice of the people … cannot be! and will not be! and must not be! deniiiiiiied!" I almost swooned in the back seat every time. The fact that smoke from the sitter's joint was always being

blown back at me by the wind might have contributed to my delirium. But even this many years later, seeing Andrew Lloyd Weber's name on the marquee makes my heart rise in my chest and I hear in my head the echoes of those bass voices coming together warning of a very wrong, very big violence a-brewing.

The scalper charged me fifty dollars a ticket—the last of my money—for the worst seats in the world. Well, they aren't seats. We have to stand very far away and peer over the heads of the people who did get the worst seats in the world.

I don't much care for "Phantom"—probably because it's not "Evita"—but it has quite an effect on Jean Louis. He expected me to take him to a show of, say, The Swans, whose drums are booming and smoke is blown out by a big, sooty fan and the singer looks pained and mean. The Swans do put on a powerful show, but not in any unexpected way. "Phantom" is bombastic and romantic and different. There must be some unwritten law against underground performers like us attending the most generic Broadway hit and being moved to tears by the sad, slow, melodic song of the heaving-bosomed lady in a fake boat on a fake river. It changed Jean Louis's ideas of what we could do together, he says afterwards, excitedly—for the shows he and I will do together and even with our lives: "It is now obvious to me our large choice of possibilities." We don't have to follow any rules—not even the rule to not follow rules.

* * *

We're in the hotel, trying to decide what to do. He sits on the bed; I kneel at his feet, alternating that with angry pacing. I want children and he doesn't. "Well forget it then," I spit. I decide I am a hard woman. He is nervous and angry but I don't care. We have to separate—there's nothing else to do.

Then comes Jean Louis's marriage proposal: "Us to marry is nothing important, like to say okay, let's meet at Dunkin' Donuts at five. We are the kind of people efficient who do everything we want, say, dream. I crossed Africa by foot and you crossed America by awful buses. You know I hate your sex, you, your presence, everyone. Still you are the person I see, across all other people's bodies. We are together in a magic little corner of my head, your head. There has to be some solution to this cloud of desperation. To marry is not the answer, but why not to?"

Chapter Nine

We marry. My husband promptly gets a job downtown working the fryolator at a chicken shop for some Koreans at three dollars an hour under the table. But that's okay, as our rent—even after Rachel moves out to go live with her boyfriend Chris—is only $150 each a month, due to the asbestos. At night, Jean Louis and I write operas and talk on and on about moving to Africa and starting a tour guide business. Jean Louis tells me stories about it. When Ghana was under British rule, voodoo ceremony was forbidden. Instead, people would get possessed by modern devils—the chief of police, the priest—rather than more traditional spirits, like the wind. They would run all over the place, drunk and yelling, before an audience of five or ten neighbours, wearing just a feather in the ass to play the president. Jean Rouch shot an ethnological film about it in the '60s called "Les Maitres Fous"—Crazy

Masters. And Jean Louis saw with his own eyes a tribe of Masai, who mixed traditional African outfits with modern Western things—like rusty C batteries in their earlobe holes; or a crisp, button-down shirt …with no pants or underwear! The mix of crazy and normal seems crazier to me than just plain crazy, and I want to do that.

We manage to get a coffee house to let us perform on pacifist poets' night. Five people show up, besides the pacifist poets on the bill. (I guess we're the warmonger poets.) Jean Louis surprises everyone by coming out of the bathroom with an open umbrella with broken metal ribs duct-taped to his back, trailing black tissue paper, and a turkey baster for a penis. I wear just Christmas lights. There's no sound system, so we play our backing tape on a boombox. It's a cacophony of the instruments Jean Louis bought in Africa—rusting tin strips attached to wood, which we drank a lot of coffee and recorded about thirty loops of us twanging, all on top of each other, along with a rap mix of Jean Louis's favourite band running underneath: Paul McCartney and the Wings. Jean Louis opens his mouth and screeches: "I am zee murrrderrrerrr frrrom Venuzzzzzzzz!" Before we're even halfway done, all five audience members have run away. Whether they feared getting poked in the eye by a loose umbrella rib, or squirted with the turkey baster, or electrocuted by my lights—or if they just don't appreciate opera in Philadelphia, I can't say. "The next time, we really must concentrate on the lighting! I

have a crazy-good idea on what we can do with broken pieces of mirror!" Jean Louis says as we leave, as if we didn't just get four dollars for weeks' worth of work—and the cafe owner wouldn't even look at us when he handed us the money.

It turns out there were six people in the audience, not five—and the sixth one, Gerard Cosloy, writes for SPIN! The next time I pick up SPIN by chance in the grocery store, I read: "She's from New Hampshire and he's from France. They sing over tapes they made off the radio, generally really horrible AM radio sludge, whatever they could find. They put together their own 30-minute rock operas, usually separately, sometimes together. Lisa's 19 years old. Something really bad happened to her at a young age; she's very strange—it seems as though she's eight or nine years old and she's never trying to come off that way. Costes, on the other hand, he's in his thirties, and his command of the English language is not that strong. The only words he really seems to have gotten the hang of so far are words for body parts. He likes to use those words very often. He likes to talk about the parts of the body, and what he's about to do with them. The two of them together are really great, they're sort of made for each other. They make a very nice couple. I've never heard anything in rock'n'roll that sounds like them."

When I bring Jean Louis to a party, he is ten or more years older than everyone; his hair is not nice and his skin is not smooth. He looks like he's from another tribe—bony and alert

and wild. He is my ideal of what a man should be: irritable, capable, quick, harsh, strong, smart, authoritative. When he takes out the garbage, he looks mysterious, dangerous. ("I just saw a shady-looking character out there by your dumpster," Rachel's brother said when he came to visit, patting his wallet to make sure it was still there. "This is not a good neighbourhood, is it?" Then Jean Louis walked in behind him, and the brother said, "Oh!") He has a big appetite at dinnertime and he has the ugly man-things: abrasive political beliefs; black hair coming out of the nose; a thick neck; and what looks like extra bones in his feet. Rachel doesn't like that he doesn't talk much, and then on other occasions talks fast and spitting and his accent gets thicker and he won't shut up. But I think he's perfect.

And he thinks I'm knowing and depraved and very driven. "You make no move that isn't … prosperous to your future," he says, squinting. People who don't really know me describe me as "oddly innocent," "perpetually tipsy"—even "a half-wit." But once they get close enough, they start wondering if I'm not some kind of monster—secretive, and hardened by ambition. Jean Louis, though, seems to like monsters. Still, he's keeping his eye on me. He draws a really big eye on a piece of paper and tacks it up on my side of the bed, where it can watch me whenever he, reluctantly, falls asleep. I like the eye. I find it comforting. I'm suspicious of me too.

* * *

I come home from a walk and Jean Louis, who appeared perfectly reasonable when I left for my walk, now has a look about him. "I have something for you," he says. It's a carton of orange juice. He pushes me down and dumps the orange juice over my head. I try to crawl away and he pulls me around by my hair, up onto furniture and off again. He pulls open my mouth and spits in it. I spit his spit back at him. There's orange juice in my eyes. I'm punching his legs and I can't believe how weak I am. And then we both stop, and we're sitting on the floor, sticky, with messed-up hair, looking at each other.

"This was what you want?" He says it conversationally, as if we've just been hanging out. "I see the GG Allin record with the new 'Suck Dog' song he made. He likes to send the secret message, eh? And then I find in your underwear drawer your letters you still write to him. Your little George-George. It's always more with you. What you want—for him to kill you? I thought it just games we do, but you will make me do always worse. I have to show you this violence is ugly. You think it's romantic! You will drive me mad. You will make me kill you in the end. Then I'll be in jail. My peanut girl."

I contemplate the phrase "peanut girl," ignoring everything else. Finally I figure it out: he mistook the term "pin-up" for "peanut," because sexy women are shaped like peanuts.

He punches himself in the forehead. "I am broken in the

head, me. What I do? You must be mad, to stay with me. Now you see how I am. I am polite only to foreigners." (He met a Moroccan at work and brought him home and let him stay, and was nice and animated with him, not paranoid and unstable, like with me.)

We wash the orange juice off us and the apartment, and Jean Louis makes up the bed, going "woo-woo!" and swinging his arms. "I am your big gorilla!" He pronounces it "gor-ee-ya." "I make the nest!" He chases me all around "woo-woo"-ing and then we have gorilla love.

A man is killing one of my five kittens slowly and painfully, ripping off one ear, then the other, and then the tail. To save the other four from torture, I decide to strangle them. But it's taking so long. My fingers flatten their necks down to paper, but still they won't die. I wake up with my face all wet and Jean Louis whispering to me about everything being all right. Even his whisper is accented!

I lay there watching headlights skim the ceiling, and then I remember that something like my dream really happened, when I was six: My kittens have some terminal diarrhoea disease. My father puts them in a bag—maybe it's a burlap bag. He carries the bag out into the garden, and chops their heads off with a shovel. Only, how could he know where their heads are, since they're all in that bag? He's just chopping, chopping. I run and hide behind a row of corn, crying, and

my father yells at me: "This is part of life! If you can't take it, go in the house. Don't sit there cowering and blubbering!"

"Go in the house" is code for "Go ahead, be like other women! Be frightened of harsh realities; turn away, live only half a life! In Genghis Khan's time, you wouldn't have lasted one day."

My father's shouting mixes with mewls from the dismembered kittens. He never yelled before—he likes to deliver his messages *sotto voce*, quite close to my ear. I'm frozen in my squatting position, and then my focus shifts and I'm watching the aphids march up the heavy stalks into ears of corn as the mewls fade and then stop. Later that afternoon, he plants geraniums to attract ladybugs, which eat aphids, but it's too late—the whole crop will be destroyed.

That was a few months before my father went to prison for the first time, so I must have been five, not six. I completely forgot that ever happened. Maybe it got in my head because the opera we're working on now is called "Lost Kittens."

Chapter Ten

I pick out my candidate—the shyest, reluctantest, least-rebellious-looking brunette in the audience—and sit upon his knee, laughing. "I like your hair!" I say, ruffling it.

"It's just hair," he says, inching away from me as best he can on the hard little chair, but I inch along with him.

"I know," I say. "It's not statement hair. You're the only one in the room not making a statement with his hair. I think that makes a statement! You're the real rebel. Can I put my hand in your shirt?"

"Can you what?"

"Don't say anything, because everyone is looking at us, but this is for the show. I'm supposed to be flirting with someone to start the show, and Jean Louis comes out and gets all mad and drags me off of you onto the stage. It's a lot more

dramatic than when the actors just walk from behind the curtain straight out, don't you think? And now you're one of the actors!"

"What, he's gonna… Wait!" The boy is genuinely alarmed.

I gaze into his eyes. "He and I are married. But we don't have a regular marriage. So what do you study at university?"

"Journalism. But—he's your husband? Could you, uh, your hand…"

"Oh that's great! In journalism school they tell you to tell who-what-where-why-when, right? Me—my hand—your thigh—because I want to—right now! That's our story!"

"I'm really very nervous right now. You're cute, thank you for picking me, but I…. Can you get off me?"

"Ooh, here he comes! Quick, give me your lips—this is your last chance in this life to kiss me!"

"*Salope du pris!*" Jean Louis roars, bursting from out back, and he throws a chicken bone (one of our props) at my head. It misses my head and hits the display window—this place is a bookstore by day—shattering it. Everyone is silent. Even Jean Louis looks like he doesn't know what to do. Then he just goes with it. "You American … girl! See what you do?" He pulls on one of my arms. I yank it back and put both my arms around the brunette and hang on tight. Jean Louis hisses low so only I can hear (which I think strange, since he's supposed to be acting the jealous husband for the audience's benefit):

"I work to set up the props and sell your records, and what you do? Your little kissy-kissy? Now you make me break a window—that is fifty dollars you cost me!" He addresses the boy: "Hey you! Hey you! This is my wife, you know!"

"I didn't do anything! My shirt!" my swain calls. "This is my best shirt!" It's ripping as Jean Louis pulls me away by my hair and I'm using the guy's shirt as an anchor. Next thing I know I'm at the foot of the stage ("the stage" is a rug) with half-a-shirt in my hands, and Jean Louis is pouring a pitcher of beer over my head.

"My contact lenses!" I yelp, smashing my fists into my eyes. "Keep it out of my eyes!"

"I don't care your eyes!" Jean Louis screams, looking really scary.

Debbey Puff, who took the train from Atlanta to go on tour across country with us, says, "Oh yeah, make her blind—she's already so skinny she should be in a hospital. Make your wife totally fucking helpless, then you'll be happy." Her lines weren't rehearsed—she's not supposed to be doing anything at this point. She seems truly disturbed. Everyone seems emotionally exaggerated tonight, out in the middle of nowhere in Athens, Ohio. Maybe because this is our fifth straight night of travelling, unloading, playing the show—which by design plays on all our real insecurities and obsessions, then packing back up, sleeping two hours on someone's floor, and getting back on a Greyhound bus, with all the heat tumbling out of

thousands of tiny, rectangular vents lining the insides, drying our nasal passages and making us sick and mad and frizzing our hair. Or maybe it's Ohio. I find the Buckeye state to be the craziest of the fifty (What kind of state names itself after a poisonous growth?). The hardest drinking, latest-into-the-night-arguing, the lostest, the best.

Two almost identical fellows with pasty faces stand up and come toward us. They both wear flannel shirts tied around their waists. "Let's get this disgusting little foreigner outside and teach him some manners towards American girls," one of them says. I can't believe this is an underground performance in a bookstore, and audience members have been so easily turned into xenophobic rednecks. Each takes one of Jean Louis's arms and starts dragging him through the crowd, towards the door. They're gonna drag him through the broken glass! flashes through my mind. "Hey guys," Jean Louis says. "I am just a freaky French frog, I mean no harm. I don't know any better!" They have him out the door before I catch up with them, and I say, "Guys, don't you want to see the show? It's really fun! Let him go and we'll start the show."

"We'll kick his ass," one of them says. "You just say the word. That wasn't cool, him dumping beer on your head. You want us to teach him a lesson?"

"No, no. He just got a little overenthusiastic. Let's go inside, guys."

They look at each other for a minute, look at me in my cat

ears, whiskers, and tail, then they release Jean Louis's arms. The four of us go back inside, a solemn procession. The two with flannels resume their seats and Jean Louis and I mount the rug, where Debbey stands frozen, looking like an Italian greyhound—those dogs that shake all the time, and keep breaking their little legs with their terrified leaps away from what they perceive as threats.

"We begin?" Jean Louis asks, but just then I catch two girls trying to slink out the door, so I leap into action and drag them back in.

"This is all an act, isn't it?" a tough girl shouts. "You rehearsed this!"

So I sit on her lap and french-kiss her. "Did we rehearse that?" I ask, pulling away only far enough so I can use my mouth to talk. She's not so tough any more! My forehead and the tip of my nose are still touching hers; our hair brushes each other's cheeks. The music on the backing tape signals the beginning of the Lost Kittens dance. I get off the girl.

No one would guess how meticulously choreographed the dances are, how many rhymes we've memorized, how much meaning each of us invested in the storyline. Everything has to be just right, in preparation. But then, once the show begins, we have too much energy, and we slip out of everything we worked towards. We let our whims, or the audience's, crash down any dance or song or decoration. Then we go back and pick up the plan again. (Well, with me there's a little more

crashing down and with Jean Louis there's a little more picking up, as he doesn't drink or use drugs or have sexual activity with strangers.) As Debbey and I synchronize our moves, I have a rising feeling inside, like a helium balloon, that this was the best beginning of any performance in the world ever—or at least the best blurring of the line between show and reality, between performer and observer. "What we do is war!" Jean Louis insisted during practice, and I passed that off as him just being French and dramatic and paranoid. But in a way, isn't he right? We are waging war on perceptions of reality, with our physical Socratic method. We are losing money, health, safety—all that to give the gift of confusion to thirty or forty people a night. In confusion, all the pieces of what you think are scattered, and you might put them back together in a new way. In fact, I'm like Mother Teresa! Except I'm naked and hitting people with a broom. And I pee in the litter box.

Jean Louis must've bought scoop-away litter; the pee is making it clump, and it looks like something else—number two. People start to leave. Debbey starts to cry. I am so offended that people would leave halfway through our show—an opera (well, they often leave halfway through—I'm not really offended, just extra excited tonight)—that I pick up the clumps and throw them at their fleeing backs. Which horrifies the half of the audience who stayed, and they jump up to leave too, and there's a bottleneck at the door and girls are screaming that they can't breathe. Only one audience member

remains. It's Rob from Connecticut. He loved our show in Stowe, Connecticut so much he followed us all the way out here to see it again. He stands there laughing and laughing, and we perform the rest of the show for our audience of one. Debbey is weeping, but like a soldier, she carries on, improvising new words to her songs to show her horror and her hatred of Jean Louis.

"Well," says Jean Louis at the end, "I did one show sadder than this, in Paris. A puppet show with the saxophonist playing, and only two people came—my parents—and both were crying."

"What was it, really?" one reviewer wonders. "A feudalistic potboiler reminiscent of The Theatre of the Ridiculous," ventures another. My mother is horrified, of course. But when the Boston Globe runs an article about us—implying we really killed a dog on stage!—she is excited by the fame and lets everyone at the navy yard where she works read the article (wringing her hands all the while). They make a nameplate for her desk that reads "Mrs. Suckdog."

I pee in a litter box because I am playing a cat, and that's what cats do. If I were an audience member, I'd like to see pee as part of a show, because you know the pee-er isn't acting peeing. Jean Louis and I both end up naked due to similar theatrical reasoning: You can't pretend to be naked. I was in a real Hollywood movie, briefly: *Small White House*.

It won some award in Portugal. You would have thought I was perfect for the part—my character peed, manipulated, was crazy. But I was fired two weeks into shooting, only to be replaced by an overweight stripper! I was fired for being a lousy actress. The director said I was a "spaz." I just couldn't keep saying the same line take after take. I didn't even want to hit my mark! I missed having a live audience to make part of the show. Because they're untrained and thinking they're just going to watch something, what comes out of the audience, when they're disturbed or excited enough to stand up and do something, is always so surprising. And our show becomes different every night. In Lawrence, Kansas, we played in a shack in the middle of a field. There were snakes in the bathroom, and the skinheads were so offended by our performance, they went outside as one and force-vomited in a circle in order to purge the brotherhood of what they'd seen. Then they came back in and stole all our stuff, and made a bonfire out of it. The Lawrence, Kansas show no longer had anything to do with what Jean Louis, Debbey and I wrote or planned. It was about snakes, skinheads and thievery. With movies, there's too much control; all the action is flattened down to play out on one fifteen-by-ten-foot surface, exactly the same night after night. Even with regular live shows, the action still occurs all inside a rectangle—just horizontal instead of vertical (the stage). I believe the composer John Cage, who says, "Every seat is the best seat." Including places that

aren't seats at all. Our action spills out into the street, or hides in the bathroom (with me initiating some weird version of SM with someone who looks like they never would have even heard of such a thing, while my tourmates pound angrily on the door). A journalist in San Francisco cowered under our For Sale table, afraid of being assaulted—or at least grossly spilled on. He watched the entire production from only our knees down—and later described it as the best show he ever saw!

What we had for sale—what the skinheads stole, and what the journalist hid under—were mostly our "Rape GG" records. When dumping orange juice over my head didn't prove enough to completely get me over GG Allin, Jean Louis decided to make an album out of my crush and his jealousy. We trade off songs, blending the real situation with paranoia and physically impossible acts. "*Ole!*" Jean Louis yells over cut-up trumpet sounds. "Heh GG, I see you in your wheelchair, you like to rape the girls!" He starts off planning to beat GG in battle in order to win my hand, and become the king of the underground. But then something unexpected happens: He falls in love with GG himself! So (naturally) he decides to cut off his own cock, sew it onto GG's belly (because, Jean Louis likes to pretend, GG's own dick is so dwarfish as to be useless, unfindable). Then he (Jean Louis) will cut himself a cunt in his own belly—that way they can consummate their freakish love.

While Jean Louis's bizarre infatuation heightens over the course of the album, mine wanes. I explain my disappointment over a drawling violin: "GG I love you, but you're pretty fucking slow. You didn't come for me, and now I'm not coming for you. Oh, oh, ohhh, oh." Around that time, I received a photocopied announcement of GG's plan to off himself on stage on Halloween, and in my final song I taunt him: "C'mon, GG, you keep promising. When's it gonna be, huh? When you gonna die on stage? C'mon, GG, when's it gonna be? C'mon, GG, die!"

I was surprised when people found our oeuvre of a love-hate triangle not only "unlistenable," but also cruel, weird, and unrealistic. Most relationships, when you strip off all the artifice, are cruel and weird and unrealistic. At least I thought they were. GG and I always flirted by insulting each other. He'd send me a letter threatening me with violence, but include just enough sugar (a peeled off Jim Beam label, or a matchbook that said "Flick me!") to keep me hooked. I'd send back a dime taped to a piece of paper saying "Here's for a payphone … tell someone who cares." What I really meant was: "Here's for a payphone so you can ask me out on a date, and insult me in the flesh, ya big lug … you misunderstood Heathcliff of scumrock."

At the end of our Lost Kittens tour, Jean Louis has to go back to France, and I go back to Dover till I can earn enough money to join him. I discover in my post office box a booklet

of GG's prison poetry. It's so dreadful! I always thought it was theatre—all his brutishness, from the bar brawls to the poor grammar—conceived by an elegant and vicious intelligence. I thought he played dumb brilliantly. After reading "Troubled Troubadour of Tomorrow," however, I realize my dream-date is probably borderline retarded! I don't know if my new perspective has completely killed my crush, or re-ignited it. After all, there is no question any more about one thing: GG is real.

Chapter Eleven

GG is splayed underneath a show announcement poster of himself on the spilled-beer-greasy black floor of The Lizard Lounge in Manhattan, wearing a leather jacket and no shirt. Does he even own a shirt? How does he get service at convenience stores? His male, mostly shirtless, followers squat around him in a semi-circle. "Hi," I say, standing over him. "Hi! I'm Lisa." He stares at me, and the followers look from me to him, waiting for a cue. "Suckdog," I prompt.

"Oh, the girl with the record," GG says. His eyes look glazed. GG's gotten into heroin.

He's already forgotten I'm standing there. But I'm determined that this meeting will not end as innocuously as the one in the Greyhound station did three years ago. Then, I was an awkward little girl. Now I'm an awkward woman. "I want

you to pay attention to me!" I say, tugging at my clothes.

"I don't pay attention to no one."

I slide down next to him. "I'll teach you. First, offer me some of your drink."

GG pulls my head back by the hair and pours Jim Beam down my throat. I cough and climb into his lap. "See, there are little hearts on my stockings. See, ruffles on my socks. And lace on my dress." GG pulls up my dress, I pull it back down. "See the taps on my shoes?" I lift my leg. He really looks at me for the first time. Well, he looks at my shoes.

"I don't like 'em."

I take off my shoes and throw them to the other end of the bar.

GG laughs. "I can't see you. Put your fucking face up. You're all curled up." He grabs my face with both hands, stares at it.

A fan bends down and gets right in GG's face. "Hey GG! You gonna shit tonight or what?"

"No, don't wanna."

"C'mon GG, ya gotta! I brought all my friends, I told them all about you. You gotta shit, man, c'mon." The fan looks at GG's blank expression, gets disgusted, leaves.

"It must be hard to be GG Allin," I say. It's getting hard for all of us in the profession of being shocking. Jean Louis and I played on the same bill with Nick Zedd, and before the show, Nick threatened to stab a waitress with a fork. It would ruin his reputation, I guess, if he just ate his food without as-

saulting anyone. "Do people ever get your number and call you?" I ask GG. "Sometimes people do that to me, and they sound so disappointed when I say 'Hello' and can actually hold a conversation. As if I've personally let them down by not jumping out a window, screaming, twenty-four hours a day. And my reputation isn't half as bad as yours! At least our shit and blood is fake. Mostly. Unless there's an accident."

"I don't give a fuck what those fuckers think," GG claims. "I don't have to give them dick. I might just do some blues numbers tonight. Fuck them."

As GG and I pass the bottle back and forth, it becomes more and more difficult to see. If I squint, I can make out one thing at a time, like the glinting zipper on GG's jacket, or Jeff at the other end of the bar, bent over the pinball machine with Angela bent over him, and everything outside that one thing is blurry. I feel like I'm in a play, and then I feel like someone in a play who feels like they're in a play. Then we're making out! GG doesn't have all his teeth, and the ones he does have haven't been brushed for a while. They're slimy.

"Hey, you got small fucking tits," he comments.

I laugh. "Yeah, I know. All girls who make music do, almost."

"Get back here, what are you scuttling away for? You a crab?" He makes a playful swipe at my leg. It's the most animated he's been this whole night. "Hey, Lisa,"—he pauses, as if names don't usually make it into his mouth, and mine feels

funny in there—"you never wrote back about that movie I wanna make with you. Fuckin' Zedd said he'd film it."

"Yeah, well … 'Fuckin' Zedd' told me you were planning on making it a snuff flick!"

"Me?" GG tries to make his face all innocent.

I don't think he'd actually kill me, but I also don't ever want to be alone with him and find out. This date with a wall of witnesses (in leather, with cigarettes hanging) is just right.

"So, GG," I say, "do you fuck?"

"Yeah," he answers. Quick and defensive. "Yeah, I fuck. Do you?"

"Nope."

"Well what do you do then?" He's interested.

"Other stuff."

I happen to know—or, at least, I hear—that the one thing GG doesn't do is have regular, completed sex. Me too! I'll do things on the telephone, with lit cigarettes, with girls, or guys pretending to be girls, or two guys pretending not to be gay. "Other stuff." Only being alone with someone, in a love mood, makes me nervous. That's one reason I thought GG and I should be together—we could be not together in all kinds of ways. But the more I find out about other people, the more I realize these are just plain twisted times. Twisting away from traditional sex because that can give you AIDS. Even the most innocuous-looking kids I went to school with are tying people down or being tied!

"Give me your wedding ring," GG is saying.

"Why?"

"That 'Rape GG' album—if it's true, if you love me, you'd give me your wedding ring as proof of your devotion."

"You'd just sell it. I love my husband!"

An acquaintance of mine stalks over, sticks his finger in my face. "You're a real fucking whore, you know that? And you know exactly what you're doing. Think you know—"

GG has taken out a pocketknife. Finally. My acquaintance decides to leave, and I wait to see what will happen next. GG cuts down the front of my lacy white flapper dress, real slow and almost gentle. I can feel the knife tip just barely touching my skin all the way down. There's a commotion, people bearing down on us from every direction. Someone sticks a video camera in my face and I start singing "La la la la la!" Jeff is wrestling GG, Angela's pleading with them both. Some of GG's fans hold me down. I bite them and kick. "Get him the fuck out of here!" I hear someone scream, and everyone reports to the next person what just happened, and then that person repeats it to someone else. The bouncers get into it. They're throwing Jeff out the door and I'm straining against hands holding me back. I know things have gotten out of hand and a bone might crack but it won't be mine because I am magic. Finally I break free. I rush barefoot down a sleepy New York street, my dress in tatters, someone else's jacket over my shoulders, heading for Angela, who's crying and

laughing hysterically, and Jeff, who is bent over in a cone of light from a streetlamp, hacking up phlegm. Jeff's not used to actually having to move his body.

I used to be this shuffled about thing in highwater pants secretly fantasizing about danger all the time. I loved the *Little House on the Prairie* book series, especially when there was a blizzard or locusts or a sick family member and no doctor within forty miles. I read all of Isaac Asimov's books too, and Edgar Rice Burroughs's *Tarzan* series. Anything that had to do with surviving in alien landscapes against terrible odds. Which was what childhood felt like to many of us who went on to become performers.

GG—when he was born, his father named him Jesus Christ Allin. Then his mother changed it to Kevin. Then she let Kevin get sexually molested, get bounced around and taken away. Kevin turned himself into GG, a comic book hero of sorts (of gross, scary sorts). Lydia Lunch's dad molested her, till she ran away to New York at thirteen, and became Lydia Lunch. Boyd Rice's father was a speed freak and young Boyd never knew what he would wake up to: every appliance in the trailer disassembled, their parts spread out across the floor, when his dad got the idea in the night that the CIA had hidden a bug in one of them.

To protect ourselves, we spun cocoons out of TV, books, video games, early stolen alcohol, and dreams. And then one

day we realize we're grown up and yet still all muffled inside what we've built around us. We don't feel real. "There were often times when he would feel as if he were lifting out of his body and observing himself from above," Dan Chaon writes in just about every one of his short stories. All the writers my age write about blackouts and floating. We try to get out of these cocoons and make our way down to where our bodies are. We try shoplifting and racist/sexist/ageist humour (trying to offend our way out); we get naked on stage. We try sleep deprivation and razors on our skin. We date creepy, scary sleazes who we half-hope, half-fear might do the cutting for us. But we're so used to living inside a dream, even cutting feels dreamy. We can't get out. We can't wake up.

Chapter Twelve

Paris, much like my husband, is old and dirty. The lighting is nice, though. The lamps in the park are meant to look like turn of the century oil lamps—the kind Jack The Ripper would hide behind. Jean Louis's flat is like a cave, or a white hole. There's almost no furniture, nothing on the walls. I find a blue workman's jumpsuit in the basement. Jean Louis doesn't know where it comes from. I put it on and I'm a communist now, like him. I wander the city, coughing, in my blue jumpsuit. The cars use leaded fuel, and Paris is situated at the bottom of a circular valley, so the pollution just sits there, in this second-most densely populated city in the world. Millions of people on a very small surface, and not one of them speak to me. They don't care for Americans—and with good reason. My fellow Americans are moronic and loud. They act like they're on spring break, no matter what season it is

or how old they are. When I try to buy something using my choppy French, the shopkeeper answers in precise, disdainful English. Even Jean Louis won't speak French with me. He says I'm too slow. Everyone is too slow for Jean Louis. "You don't take pleasure anywhere," his father complains during one of his rare visits to our flat. "You do everything fast, like a fart!"

His father is right. I never noticed before how loud and abruptly Jean Louis laughs, how he swallows food in chunks, barely even chewing, how he yells not only at people, but at animals, too. I'm both disgusted and enthralled with the new, more Jean Louis Jean Louis I find in Paris. This Jean Louis is so unafraid and wild! He gets kicked out of his own, weekly Anarchist Radio Show for having a huge argument with the director about the moral value of a sandwich.

"I don't know," Jean Louis says, describing the incident. "I'm a little bit fuck-myself brain. I hurt myself." I look at his familiar greasy pigeon head and sharp shoulders, the worried brow and the sensuous mouth, and I am so in love with my angry man who has so far been fired from every job he's ever had. He always has to go deeper, and more alone, into any forest or desert or spectacle or argument. Even the Anarchists are too confining for him. Even I, who cheat on him and let him cheat on me; who never once required of him a normal job or a normal opinion or even that he take a bath—even I am too confining for him. And so I shrink. In Paris, I am a new, less Lisa Lisa.

In the show we're working on now—*Les Pendus* (The Hanged), Jean Louis plays an Arab gardener and I am the white young princess. "I love her with all my heart," he sings while watching the princess cavort in her garden. "My big swollen heart, my circumcised cock, my amputated fingers, my rotted teeth. I know that I can't touch her." He doesn't touch me in real life either. He'll masturbate to videotapes of me, but won't fuck me when I'm actually there. He writes a song about my hair on his pillow, how oppressive it is. As if I've done some terrible thing to him by being alive. Everybody sheds! Since hearing the song, I walk around feeling like one big bruise—a floppy bruise spreading throughout Jean Louis's entire flat like pancake batter … with hairs poking out of it.

On the one hand, here I am still a teenager and I get to live in Europe; I'm good-looking (when I catch myself in the mirror, despite feeling like an uncooked pancake, I have to admit I am a total fox), in love with my husband (even if we do have an odd relationship), working on a show that I love—everything is perfect! On the other hand, I'm getting really freaking weird. Switching time zones so much might have something to do with it. But my imaginings—my zebras and dead girls and flying cats of the stars—grow more vivid and independent, and daily existence—like having to eat or communicate with visitors—begins to feel distant and irrelevant.

And then there's Anne's paintings—large, bright, expressionist, some half-finished, others barely started—everywhere,

stacked up. She doesn't have room in her new, tiny apartment for them. The sheets we sleep on are Anne's, as are the plates we eat off. As are the tack holes dotting the walls, where Anne took down what she hung up before she left. I feel like I'm the ghost, not her. I write all day in "my" room where Anne used to paint (but I'll never publish it—I'm working on this experimental sci-fi that even I know is no good, but I enjoy it) while Jean Louis practices his made-up scales on the piano in the other room. I don't mention GG; Jean Louis doesn't mention that he still sees Anne. I don't know exactly what is wrong. I mean, I'm not happy about Anne, but she's not the fundamental problem. She's the past, and I know I could squash her if only all my power hadn't drained from my body. It feels like in dreams where everything shifts—who people are, where you are—but no one acknowledges the change. Jean Louis has become casual about me, and I have turned greedy for him. Perhaps he's wise in finding my love too confining, because what I'd really like to do is put him in a cage! A little, tiny cage, with forty little locks. Naked. Cold.

Ooh! I have to shake off that fantasy before it gets worse!

He's out now, doing independent things I don't know about. French things. It's just me and the piano and the abandoned paintings here, hanging out. I spy a bottle of gin that the saxophone player left. I take a drink straight from the bottle, feeling like a detective who does his work in the office after hours, liquidly. I decide to laugh like a sailor. "Har! Har!

Har!" I chortle into the empty room. I cock an ear at my own laughter. Why, this is fun! I throw a shoe at a cobweb friskily.

The bottle falls from my hand and rolls across the room. I decide to copy it. I roll over to the hotplate, which has on it a rusty potato peeler. It comes to me that it would be a good idea to peel myself to death. The old thing doesn't have much effect on my flesh. Maybe I'll die of rust poisoning, I think. Before I've done much work on even one wrist, Jean Louis walks in, bringing the cold and a fresh feeling with him. I hastily try to hide the wrist under the hotplate, but he finds it.

"You do this stupid thing?" he says, dragging me to the bathroom. He doesn't seem very mad. "The most stupid, this." Once I'm washed and bandaged, he asks what's wrong, and I tell him.

"You think I don't like your body in my house?" he says. "I love your body. Come sit on my lap. I like you! You are my only friend, besides Anne. I am just strange. Don't listen so much to stupid songs. It's all tricks, to make the show stronger. I take the worst possible position on what we feel in the real life, so that you feel it and I feel it when we're on stage … I go for the 'tcha!'"—he makes a stabbing motion into an imaginary gut. "But it's not my total position—it's only the 'tcha.' You do the same in your songs, no?" I bury my most stupid head in Jean Louis's shoulder and I feel almost happy. Or very happy. I feel like a cat.

* * *

Apparently the 'tcha'-factor doesn't count for diaries. "Why you write only about when you visit the father?" Jean Louis says when I blink awake some hours into my gin-induced coma. He's sitting on the radiator, my diary in his hands. "The way the sun felt…." He flips the page. "Then you go to the big pool with the father. He makes you eat the orange peel. There's something misty about this. I can't put my finger on it. You put fog, but I know! I know! A-ha! It's not the GG-fighter she wants, it's the fuck." He was laughing; suddenly he stops. His voice becomes dangerous: "You think you're the only one to have a crush? You are so special? You are girl one million. Anais Nin went to a room with her papa and fucked for two days straight." He hands me my diary, taps his foot. "Well, it's not really my business, but why not to go, you?" he proposes. "Fly to America. Pull out the magic father-cock from the pantses, take off the fog and see what it is, plain."

"Jean Louis, I was just trying to remember," I say. "I can't remember anything, and then I'll remember something, but I forget it again. So I was trying to write things down."

He notices that I'm crying. "Grrr!" he says, and boxes his own ears. He lunges off the radiator, slides under the sheet and takes me in his arms. "I went on 'the tear' after you fell asleep," he confesses. He shakes an open can of beer so I can hear how much is still sloshing inside. "The half-a-beer ma-

niac has struck again!"

Jean Louis lives a very clean life because he's close enough to being nuts already without any help. A single beer will send him completely round the bend. The last time it happened, in Philadelphia, he had three-quarters of a Budweiser and a cigarette (out of the pack Chris Sakey left behind), and he became insanely jealous, thinking I'd been calling people, and tried to burn the phone down. But it wouldn't catch fire—it just made this horrible smell. The odour never quite went away, and from then on whenever someone had to use the phone, they'd make a sour face the whole time, and I'd laugh, feeling so proud of my very ridiculous, very special maniac.

He goes out to flyer the city with posters for our show, and I examine the situation as I shower and dress for the first time in three days. Maybe all the dumb-looking stuff we do is really smart. If it weren't for my dumb problems (and his), we wouldn't have created these shows, we wouldn't always travel, we wouldn't have so many funny stories to tell. Having an unfillable hole inside is a great catalyst. You're always trying new things to fill it. People with holes look good! Look ready for action. But then sometimes you're home alone, and there's nothing new to try, and there the hole still is. "Hey," it growls, poking you from inside, "I'm still hungry." I get tired of it! And now, here, I fear Jean Louis is getting tired of it, too—of my hole, which I'm beginning to think might be a little bigger, a little hungrier, than his. Other times I think

there's no hole at all—I'm simply happy and in love, and I just can't stand to see myself as simple or the same as other people, so I make up all these complications.

One thing is certain: I've lost my confidence, in this country. I have to hide the loss from Jean Louis. I should have burned that diary. He hates wallowers, and vacillating people. I have to stop staying in bed all day and saying weird things, or else he'll end up hating me. "That would be fine," I conclude out loud, buttoning my last button, "because I hate him!"

But then Jean Louis returns with a journalist in tow, and I forget all about my resolve to act normal. I lock the door to my room (Anne's room) and not only do I hide in there, I actually crawl into the closet and shut that door, too. I guess in case this journalist is so mad for an interview he breaks down the door and tries to make me answer his questions about the state of art today.

"You are obviously in pain," Jean Louis says when the journalist leaves. "I don't know what's wrong. I don't know how to make it better. You think, you think, you think. You are too intellectual."

"I'm not an intellectual," I say from my closet. "It's you. You make me terribly unhappy."

"Me? What I do?"

"No, it's not you—it's the way I am about you. I love you too much."

"It makes people crazy, never to go out for social activity.

No one can take my life; it is not possible. We will make social activity one time every week. We start today, right now."

I peek through the slats in the closet door at him. "Really?"

"We must find some wild place to remind the New Hampshire girl of her native forest. The squaw I stole. We will take a canoe, spy the animals." He extends a hand into my closet. "Come, we go."

I come, and we go.

Chapter Thirteen

We visit his parents, in their mansion. The mother looks up and twists her head at my entrance. I can see only her golden head over the back of a golden, embroidered sofa. She's nodding and smiling. The father is mixing drinks, charming. "No, no, don't get up," he says to his wife, hands her a drink, comes around the couch to hand one to me. I glance up the bannister glistening with polish. I think, Up there is where it happened.

I found out about them molesting Jean Louis when we tried to get the Philadelphia apartment into security-deposit-returning condition. "Look at this mop water," I said, hauling the filthy bucket over to where Jean Louis sat, naked and sweating, on the couch. "It's black!"

And Jean Louis's cock turned red.

"Oh my god, this gross stuff gave you an instant erection!" I laughed. Jean Louis was embarrassed. When he was eight, Jean Louis explained, his father took out his own erect, hairy cock and started stroking it, saying, "This is so you won't be frightened in a few years when yours gets big and hairy." The mother nodded and smiled. After the lesson was over, she got out the mop (to remove the spilled sperm of the father). She was a very clean woman with a very clean house, very respected by the community. I understood then how Jean Louis had come to love everything not clean, not orderly, and disrespected by the community. Why he puts shit and exposed penises in every single one of our shows. (And why he still loves me, even though I'm a mess.) He wants to fight all the clean people, the ones who hold up cleanliness like a curtain over the filthy things they do. He wants to show them their lives turned inside out. Jean Louis had three brothers. Two of them committed suicide. The third emigrated. So in one way or another, the other three escaped. Only Jean Louis stayed to fight: first his father, and then all authority everywhere. "I will fuck them down," is how he put it.

The brother who emigrated is back in France on a visit with his English wife Beth, and they're at the parents' for dinner. We sit at a long, long table under a dazzling chandelier, all of us smiling mutely at each other. The cook totes out tureen after tureen of meats and vegetables and breads that have all soaked so long in various juices, they're almost interchange-

able. She complains about each new dish she brings out, how it's burnt or soggy or a bad cut of meat. But it's all delicious. The conversation (in French) is very strange. It feels like a soft net lowering.

MADAME COSTES (JEAN LOUIS'S MOTHER): These sugar cubes are a little large, don't you think?
MADAME COSTES (JEAN LOUIS'S BROTHER'S WIFE): Yes. They're half the size more.
MADAME COSTES: Maybe two-thirds.
MADAME COSTES: Yes, two-thirds, I think.

Jean Louis's father asks me in English, in warm tones, about the sugar cubes in America. His wife does not understand English. If I were her, I would imagine Monsieur Costes was saying: "I want to have you right here on this table, you foreign little whore. I'm going to soak you in some French juices and then stab you with one of our long French forks that have three prongs instead of four, and you're going to like it."

"Well I, I think our cubes are the same size," I say, and I feel like I said something filthy back! I think: Child molester. But I can't get over how handsome he is. I feel terrible about it, but I'm attracted to him!

There's some skirmish between the brothers about something I can't catch because they speak so rapidly, but I can tell from people's faces that Jean Louis said something inap-

propriate. I try to hide my smile. If I understand correctly, the brother complained because he wasn't able to hunt rabbits during his weekend business trip to a French village, because Saturday's hunt kept him awake while trying to sleep off his jet lag, and he slept through Sunday's.

"The rabbit screams when it is killed," I say (in French). "It never makes a noise its whole life, but when it's killed it screams quite loudly. That could keep someone up."

There is silence around the table. I hope the conversation wasn't actually about, say, angels, and I've made an awful blunder. But then Jean Louis says to his brother: "There aren't any rabbits where you were. They've all been killed … hunted. The company buys fifty rabbits from a trader to provide weekend excitement for its workers. Most of the rabbits get killed right off. They don't know how to defend themselves, how to hide. They aren't afraid of a gun. The second day there is only one rabbit left. All the men and dogs chase a single terrified rabbit."

There is another big silence, and then the discussion moves on to the merits and demerits of iceberg lettuce in salads.

Beth says her favourite city is Munich, because everything works there. "A combination of politics, economics and the mentality of the people keep all the telephone systems, public works, etc., running smoothly. The streets are always clean. There is no crime. The community is very proud."

"You forgot to add that there is no one with AIDS there,"

Jean Louis says. "They are not allowed."

I want to rip it all apart—the iceberg lettuce and the sugar cubes and the clean streets. I want to knock down all the telephone poles with my big boots, make nothing work. I wish that I were a river, so I could flood their streets with mud. I want to humble these proper, scaredy-cat, clean bullies.

The next night, I prepare for *Les Pendus* by drinking a fifth of whiskey and applying Vaseline to my butt (the better to slip a flower up there, for when I'm dead and naked and symbolizing rebirth: the victory of nature over what man has built up). At the end of the show, I burn the city (turn a fan on to make strips of red plastic flutter, looking like flames). But this time I really do destroy the set, totally—our painted scenery, mic stands, amps, a cardboard throne. I'm playing crazy, and then I really become crazy! I snatch a chair out from under an audience member to smash. A chair, I discover, is quite difficult to make come apart! I have to keep bashing and bashing, until at last the seat is hanging loose from the legs. "*Regard!*" I cry, holding up the pillow I magic markered a face onto. "*Mon bebe, le nouvel roi! Pour toi je brule tout! Il l'aime! Il rit et il applaudit! Mon beau batard!*"

My son (the pillow) is a bastard because the Arab gardener-paedophile (Jean Louis) raped me, the princess. The gardener was killed by my father's men before he could marry me and make our son legitimate. But it seems I love him anyway, despite the rape, and despite him being dead, because I'm

destroying my own kingdom in celebration of our son's birth. The streets of fire are his birthday present.

In the real streets, Le Pen's followers are planning their anti-immigrant parade straight down the middle of the Jewish neighbourhood. France for the French is their slogan (We borrowed it for the unseen chorus in *Les Pendus*—the citizens encouraging all the hangings.). Jean Louis and I decide to go. The streets are emptied of inhabitants—no one sits at the outdoor cafes; the shutters of houses are all closed. They must be cowering inside, peeking out. Only the invaders move through the streets—thousands of them, chanting. Jean Louis and I watch, following them. They all have stiff hair and stiff bodies and stiff eyes. I try to catch the eye of one lady with gray, coiffed hair. All my anger narrows down to her. I can't hold the concept of such a mass of people. They're too powerful when you look at the lot of them, moving as one. They seem insurmountable. But this one lady—she decided to join this group; she decided to terrorise these Jews in their own homes. I can comprehend what's going on and I can fight it, once I boil them down to this individual. And I'm thinking about Jean Louis's mother, because she looks like her. I imagine she has the same philosophy: that she wasn't actually guilty of anything because she didn't do the action. Jean Louis's mother didn't physically molest Jean Louis; and this woman marching isn't one of the men who beat with pipes the Arab stallkeeper the other day in the underground subway station

just outside Jean Louis's flat while subway riders watched. But I feel it's worse to support such actions tacitly than it is to actually do it—because at least once you enter the world of violence, there are repercussions. You could go to jail, or get hurt yourself. And it's clear: the victim at least knows you beat him, knows you were wrong. The witness, unlike the perpetrator, risks nothing, but allows everything.

My heart is jumping all around. I start jogging to get ahead of the woman, get a better look at her. Our eyes lock. She hates me too. I start yelling. I don't even know what I'm saying—something about American money. I have no idea what my body is doing. "Ah, look behind you," says Jean Louis. Three or four skinheads are moving toward us through the crowd from different directions. They take weapons out of their pockets as they walk-jog. I roll my newspaper up into a club. "C'mon!" I taunt them. I know I'll never win, but I feel untouchable. Like they could kill me and still I wouldn't die. "No, you c'mon," Jean Louis says, and he has me by the hand and he's running and dragging me and then we're both running as fast as we can through empty alleys, and the skinheads are running too.

"Whew, it's lucky we train for these shows, make the jogging every day!" Jean Louis exclaims when we duck into a tiny industrial music record store—just a few yards ahead of the skinheads, but around a corner, so they didn't see us go in. We're panting and happy. Jean Louis asks the man behind the

counter, who he knows a little, if there's a place to hide, in case the skinheads enter the shop looking for us. The man—all in black, his hair and clothes as stiff as the Le Pen marchers'—is reluctant. "He would give us to the skinheads, happy, this one!" Jean Louis spits. "They would hurt us for life, eh? Those skinheads have knives, eh?"

Industrial music first flirted with fascism as an attempt to shock. And to disarm signifiers by borrowing knee-jerk paraphernalia from all sectors (like the brown shirts of the Nazis along with flesh-elongating earrings from Africa), and mashing them together in their apparel and music and album cover art and stage show. (Genesis P. Orrige and Throbbing Gristle in particular do a good job of that, adding the study of "magick" and mutating that strain of industrial into "modern primitivism.") They wanted to confuse and re-order things, the same as what Jean Louis and I do. The problem is, the right wing just looks so good, with their crisp uniforms and threatening symbols, and the left, with their yielding symbols and disorganized apparel, have never even come close to competing, aesthetically. Vain youths—like the man behind the counter of this record shop—wear more and more crisp and threatening things until they get confused by their own, copied wardrobe, and start thinking maybe they are right wing.

We are a promiscuous generation—with ideas as well as with the flesh.

Chapter Fourteen

We perform *Les Pendus* twelve times in ten cities and four countries. How can the Americans call what we do live sex acts? Broken taboos, broken bones, betrayal, castles, death—that's not porn, that's classical opera! We're hanging out in our bare flat at the end of the tour, proud, trying to figure out what to do to celebrate. We have a profit of one hundred francs (about sixteen dollars) to work with!

"Let's go to the zoo," Jean Louis says suddenly.

But I don't like to see all those animals in tiny cages.

"No, the microscopic zoo. We can see what all the little bugs in our food and body look like."

I feel like he is magic. Walking to the zoo, I notice people stop and stare. Probably they're thinking we look like drug addicts, but in my mind, they're amazed by Jean Louis's won-

derfulness. We are simple and careless on our early evening walk, hand in hand. He is the same exact height as me. We smile at each other like two dumb people.

An old lady is selling big white jasmine flowers. "You want?" Jean Louis asks. I look down and smile. Though we have no money even for butter for our bread at home, he buys me the flower for thirty francs. I stick it into a tear in my dress.

Hanging happily from his arm, I say, "Do you think that by being with me, you lose chances for fame—that people will think of you as taken, and will stop dreaming of you?"

"Not at all. It's good to be with you because you have a big potential. You will be a famous writer, it is sure. There is drama, us meeting. I imagine people saying, 'The time when they were together in Paris.' "

We pass through the Arab section, and stop for dinner. This Arab "restaurant" is just someone's kitchen with two tables. I love being here. I love all the different immigrant clothes and customs and smells, and that we are on our way to a microscopic zoo.

At the last minute, we decide to go to the African Museum instead. In African art, much attention is paid to extended belly buttons; sagging breasts with long, chewed nipples; long, skinny penises; babies' heads coming out of stretched labia; teeth; nostrils; stuck-out tongues; eyes. Tusks instead of a moustache; a head growing out of a stomach.

This is how they deal with the father: In one tribe, when a

parent dies, the children clean the skull and use it to make a life-like version of the deceased. They use the real hair. They put the heads on a shelf. Opposite to that are the Masai. When the old dad is almost dead, they throw him into some bush deep in the forest and never mention his name again. The Yamomamis cook the dead body into a stew with bananas, and all the tribe eats some. To not eat is a really bad insult. Each tribe has its own method of dealing with the power of the memory: to keep it watching over us; to get rid of it; or to internalize it, to become it.

We don't have a system, Jean Louis and I, of how to deal with our fathers. So we keep retelling the same story, in these shows and in our private lives. We keep the powerful and dangerous fathers alive, long after they've devolved in real life into TV-watching, drink-mixing old men. I make out of Jean Louis an effigy of my father. I drive him to violence, to running around on me. Jean Louis sees his army sergeant dad looking disapprovingly out of everyone's eyes, even mine—and to fight the father, he has to fight us all, kill us all. Even me. It almost doesn't matter at all that we love each other so much. Love is just this thing in the way, a minor obstacle on the paths we hurtle down.

But not tonight. Tonight, there's the *Rocher Noir*—a ten-franc treat less than the size of my thumb—under a spotlight in an all-night bakery. We split it. My half is noticeably larger. God, is it worth the money! I almost cry, it's so good. And

then I really am crying.

Jean Louis thinks he did something again.

"No, no," I say. "The *Rocher* … I'm so … I'm happy!"

Jeff sends me a letter: Halloween came and went, and GG didn't die, and now he's the laughing stock of our whole world. He would have been a laughing stock for killing himself too, had he gone ahead and done it. You always have to be something other than what you are, if you want to stay ahead of change—not simply more of what you are. If I keep looking for problems, I'm going to end up a caricature of myself, too. They tell me that after our CBGB's Lost Kittens show, I was down in the audience, screaming: "Hit me! Hit me! I can take it!" I was making people hit me as hard as they could. I don't remember that. I was drunk. In a separate incident, I flew off the stage and landed on my face, resulting in the need for thirteen stitches. For the rest of my life, whenever I wear dark lipstick, my mouth will look lopsided; the colour rides the ripple of the scar. In the early days of Suckdog, when I was with Rachel all the time, there was emotion. Things felt genuine. Now it's like I have to keep upping the volume trying to get that feeling. I need to find a new way.

In the meantime, Brett Kerby from Psycodrama flies out and we do a new show across Europe: The Last Mass. It's so funny to see him in his farmer's overalls and beard and beerbelly, walking down cobbled streets in Holland that smell

of clove cigarettes and spice and leather. He is incensed that the toilet paper here doesn't come on a roll, but in separate, tiny, pink sheets. "It takes twenty-five of these to even begin to wipe an American man's ass," he grumbles. In Amiens, Brett uses too much flash powder for what was supposed to be his little bomb. It blows up the backdrop, the drum set of a band who was supposed to go on after us, a suitcase filled with our records to sell, and one of Brett's eardrums. Jean Louis is not amused at the thought of having to completely repaint a backdrop and pay to replace the other band's drums, but Brett and I cannot stop laughing for the rest of the show (which we perform completely covered in black), or even over the next few days. I dub him The Bomber Boob.

That's really what we're doing in our lives. We try to explode everything for people; we try to do something spectacular that will inspire awe and confusion and, ultimately, redemption. But all we do in the end is blow up a little bomb in our own faces. We're left with sooty cheeks and smarting eyes, deaf in one ear. We're all bomber boobs.

Totally out of money, I have to go back to America to work. Jean Louis has given me the last of his money for my ticket, so I'll be flying alone.

Chapter Fifteen

When I tell Jean Louis over the phone upon my return to America that I've decided to become a prostitute, he says: "You risk your health, your life?"

"No, no," I tell him. "It's safe. They have a bouncer. It's in a parlour." I found it in the phonebook, under Massage Parlours. I called all the places listed until one of the people answering didn't ask me if I was "licensed," and used a tone both guarded and insinuating, finally asking if I wanted to come "audition."

I wanted to be a prostitute for as long as I can remember. I wanted to be Rhett's warm, wisecracking prostitute friend in *Gone With The Wind*, not Scarlett—she had better make-up, velvety-er clothes. Prostitutes fight with all the girls who don't enter their little gang, their faction (and the prostitutes

always win!), and they make cold, sad men come alive. Perhaps becoming a prostitute will suddenly arm me, too, with zinging comebacks and a hidden, smart tenderness.

Jean Louis writes that he understands that I'm "nineteen, walking bitch and beautiful down thin time, like thin panty between your stalking legs." Did he really mean "stocking-ed legs"? I choose "stalking"! Everyone in my family is pretty ugly. I don't have great bone structure or anything—you can tell already I'm going to be tired-looking when I'm older. It's pure youth and sexfulness that I possess, mixed with fear and pleasure. The mess of it all quivers on my skin and in my walk. It has an effect on me when I catch my reflection in a store window—stops me dead in my tracks! I know this beauty belongs to nineteen, not to me. It feels like it was given to me by mistake, and its rightful owner will return at any moment. I want to really do something with it, while I have it. These shows are too confusing and repulsive for anyone to see what I actually look like. And I can't be a dancer because I have no rhythm. I'd like to be an acrobat, but I'm not strong enough. Looks like being a prostitute is the only option!

I stare out the window on the long ride up I-95 to the little brick cathouse. The last leaf has fallen, and the trees are once again frozen silver lightning bolts rising up out of the ground. It's a new world.

I meet my first trick mere days before turning twenty. He's

at least sixty years old. Maybe seventy. Maybe eighty! He shakes off the cold and pays the first hundred dollars in the little "office" that the front door immediately opens into (I believe it was the mud room, when a family formerly lived here). He enters the big screen TV room where a half-dozen of us bra-and-pantied or bathing-suit-and-pantyhosed ladies sit around waiting. (I'm in a black and crimson contraption that looks like tangled kite string with no kite.) We shift into our "pick me!" poses. Mine entails sitting up straight, like a meerkat. The more beautiful the girl, the less she poses. Candy, who looks like a perfect plastic doll, practically turns her back on the poor old man. He lifts his hand sort of in my direction, so I leap up and show him where the showers are, down in the basement, like I'd been taught in my ten-minute "training session." Then I show him where my hot, tiny room is, and ask him to meet me there after his shower.

A previous occupant taped a piece of lavender tissue paper over my ceiling's rectangular fluorescent light. A framed poster of a corvette is shiny under glass, looking ready to take off. My old man, moist from his shower, comes in and lays down on the rickety "massage table" on his back, his towel falling partly open. He seems a little embarrassed and a little joyful. I watch in the wall-size mirror in disbelief as I move confidently across his mass of soft, furry, Silly Putty skin. An hour or so later, he pauses, in his unbuttoned shirt and unbelted pants, considering. He reaches into his wallet and pulls

out an extra hundred, on top of the hundred he already put on the table, "for being so sweet."

As soon as the old man and I emerge from that room, another man comes in and points to me. This one looks just like Frankenstein. Candy squeezes my hand. I try to show him the showers, but he refuses. Meekly, I re-enter my room, and Frankenstein closes the door behind us. He's big. "They're going to hear us," he says. I can't tell from his expression whether he's pleased about that or not. I wonder what he has in mind that will be so noisy.

"They don't care," I say.

"Of course they don't," sneers Frankenstein, "they're whores. Get undressed."

I comply. He stares hard at my naked body, which I nervously try to cover before realizing how silly that is in this situation. He asks me if this is my first night, and I say yes.

"I mean, this your first time? You never fuck any of your boyfriends? How old are you—sixteen?"

I nod.

"Liar," he growls. "Get down on the ground."

After it's over, he takes two twenties and a ten out of his wallet and lets them flutter down onto my body. "Always get your money first, little girl," he grins. "Not all guys are as nice as me."

* * *

Frankenstein is not the only creep ever to pick me, but he is the only one I don't know how to handle. Quickly, I get as wisecracking and as slippery as my childhood fantasy prostitute—but only with someone trying to get something over on me. Most of my clients are great. I love that my life consists of sucking a businessman's cock at five, relieving a probably mentally retarded gas attendant of his virginity at six, and peeing into the mouth of a perfectly elegant man of independent means at 7:30. I love joking with Candy, fighting with Sandy—who is getting on in years and gets back at me for having more clients than her by slyly dumping small amounts of cigarette ash in my room after I vacuum and then telling Carl, our pimp, that I didn't vacuum at all. I love rolling my eyes at Carl, who wears a cowboy hat and dyes his gray hair black and strums a guitar. Most of all, I love my time in the little room under the engine-racing Corvette poster.

I get to change my personality five times a night, stepping into other people's ideals. I can guess—from a man's greeting, from his clothes, his eyes—who his dream woman is, and I become her. Take on her bearing, her speech, her interests. It's a lot like the shows, except I don't have to come up with my own character or new rhymes. The men's fantasies aren't particularly unique: One wants a dominatrix, one a naive girl, one a sophisticated companion, one a filthy slut, one a kind ear. Even the dialogue men respond to (meaning: their penis goes boi-i-ing) is canned: "You've been a bad, bad boy." "I've

been a very bad girl." "Put your money on the table and shut your mouth." "Oh really—Alaska? Tell me everything!" But to say all those things sincerely, to be that person for twenty minutes … to zing from one personality to another, and to make come fly all over the room … this brings me happiness, in the same way the shows do: escape from awareness of self. Unlike touring, though, it also brings me thousands of dollars a week.

Though I'm happy, sadness is in the air. All the girls but me are on drugs. While I'll occasionally indulge in my time off, I don't want my vision clouded while on the job. I am curious about all the people who would come to a prostitute, or be a prostitute, or be a boyfriend to a prostitute and pick her up at the end of her shift and take her home. I soberly watch everything and everyone, including myself. All the girls but me have been here a long time. I can see that it gets hard after a while—or at least very weird—to live inside other people's dreams. In Candy's case, she literally lives, and drives, in other people's use of her beauty. Her sporty little car and her spacious, bright apartment are both paid for with one-hour sessions each month, to the car dealer and the landlord. The drugs are always gifts, or trades, as well. Along with hundred-dollar restaurant meals and concert tickets. Prostitution isolates you, with all its little ways that people not in it don't understand, much in the way some religions do, or drug addictions. It's hard to explain certain things, and after a while

it's easier to not talk to anyone outside much at all. I thought that as a prostitute, I would no longer be inside a dream; I'd be flung, sharp and fresh and fully capable, into life. Actually, I discover, the opposite is true. Prostitution is a complex, shared dream where everyone agrees to not wake up, for just a little longer.

"Home," too, is filled with people on drugs. Heroin, mostly. I'm living on Jeff and Angela's couch again; dozens of skull candles watch me sleep, and living, skull-faced visitors tiptoe around muttering non sequiturs. Angela is always puffy from sleep, since she's always just waking up. If anything, it makes her even more beautiful. Her face looms slightly closer than is comfortable, the tips of her hair tickling my shoulder. Her soft, gentle face trusting, but I do not trust her.

There's simplicity to winter. Everyone is hiding.

I come home from a hard night's work and ten or twelve men and women in uniforms bust down the door right behind me and start hollering. Lights glint off the silver things scattered about their outfits: buckles and pins and cuffs. (In Kentucky, policemen burst, with all their flashlights, into a house where Jean Louis and I were playing a show, and I thought someone had turned on a strobe light and I just kept dancing, naked, feeling like David Bowie in 1976, until finally an owner of the house yanked me into the bathroom and had me hide in the tub under a bunch of dirty clothes.)

Jeff, Angela and I are forced into separate rooms. It's as if these small town officers saw a movie of a bust and are trying to copy it. They shine lights in our eyes and demand to know where the drugs are. They tell me I'm not the one they're really after, and they'll let me off easy if I cooperate—but they'll take me down too if they have to. I open my eyes really wide and feel innocent. I'm scared and bored at the same time. It lasts so long, the questions and the lights. Three officers have me—a tall woman, a meaty man and a stringy man. One says one thing and another something else, like that they'll let me go, no they won't let me go. I've been waiting for this —when I would be tested and find out if I was a hero or a rat. My father was tortured in Mexico, hung upside down over a giant pot of other people's vomit and dunked into it, and still he didn't tell on anyone. I often daydreamed that I was in that position and worse: "They" tied me up in a burlap sack and took turns whacking me with bats; they raped me and sniggered. Still I never told.

It is disappointingly easy in real life to not say anything incriminating. Of course, the New Hampshire police force doesn't have a vat of vomit.

The drugs are on the top shelf of Jeff's bedroom closet normally, but he just happened to be all out on the day of the bust. I was due to buy five hits of acid from someone else that morning, but the dealer didn't show. That was the best time I ever got stood up in my life. I was really lucky once before. In

Germany, a fan insisted on giving me several packets of heroin. Unlike stimulants or psychedelics, which open you up, I never liked narcotics, which shut you down. But it seemed to mean so much to him, I would have felt rude turning him down, so I took the packets and told him I'd do them on the train. Then I forgot I had the stuff on me until, in the bathroom, one of the packets fell out of my pants pocket, and I flushed them all down the toilet. Upon my return from the bathroom, by coincidence, I saw German police roughing Jean Louis up. They made me stand against a train wall while they searched every inch of our luggage and bodies. They were incensed by our combination of glitter and dirt, and they just knew there was something wrong when they unrolled our weird backdrop, but they couldn't put their finger on where we'd broken a law, so they had to let us go. If I'd still had the heroin on my person, I wonder if I'd be a resident of Germany even now—in jail!

Jeff and Angela are taken to the station and booked, due to pot resin found in their bedroom ashtray. I get to stay in the scary skull basement all alone that night, but my diary takes a ride downtown. Jeff and Angela are released on their own recognizance. There's a write-up in the Foster's Daily Democrat, which Jeff cuts out and frames. In court, it comes out that the officers read my diary aloud to each other every day at lunch. I can't be prosecuted for the prostitution described therein (in great detail!) because of some illegal seizure rule.

When I go to the police station to claim the diary, all the cops pour out of the back rooms to look me over.

While I attend the school of soft knockers and hard transactions, Rachel is studying plant biology in Philadelphia. She comes home for Christmas and finds me much changed: reserved. "Distant and proud"—that's how she phrases it. I don't giggle any more.

Rachel got a job through the university killing experimented-on mice. There isn't a lot of money for the program, she tells me, and so she has to kill them by taking them by the tail and whacking them against the wall. Sometimes it takes several whacks. One day she took pity on a mouse, and smuggled him home. Within twelve hours, his eyes started leaking black, and he screamed—or did what mice do for screams—all night long until Rachel did to that mouse in her free time what she did to others while on the clock.

That reminds me of how I have sex these days: it feels like bringing my work home. I can't even masturbate. It feels too quiet. I need that third party now: me, the person I'm with, and the person I imagine they are imagining, who I can become. Sex for me—after only a few months on the job!—is only about becoming. I no longer know what I am when there aren't strangers around whose minds I can read and holograph myself into. I feel downright ridiculous having sex just as me! At first, I was hiding my personality at will. Now I think I'm

actually losing it. I buy a ticket for France. I have to quit my job because I like it too much.

No one still in "the life" will talk about it, and it seems like those who have left will only talk about the bad side of it. But as I walk away from prostitution and drug addicts and gain back my own life and body, I know I'm losing something too. I lose nothingness. I lose the concealed passageway (by way of having sex while invisible) I found into other people's Something-ness. The lights in the airport are so white! I'm not even on the plane yet, and already I miss everything I'm leaving behind: the sombre lighting; the camaraderie with the girls; everyone being awake with you while the rest of the world sleeps. I miss the drifting conversation of people who are high. I miss my clients; I miss being on top and being nothing, being only what I can see in their eyes, always new.

Lots of underground front-women strip. Jennifer from Royal Trux, Kathleen Hannah from Bikini Kill, Courtney Love—just tons of them! None of them admit to being an out-and-out prostitute, but I hear some are. Did they, like me, want to squeeze all that they could out of the mantle of beauty they found by surprise around their shoulders one morning?

Someone on *The Jenny Jones Show* said that seventy percent of girls abandoned by their fathers turn to promiscuity and drugs. If fifty percent of our parents divorced, and ninety percent of the mothers got custody, that would at least look like abandonment to ninety percent of fifty percent—and seventy

percent of that equals thirty-one point five percent. So, one out of three—that's how many of us Gen X girls, according to my calculations, should have turned out slutty drug-dabblers.

I think Jenny Jones should add "really creative" to that set of descriptors. My reading of art history books tells me that abandonment has always led to advanced creativity. The greatest periods of art flowering have also been the most precarious periods for children. In Greece, when the arts, politics and philosophies were all exploding, inconvenient babies were regularly "exposed"—left out to die. An inconvenient baby would be, say, a second son (didn't want to have to divide the family fortune and have two poor citizens bear your name rather than one rich one) or, of course, a daughter of any birth order. And then in the Renaissance ... well, let's look at Michelangelo and da Vinci. Michelangelo was sent off to a wet nurse as soon as he was born, and didn't see his mother again till he was two; then she went and died on him when he was six. Da Vinci was a love child who was given up at the age of four by his peasant mother when his rich father married. Freud describes Mona Lisa's smile as holding "the promise of unbounded tenderness and at the same time sinister menace." That's how da Vinci looked at all women, after being abandoned by one. I know for me, my father's smile, and everything he says, is nothing if not a double-edged promise. Prostitution—and promiscuity, and weird sex, and the shows, with their combination of flirting and hurting people and

shifting reality—are chances to turn things around, for me to give that promise back.

Chapter Sixteen

I return to a cold, empty flat in France—well, colder, emptier—and a weird—well, weirder—Jean Louis. He sold everything—the few pieces of furniture we had, and little special things. The rest, he threw away. All that remains is the futon mattress in the corner. No electricity—he didn't pay the bill. Oh yeah—and there's a new girlfriend. Her name is Darling, she's from Haiti. Her hair shoots straight up like a geyser out of a rubber band at the top of her head. She's the upstairs neighbour girl. And I do mean "girl." Anne was two-thirds of Jean Louis's age; I was half. Darling is down to one-third. I can picture him ten years from now stepping out with a fetus on his arm. The continuum continues: Anne was Jewish but still French; I was from another country, but Darling is from another world. Most of Darling's family practice voodoo and quit school around the fifth grade. Finally, sex

with Anne, I gathered while snooping through Jean Louis's personal papers and the ones Anne left behind, was normal. With me, it mutated into something the pope really would not like. But with Darling, Jean Louis has developed a kind of sex so untraditional—i.e., going to the store daily to buy ice chips (neither we nor Darling's family have a freezer) and trying to make it back before they melt, and then sucking on them—I'm surprised Darling's aunt can recognize it for what it was. But recognize it she does, and she sends a bad spirit in the shape of an owl to our patch of garden to stare at Jean Louis all the time. Jean Louis is truly frightened!

He has another, equally subliminal intrigue going on with Anne. Their sex life was normal years ago. Now they keep going off "visiting sights." Jean Louis invites me along—how rude! The compass and binoculars swinging from Jean Louis's and Anne's necks are total substitutes for sex parts, as far as I can see. I always try to figure out what's going on, how serious he's getting, but my spy tools are clunky. I write down phrases I catch him saying low into the phone, then go into my room with my disintegrating French dictionary and mull over them for hours, looking at each phrase from every direction. Even if my French were perfect, though, and my knowledge of European ways thorough—how can you discern the emotional content of a situation when the man at the centre of it has totally abnormal goals?

Even when Jean Louis isn't here, little Darling is: playing double dutch with her younger twin sisters; rapping; infer-

ring things in rapid, slang-y French. What on earth she could want with me, I don't know. "*Qu'est que tu fais?*" she says, sidling up.

"*Je lis*," I answer, more often than not. I'm reading my way straight through the spring and summer, on the lonely futon. I read Russian books, where they list how much everything costs and all the characters' super-long names, and it snows all the time, and guests never leave, and there is tragedy and there is God and there is doubt. One time I snap at the interrupting Darling: "*Laisse moi a l'enfer, petite fille*!" Leave me in hell. My French vocabulary is small, so sometimes I just say whatever words I know, and don't concern myself with meaning.

"*D'ac*," she replies, which is the kid-way to say "*d'accord*"—okay. "*Et moi, je retourne au paradis*." She actually skips away.

I take comfort in making Jean Louis mad. At least I can still do that better than my replacement. One time I get him to throw his bowl of oatmeal at me, and when I just sit there smiling under the splatter, he becomes so enraged he scoops the rest off the floor so he can throw it at me again. In my mind, I'm already honing the funny, daring tone I'll take in my future letter to Bill Callahan, when I describe the incident. I'm meeting someone else where I used to meet you—on the unreal plane, I say silently to Jean Louis, sticking my tongue out to lick a glob of oatmeal off my chin. You could still stop me, I add in an even silenter voice, if you wanted.

I found Bill under a staircase at one of our shows. He was lurking there, hoping to escape notice. He reminded me of me: cute and floppy with a big head, scrawny body, and a loping walk. His shirt was buttoned wrong. I re-buttoned it and then I alarmed him by giving him a blowjob, which was cut short by Jean Louis clattering down the stairs calling out for me to come on stage and start the show. Bill sent me a cassette of his band—Smog. It was just him fooling around with his four-track in his parents' basement, making short, static-y, tinny yet somehow blues-y songs about not getting out of bed, and fruitbats, and evil tyrants, and then some more songs about not getting out of bed. He has this cheap guitar he got for his twelfth birthday, but he still uses it because it looks like something Kiss would play. He makes me feel maternal and controlling. I want to re-button his entire life.

I read somewhere that Bill is (not on purpose) leading this new thing that's happening back in America—indie rock. From what I can tell, these indie rockers are either depressed, or just repressed, and intellectual. With Bill, there's this enormous sludge-pool of despair bubbling under a veneer of humour, both in him and in his music. An old man mind behind the young boy face. It's dark. Not dark as in dangerous or predatorial or sexy. It's dark like how I first thought Jeff was, before I learned that he's simply a junkie, and that's why he can't stand bright lights or the outdoors or loud noises or all the things normal people say—an under-a-rock, larval, secret

sort of dark. I don't know about Bill's movement, though. The indie rock shows I've attended, everybody stands around with crossed arms and backpacks, indistinguishable from the three on stage (each band has three members), who sing mutteringly and moaningly, and not one person wears or does anything inappropriate. The whole thing is cryptic, and the opposite of me and Jean Louis: Indie rock is quiet, undecorated, unambitious and asexual, with nothing to prove. I think it's a bad influence on the youth! It's my suspicion that they mumble lyrics so no one can decipher their message—because there is no message! How can someone have nothing to say?! Jean Louis and I may be uncouth, but at least we run around trying to figure things out. I hate indie rock! It's my enemy. But I think I might be falling in love with Bill, in letters, for the very same quality—the understatement—that bothers me about his movement. Bill writes to me about what's going on in his world, which is not much. He observes his sisters, his parents, his best friend—who was hit by a car and is in a wheelchair, and he doesn't seem to quite understand any of them, and he doesn't interact much with anyone; nevertheless, his observations are affectionate. It's a slow life that he describes, a funny life. The way he describes it makes me want it.

I'm writing to Bill about the oatmeal incident, and about the beautiful, tiniest, white flowers I saw on some bushes, and about the man who was trying to fix his TV roof antenna here during a storm the other night and a metal door somehow

broke off its hinges, swung up, and cut the man exactly in two! Jean Louis walks in the room. "I like to see you there, writing by the window," he says, and comes to kiss my forehead. "You look very far away. I can almost see through you." He touches my shoulder lightly, as if to check my molecular structure. My affair might be the perfect solution to this whole hair-on-the-pillow/existence problem Jean Louis has with me.

But it's not enough for me. I start carrying on with two French fellows whom Jean Louis calls my "children." It's true they're younger than me, but still they're older than Darling! Stephane is fat and seventeen; Alexandre, nineteen and skinny. Since meeting them, I spend all my time riding the subway to their separate neighbourhoods. They each live with their parents, so there always follows the search for some new place for romance. They're best friends, so they jealously tally how much time I've spent with the other—so I keep having to add an hour here, an hour there. I come home to get fed, sleep, and then hole up to write. I don't try to make Jean Louis mad any more. I do involve him in my complex configurations; I ask his advice. I'd happily give it all up if he asked, but he doesn't ask. In the meantime, I'm having fun!

I've always tried out ways to live—different meanings of life—and I've always confused meaning with penises, and penises with music genres. Stephane and Alexandre love The Virgin Prunes, Joy Division, Dead Can Dance, Christian Death, Death In June. When you take how melodramatic the

French are about love in general, and add the melodrama of teenagers from any culture … and that these two French teens are immersed not only in death rock, but also in obsessive authors like Kafka and Rimbaud … well, you can imagine the desperate late-night pronouncements made, while twenty fingertips meet from opposite sides of the subway turnstile, or outside a door that one of us must enter and the other must not.

"Before I met you, I was quietly living my hopeless life," says a much-folded note written by Alexandre, who plays the violin and is so thin he looks like an onion skin in the wind with two staples for feet. "But you seemed to me so free, so spontaneous, so vivid, that I believed you were always acting by fantasy, without regret, and I decided to be like you. Then I came to see you as close to the devil. What kind of game do you play with me, I asked—with all of us? Now, finally, I know that you are neither good nor evil. You are simply a perverse little girl, lost. I would like to hate you. I love you desperately."

Alexandre is always arriving at the truth with screeching tires, as if coming late to his own wedding; he's never safely, securely arrived. He loves Van Gogh, as do I: the liquid quality to all the things in his paintings: the stars, thatch on the roofs, the centres of flowers, a wooden bridge. Van Gogh perceived mobility, vibration, in what others mistook for stationary objects. Alexandre's and Stephane's verbose, quivering passion

(Stephane wants us to live in a hut and be sheep herders, and marry "before the animals.") is in sharp contrast to Jean Louis's highest compliment to me: "I can stand you." No, he put it like this: "You, I can stand." But Jean Louis's means more to me, precisely because it does not vibrate and metamorphose. I know it's real, like dirt is.

Jean Louis does not have the same confidence in my feelings for him. "Write about treason," he suggests, when I complain I have nothing to write about. "Write about ambiguous relationships."

That's not fair, I protest. There is a clear hierarchy to my love life. I tell everyone what's going on, what they are to me. Jean Louis is like a king, the biggest gorilla on the top branch, presiding over the silly monkeys below without even having to open his eyes.

He decides to create an even more specific hierarchy, using my body parts. "You never get tired, with all your complex nicey-nicey's?" he laughs. "OK, I am going to solve this situation. I fuck the cunt, because I am going to have to live with the baby that comes out. Stephane will fuck the ass, because he is vicious, eh? And Alexandre will fuck the mouth, because it is near the brain, and Alexandre is a little thinky-thinky." He laughs again, proud of himself. And you, I think, Darling can fuck your ice chips and Anne can fuck your binoculars … your Anne is a little visity-visity, eh?

In fact, I don't want anyone to have his ice chips or his bin-

oculars, and I don't think he wants to give my mouth and ass away. But this is what we do. We have a momentum going. It started over something silly—he lost his erection a couple times in Philadelphia. Now he doesn't begin anything at all, rather than risk losing it again. I wouldn't care if the big bone shrunk—these things happen!—but still he wants to keep the appearance of power in my presence. And I am concerned with keeping my power in his presence. It's funny that he and I should know each other so thoroughly, and still we're so concerned with how we look to each other. I believe, despite appearances to the contrary, that we are still very in love. With each other—not with any of these proxies.

Except, with Bill … there's something normal about Bill, our relationship, that might be threatening to Jean Louis, though he doesn't recognize it. Well, OK—maybe there's nothing normal about it. But at least what I have with Bill isn't escalating like a cyclone, spinning wider and wider until it feels like it's going to have to break apart.

Chapter Seventeen

In the new show—Civil War—Alexandre will play violin, Anne will play an outraged audience member, and Stephane will be Rapist The Second (Jean Louis is number one.). Though the show—it's about terrorist acts to overthrow white civilization—is even more extravagant and violent than usual, the atmosphere in the car starting out on tour is completely frivolous. We can't stop bringing up the Danish restaurant we ate at: Fart-In. Jean Louis is like the papa of all four of us, and he is feeling indulgent.

The mood changes when we start performing. Thousands of chicken feathers are released (by Stephane) into the air. Jean Louis and I are the last members of society (meaning: white people), waltzing alone in a dancehall, with the feathers falling down and bombs exploding. Jean Louis whirls and

dips me faster and faster. We are like two living cells inside a just-dead body—doomed, terrified. The electricity goes out; a flash of lightning reveals black people and Arabs at the windows, leering, fingering the latches. The violin speeds up; apocalypse is here.

We decide (naturally) to have one final orgy of disco, cocaine, pee and shit—my spinach and chocolate pudding shit all over his face and body (but people always think it's real), and he really drinks my real pee—and then we kill ourselves before They can. But there is the question of whether any terrorism is actually occurring at all; are these two people simply crazy, and they self-destruct out of paranoid sick sex cocaine hallucinations?

There's civil war backstage as well, about the direction the shows should be going in. (Oddly enough, Anne is on my side, philosophically, while my boyfriends align themselves with Jean Louis.) Up till now, Jean Louis's worldly take on things—his sprinkling in of present-day politics, combined with my otherworldly one, coalesced into something approximating the mixed-up modern-and-traditional voodoo like in Ghana or Tanzania, exactly how I hoped would happen. But now, Jean Louis is taking advantage of us using the French language all the time to sneak in more and more explicit racial, political and religious motivations. He even gives some of our characters the names of real people in the news. He's getting so realistic, he's got me playing "A White Person"

in this show! For me, the stage is a place to portray the past and the future. People (the audience, and us as well) are too caught up in the present to see it clearly. That's why my characters usually aren't human: they're animals or aliens or gods. I feel you can tell the truth better with symbols. I see what's alluring in specificity, but I also feel it's a trap. If an audience knows exactly who and what we're talking about, then they can no longer imagine it's their own situation. They're able to identify us as "Other." Some other kind of person's problem, some other person's dream. Or, if they feel their group—say, their race—is being described unfairly, they'll start defending it. And then how will satori come about?

What I don't mention is that I feel pretty nervous about the symbolism Jean Louis chose. Is that dance supposed to be him and me trapped inside an already dead marriage, cheating and drinking because plain old love doesn't work any more?

Jean Louis's actual politics are plain communism, anti-racism. No one would know that, though. He purposely fucks up his message the same way he destroys his really thoughtful musical scores: piles complexities onto it and then pokes holes in the whole lot of it. With the music, the end result is a hint of something once pretty under the disturbing screech, as if very bad things happened or are happening to a defenceless melody. The end result of political message being cut into pieces and scattered into the show is a Rorschach test, and that's going to be dangerous one of these days, with drunken,

packed-in audiences worked up by loud, distorted music and simulated rape on-stage. Both Anne and I have warned him that serious troubles are in store. Not everyone has our attitude of: "Oh, now isn't that interesting?" But of course, our warnings only make Jean Louis dive deeper and deeper into the whole race thing.

In Belgium, Jean Louis calls me stupid in front of everyone because I don't know how to unclog a toilet, and then we have it out. We fight for three hours, and the people we're arguing about (our tour-mates) can hear it all. "Well, anyway," Jean Louis says finally, "this is not a story of sex or jealousy. There's a connection between you and me that separates us from other people and will keep us always together, even if we are apart."

That "apart" part gets my stomach going, and I have to go to the bathroom. I'm probably going to clog the toilet again.

"There has to be some solution," Anne says to me later that night. "He has to make a clear decision." That means she must really believe there's a chance he'll leave me and go back to her! She also says he's a monster. I agree. And yet this monster, this enormously influential and inescapable presence in my life (and Anne's), is so thin and little when I hold him in my arms. Bony and nervous and very precious to me. Anne, I'm really not afraid of. And I know Jean Louis knows Stephane and Alexandre are totally conquerable, should he choose to enter battle. But when we finish the tour and return home,

there the unknown quantity named Darling will be, popping wheelies in the yard, knocking on the door and asking Jean Louis—her toe tracing Z's in the threshold—to go buy a tiny can of oil for her bike chain, and that will symbolize something so rude and intimate and subtle I won't even know what. Not even the aunt's staring voodoo garden owl could say what, exactly. And, at the end of the tour, the equally unquantifiable Bill will be waiting for me, in America.

I dream that my life is a thin sheet of ice with cracks criss-crossing it, and I'm trying to hold it together with my hands. If I stop holding it, it'll break apart, but as things stand, my hands are melting it into a puddle. I wake up peeing the bed. (My poor Danish host's bed!) I pee the bed three nights in a row, in two different countries. I'm so scared, thinking that I am losing my husband, who is really quite unique and I know I can never replace him. It feels like everything has opened up; all the walls of all the buildings vanished. There's only blackness, and our bed in the middle of it, and then our bed is falling.

At the end of the tour, I tell Jean Louis I can't do these shows any more. I still think they're great; I still believe in a dirty glamour, and that chaos and violence and ambiguous relationships and constant travel can be paths to redemption. It's just that it's all wrong for me now, because it doesn't embarrass me. Showing my body or its functions to strangers,

being laughed at or chased away has never embarrassed me. But saying what I really feel—any emotion, no matter which one—makes me turn red and want to throw up. My flying limbs and flying vagina—both on stage and off—create a flurry of distraction obscuring my embarrassed heart and shy soul. I want to be and feel truly exposed. I mean, I don't want to. I'm terrified to! But because I don't want to, I want to.

Throughout my big speech, Jean Louis puts his tattooed hand over his eyes—symbols he had someone off the street put in the webbing between the fingers when he was in Egypt years ago, and Jean Louis doesn't know what they mean. Maybe they mean: "You suck, Imperialist who calls himself a Utopian. Middle-aged man chasing a thirteen year old. Bad luck to you!"

"Well," I say at last, "don't you have anything to say?"

He says, "You speak, you speak … bah!"

We drop the boys off, and the three of us who remain—Jean Louis unshaven and grimy and worried; me scribbling away; Anne humming and singing, ignoring Jean Louis's constant expletives (he can't drive without swearing)—go for "holidays in the countryside." Jean Louis rustles the map and points left; Anne points in the opposite direction. He wants the Tower of the Flies and she is in search of The Magic River. I don't want to find either. Getting out of the car into grass at least five feet tall, the forest closing around us in a circle, I'm happy right here. I like being lost. But there's an abandoned

castle, and some ant mound that's supposed to be incredible for some reason, that has to be found. Jean Louis's teeth are grinding and his thighs are… wow! All muscular and wound up. Those thighs have to keep going!

Activity and hurry and hate can keep you from ever making any real change at all, your whole life long. I let the arguing Anne and Jean Louis go look for their buried sites while I sit by a river and wait. It's so quiet, with them gone. I notice how when the sun hits the water, it stops there. It spreads out across the surface, and leaves the black part below to itself. That's what I've been doing these last few years—hitting the surface of all this sorrow and confusion in the world, and in me, and taking off running over it, moving so fast I don't sink. I think—maybe—it's time now to fall in, and see what's down there.

Chapter Eighteen

In downtown Rochester, New Hampshire, half the buildings are burnt out and no one bothered to rebuild them or even tear them down. (In Dover, we called it Crotchester.) Some glassless windows are boarded up, but others gape, black. I bet some kids over the years have crawled in there, something collapsed on them, and their parents didn't even report them missing. Just figured they must've moved in with their thirteen-year-old boyfriend or girlfriend and that kid's mom. With the dregs of my prostitution money, I pay first, last, and security deposit on a two-room attic apartment. I don't decorate or buy furniture or even unpack. I talk to Bill (at his parents' house in Maryland) half the night, and don't sleep the other half. Well, mostly I listen to him breathe. That's the only way I can sleep—in little naps on the phone, while he breathes. I stock the freezer with butter pecan ice

cream and blueberry bagels, and that's all I eat. Except once in a while I make chicken and rice or chocolate chip cookies. But food shopping is a problem. I blush whenever I go out, as if I have an appointment to sell secrets to the enemy, and everyone knows—they're all watching and waiting. I don't go out much. There's a park underneath my window, where dirty, sullen, solitary four or five year olds swing listlessly. Sometimes I go down and swing with them for a little bit.

"What's two times two minus one plus eleven?" one asks me.

I say fourteen and ask if she believes in God.

"Of course I do—I go to Sunday school."

"Would you still believe if Sunday school closed?"

"Yes."

"What does God look like?"

"I don't know. What's four plus three minus two times six?"

She's oddly devoid of any signs of emotion or imagination. It seems the whole family is: Her mother doesn't have time to deal with both her and her twin sister, so the father put the parents' names and the aunt and uncle's names in a hat, and had the girls pick them out. That's how they figured out whom to send away. Her sister will leave today, to live in another state with the aunt and uncle. I ask if she feels very sad, and she says no, and I believe her.

Brett Kerby flew all the way to France to do a tour with

Jean Louis, but once he got there, Brett says, Jean Louis says "I can't, I can't. All is lost!" while squatting, in his pyjamas, under a smashed window (he threw a soup can out at noisy children, not bothering to open the window first). Brett asks me, "Did you leave him?" And I realize I did. I call, and Jean Louis picks up on the first ring, but will answer my questions only with a guttural moan. "Well, call me if you want to talk," I say, and hang up. Like that girl in the park with her numbers, I'm busy with little pieces of little thought-puzzles, and I have no empathy. I do think he might kill himself for real, but I have to leave him to himself anyway. Where I am—which is in the middle of the night—is where I need to be.

It has a distinct odour, the middle of the night—similar to formaldehyde. And the light—even from regular light bulbs—is greasy and green. At least when you have insomnia it is. My apartment looks like a Leonid Andreyev photograph. He invented The Lumiere Autochrome process in 1904, which involved dyed potato starch grains and a sheet of glass. He took photos of his rather grim-faced children and wives (the first one died) and of the Russian countryside.

This other self, my night self, has started getting up when I lay down. I name her Night-Lisa. Night-Lisa does not have a very large sense of humour. She crumbles when anyone touches or speaks to her, and then I—regular me—emerge, blinking. I look up "insomnia" in my *New York Public Library Desk Reference* and *The Oxford Companion To The Mind*, but

both of those just tell how to get rid of it. Night-Lisa does not want to be gotten rid of. People always think the waking life is the real one. But the dream self must think the same thing—that it's the real one. Only the Night-Lisa doesn't live in a dream. She is a whole personality, with her own memories and opinions. "That makes me queasy" is an opinion the Night-Lisa holds about any number of things. Like a mushroom, she grows in the dark, and I have to admit there's something, well, slimy about her. I try not to judge, though. Night-Lisa is my guest. I let her stay.

"Ice and snow," the Night-Lisa murmurs, pressing her palms to the floor, mapping patterns out of the brown and beige squares and rectangles of freezing linoleum. "Ice and snow." Her archenemy is coming through the door.

"What are you trying this persona out for?" Rachel snaps, handing me a birthday present wrapped in brown bag paper and tied with butcher's string. I can tell it's a book. Rachel's home from Philadelphia visiting her parents for the week. "What the hell is going on? What are you so weird for every time I call? This is not you—the long face, the murder talk. I'm the one who's gonna need to be broken out of a mental institution. That was always me. Chris and I even devised a plan about breaking me out."

"Oh yeah?" I say. "How's he going to do it?"

"We never got specific. He has a black belt, so I just figure he'll leap and karate chop and break me out. He did the …

what's that thing Chris did in high school, the leaping thing, with the stick?"

"Pole-vaulting?"

"Yeah. So I figure he'll just climb up something. He always has weapons on him—chains and nunchucks. I always tease him about being ready for the fight that never happens."

"The guy downstairs beats his girlfriend," I offer. "Or maybe she beats him. Sometimes it sounds like one of them is throwing the other against their ceiling!"

"Do you call the police?"

"Nah. They always make up."

Rachel looks disapproving—either of the fighting or the not reporting, I can't tell which. Then she remembers something. "Chris even has a gun somewhere. He wants to give it to me."

"He has a gun?"

"Yeah—but I won't let him give it to me because I know I'd end up using it on him."

I don't say anything. I'm waiting for her to notice she's going on and on about herself and how interesting and funny and peculiar she is. But the more we talk, the more she gets worked up, as if I've actively insulted her by separating from my husband and giving up my career and thinking about death and being unable to sleep.

"You're playing with something and you don't realize how dangerous it is, Leese. Why do you think I look like this now?"

She gestures to her long, pretty hair, clean face, hiking boots and overalls. "I really want to be conventional. I can't play any more with looking weird, living weird, because I really am going crazy. That's what you don't understand—that it's not a game. It's not something you take on—it's gonna get too big, and take you. I'm hallucinating really bad in Philadelphia. I have to wear sunglasses inside so I won't see all these things leaping in the corners. I use a cane. I'm a hypochondriac. And Chris is in love with all the blonde girls … all the blonde girls who don't need a cane to walk. And who don't need sunglasses to avoid hallucinations."

"I don't mind that you're the drama empress," I say slowly, "but you could have left a little room for me to turn around in. Some little corner of your world."

"Why do you want my corner anyway? It'll never be you. You're not the crazy one. You were always so … healthy! Though, living alone in Rochester, who wouldn't go crazy? You gotta get out of here. I mean, never mind the domestic violence, look at this place. It's dusty. It's ugly! It's an attic! You only moved here a month ago—how did all this dust get in here in a month?"

"I like Rochester. It suits me."

Rachel gets so mad at me liking Rochester she starts huffing like a cat and has to leave. I'm glad when she's gone—it's quiet.

And so I huddle lost and frumpy in a burnt out mill town,

while my legend marches boldly all over the place without me. Forty, fifty letters a week arrive from people on the outskirts of life—virgins, schizophrenics, criminals—wanting to have sex with me (well, with Lisa Suckdog), be my soul mate, be my drummer. When I write back to these people, I'm so buoyant and saucy. Nothing like my demeanour when I shuffle to the post office to put those letters in the box. There is a definite splintering of my selves that probably is cultivated, since I read about that. Mean, nasty Rachel was right: I do try on different personae. But partly it is real and beyond my control.

Jean Louis, Rachel and I mirror each other, from our three points on the globe: Paris, Philly and Crotchester. But we can't reach each other, just as if we were real mirrors—we can see only ourselves. We cannot help one another.

My friend Ethan comes to visit, and we go to Linda's because he wants pot. She's wrapped in a quilt, her eyes puffy from cigarette smoke. A cockatoo sways atop her shoulder, nibbling at her neck.

Linda, once the apex of womanliness to me, something I could never reach, has been diminished by years of sun, cigarettes, and my father. She's down, but she is definitely not out. Ethan and Linda get high, and Linda tells Ethan: "Lisa's stupid." She pushes her long, nude-coloured fake nails under the bird's feathers, rubbing its skin. "She thinks she's smart

because some test said she has a genius IQ, but she can't find her way out of a paper bag."

"I think Lisa's very smart," Ethan says.

"How? What can she do? Nothing. Name me one thing she's smart at."

"Uh…"

"C'mon, Ethan," I say, "you can do it."

"She's a good conversationalist."

Linda snorts. "She doesn't say anything! All she does is listen. She asks questions, but she'll never say her own opinion. The only time she'll ever declare something, she's parroting someone else."

"Maybe she'll be a good journalist then," Ethan proposes.

"She's completely uncreative," Linda says with finality.

My thirty-five-year-old stepbrother drags himself away from the TV to say to Ethan: "Do you know what the name of her band is?"

"Suckdog," Linda answers for him. She lights another cigarette. "Does that sound creative to you? All she knows how to do is have sex on stage and parrot other people's opinions. Name me one thing she can actually do." She stares at Ethan, who stares back, frightened. "She can't even keep her house clean. She can't keep herself clean. Lisa's lazy. Stupid and lazy."

Laying in bed that night, I go over and over what Linda said, and Rachel. I always knew I wasn't the prettiest or the

funniest or the sweetest or the most educated, but I thought that if I kept working hard at it—at thinking, I could work out some important stuff to tell other people. But, to parrot William Carlos Williams, there are no ideas except in things. And what things can I do, in the end? Nada. Take my clothes off and steal other people's ideas.

Finally, I get up, pull on Bill's ugly, lifeless jeans (I asked him to mail me some of his clothes to wear so it would be like he was walking around with me) and a scratchy, ugly, pink cowl-neck sweater Linda gave me, sneakers, Bill's ugly brown jacket, and my stupid New Hampshire cap, and go out in the rain and walk all around feeling pretty bad.

I feel like I felt when I was a kid. My father required of me total devotion and total independence. Yet you can't be both at once. Then there was my mom—bleeding from the nose, from the gums, from her surgical stitches—yet still able to fling her arm out and smack me. If I ever hit her back, I'd be hitting a sick, frail woman. She would threaten that if I went out with friends, I'd come home and find her dead. If I stayed, I'd suffocate and die, but if I left, I'd be killing her. As far as I could see, the whole world was a trap. There was no way out. The only course of action left for me was to screw my eyes shut and see a world that wasn't there at all, and not see what was.

Until Rachel came and snuck me out the back door of my life. And then I had Jean Louis to protect me from myself.

Now I've driven them both away, and except for Bill's hesitant, slightly Southern voice on the telephone late at night, I'm all alone. I don't even have the luxury of a divided self any more. Rachel ridiculed the Night-Lisa away and Jean Louis incorporated my drunken doppelganger Lisa Suckdog into his stories; she's one of his props now. There's just me: an abandoned woman in an abandoned town. This is what I wanted—eyes open—but it sure is no fun place to be.

Chapter Nineteen

Bill's here. Bill doesn't mind me being a total mess. Unlike Rachel, he's never known me any other way. I think he finds it exotic, that he has to pull me from the tub at night and pat me dry, slip a nightgown over my head. If my mother drives up to visit and gives us a cucumber, he knows to cut it for me, as I'm so suicidal, I can't be trusted. Apparently I'm homicidal too, as he makes me sip his coffee first, if I pour him a cup. Though that might not sound very romantic, it is. There's something quite exclusive about a relationship where one fears being poisoned and the other fears that she's going to do the poisoning, and neither one calls the police or the hospital; neither leaves. We have an underwater sort of love: We can't see or hear each other—or anything else—very clearly, but we wrap around one another like currents caressing seaweed. We can feel ourselves changing in slow motion.

One of the changes is we've both run out of money. I could do a few nights of prostitution to cover all our bills for the month, but it's not like that with Bill. I was trying to reach Jean Louis through other people's bodies, trying to hold onto him by not holding on. With Bill, I'm already burrowed all the way in. There's no need to find a new way home.

I apply at a temp agency, trying to break into secretarial work, but the lady there says I'm too "excitable" and she can't "in good standing" send me out on a job. During my typing test, she points out, I kept exclaiming and gesticulating. The only job left to me is waitressing at Friendly's. I take it. It's hard! I have nightmares every night about customers ordering things not on the menu, like nuts and bolts, that I have to rush out to find, and when I came back, I have six new tables. Even Friendly's doesn't work out for poor Bill, and he's stuck scrubbing toilets for my dad's company—and my dad, who pays him in cash under the table, keeps short-changing him.

In the evenings, Bill and I work on our third eyes. I get a book of Zen koans from the library and Bill and I stare at each other and try to picture one hand clapping, or the stick not hitting the person. We paint every day and do automatic writing, where I set the timer on the stove for twenty minutes and we have to write every single thing that goes through our minds no matter what—no thinking about it, no correcting a spelling mistake, just go! Bill is a man of few, few words. One time I asked him to describe me, and he said "weak and

strong." That was it. When pressed, he eventually, after a whole day of thinking on it, added: "messy hair and a cup of coffee." Bill gets maybe five or ten automatic writing words down, and then there are simply no more. So he starts drawing chairs or chandeliers or electrical outlets and unplugged plugs. Those are the things he's obsessed with. Apparently he has few thoughts, except about chairs, chandeliers and outlets.

And, once in a while, we do drugs.

The doorbell rings. Thinking it's the landlord, I tear around the apartment pulling up shades, ripping the coat off the mirror, and otherwise trying to set right all that is very, very wrong. We end up not answering the door, but sneak out down the fire escape instead, and head downtown. Bill picks up a forked stick, which he tells me is the perfect divining rod. He pokes a girl—she's around nine years old—who's walking by. She just watches Bill calmly, and he explains to her that he was thirsty, and was divining for water in her. I get all this down, frantically, in my little notebook.

He and I love the idea of a little girl—we have a photo of his niece whom he's barely met; she sits on a stoop in a sleeveless dress and holds up four fingers to show how old she is. Little girls accomplish enormous, inexplicable feats in Bill's songs—they tame tyrants just by nothing, just by standing there. We have no idea what it's like to spend more than ten minutes with a child. We feel pretty sure that eleven minutes

would disintegrate everything we are, as if children are made up of this concentrated stuff which will burn through anything other than itself, and we must protect ourselves from them. Yet we talk about having one of our own.

For Jean Louis, art is war. For me, it's a spy mission. For Bill, it's like surgery. He plays his black and white, triangular guitar every day, but he has no ambition, no need to conquer or to sow the seeds of himself. Maybe one person might see something he's done someday, or listen—one right person, but really it would be preferable to be left alone for more careful application of scalpel to gray matter.

I, however, want a lot of recognition and admiration and even the bad stuff—I want to be called the worst at something as well as the best … just so long as I'm the most. I want power. I have Linda to prove wrong, and my other two parents, and Rachel. Linda was right—I can't find my way out of a paper bag. Because there is no way out! How you're supposed to live, to write, to love—those rules are a trick, an invisible maze with no exits. How could there be a real exit in an unreal maze? There's only one way out: You have to realize those maze walls—other people's idea of success and normalcy—are not real. That's how you destroy it, that's how you tear the whole thing open, and walk away free. Just by realizing the nature of the trap. (I must say … it is a little disturbing to read my own words here and see that they sound

like a sociopath's: "Other people's realities don't count for me." [!]) I had that realization before in a performance context, but now I'm thinking about it in terms of family dynamics, in just—everything!

I quit my job at Friendly's.

Seeing things in a unique way, re-seeing things—and then influencing others just by how I see, seems to be the one thing I can actually do. Bill tells me his music changed when one of our conversations made him realize that a song doesn't have to follow traditional patterns—a song doesn't have to be a song at all. It can be anything! Perception is nine-tenths of reality. That's how I will rip open my brown paper bag, and rip other people out too—with perception. With not needing to be acceptable or consistent. Instead of struggling to become rich or beautiful, I will redefine class and beauty for the whole world. Not just for the underground any more! The people I went to high school with, and the people I worked with at Friendly's—I want them to read about me in People magazine in the check-out aisle, and I want it to save their souls with freedom.

Latency is seductive. That's why everyone doesn't just get up out of the bag—simply because we're already in there, whether it's real or not, and so are all our friends. Change is hard. But I change my mind all the time. My belief system is pretty much simply the opposite of what whoever I'm with at any given moment believes. That's what made Rachel accuse

me of being a persona-hound, and my father call me wishy-washy, and Linda call me a parrot, and my mother call me a creepy spy. What my family says is my most horrible trait has turned out to be my one talent.

I don't think it would be exaggerating too much to say I had stab holes all over my body from being told that this thing inside me wasn't special … was ugly. I was alive twenty years swinging along in a dream before the wounds all started bleeding at once, and that's when I crawled into the cave of Rochester and lay there dying. Well, that era is over! I'll while away the time in privacy, looking into Bill's eyes trying to decipher koans, no more! All my life I tried to hide this thing in me and even tried to destroy it. But now I see that it's special. In fact, it's so special! And it's real. I am going to save people, and we'll all rise up out of our caves and be an army!

As an emerging general, I'm not a great roommate: hunched over piles of paper twelve or fourteen hours a day, grim-faced, interrupting myself only once every hour or so to yell to Bill: "Listen to this totally funny thing I wrote!" My legs form a "W" on the floor, and I eat literally nothing but bread balls and water and Monterey Jack cheese and raisins. I quit sugar cold turkey upon reading the totally scary *Sugar Blues*. I also quit experimenting with outlandish stories like the ones I made up in France. Having recently been close to crazy, I want to escape that when I write—into the real, funny world.

I make very small things my subjects: supermodel Linda Evangelista's new yellow bowlcut, or our cat Cheetah, or this purple backpack that I really love—so many pockets!—even though it's hideous to behold. While I've left hallucinating behind, I do drag a few remnants of crazy visions/logic into the above-world, braiding the wispy ideas like tinsel into my new, plain style.

I take on big things in the same small, plain way: my lust for damage; why I became a prostitute; my attraction to necrophiliacs. If I feel like throwing something away because it leaves me exposed and ridiculous, if it makes me feel like throwing up, that's my editorial guide to keep it. I write about people I meet—the roofers and the veterans at Tiny's Pub and the lonely and beautiful drag queens I hung out with in Hollywood (before I got fired from that movie), and people I read about—like Rasputin. I am a chronicler, similar to Andy Warhol—except the people entering my factory are more lost than pretty … then again, this is 1989, not 1979 any more. And unlike the laconic Warhol, the personality I eavesdrop and report on more than any other is my own. Ignoring the advice of every how-to-be-a-journalist book, I sing the song of me! I abuse exclamation points. I repeat myself, or sometimes I reverse my opinion entirely, within the same article. I tell jokes right in the middle of confessions. I try to write not like a "good writer," but like I'm telling something I can't wait to tell to one person, who already knows everything about me

and still likes me. I write as if I still have Rachel, and I'm writing to her.

When I interview people, I never ask them about their areas of expertise. I wouldn't ask a musician about chords or influences. I ask what I want to know: how many times do they masturbate a day, how do they want to die, what do they think of my cat's new disturbing habit, do they think I'm cute, and do they feel uncomfortable right now? I don't care about being comprehensive or fact-checking. My interview style is a more personal version of my former stage show (and of my old sexual modus operandi): Put someone in a messed-up situation, don't throw 'em a life preserver, and see what they do. That, I feel, will make my subject's core reveal itself, rather than let them choose what of themselves to present. And I'm accepting of any core at all, however brutish or ridiculous or banal. I want the truth—most of all when someone else doesn't want me to have it, and even more most of all when that person (and I) don't even know what the truth is until the moment it leaps, against my poor subject's will, out of his or her mouth. Sometimes the truth is just this very small thing, something you already knew. Like a rock star finding out he really believes in monogamy. I want the truth hiding behind the Truth. An heiress I interview wasn't angry when she discovered that her mother was not out performing pro bono midwifery on Mexicans all night like she claimed. Instead, the mother was arguing and arm-wrestling with men in bars.

The heiress figured out her mother meant midwifery in the symbolic sense: giving birth to ideas. The little truth there is that even drunken, neglectful losers can have honour; there's an alternate universe full of honour. I interview a physicist who spent a few months as a streetperson, and he says that bums in the gutter, who everyone holds up as the ultimate archetype of failure, in fact are fine—are probably happier than employed persons and, he says, are doing more good. Those stumbling drunks who mumble incoherently—the physicist says that, if you actually listen, often they're speaking deep, religious philosophy. How many non-bums speak on that every day? (I think back to my time as a young girl talking with bums, looking for some magnificent wisdom and finding instead only chatter. The trouble must have been I'd approach the more coherent, sober-looking ones.)

Just as Suckdog was all pre- and post-song material, I want what I publish to be the stuff other magazines cut out—what happens before and after the articles. I ask Rachel to be my record reviewer. She's so belittling—calling one poor singing duo "a terrier harassing a bull dyke"—that I fire her. I record our conversation where I tell her why I won't use what she wrote, and she defends cruelty, and I type that up instead of record reviews.

A month later, I gather up the results: my borderline sick essays, and the cute and gossipy ones; my interviews with non-celebrities; a short story of Bill's that stutters and then

simply trails off, with several portraits of light bulbs instead of an ending; comics by people who can't draw; and letters from freaks. I do it all on the typewriter, and with scissors and glue. I have no money for a computer, and besides, I'm suspicious of them, as if spell-check and a built-in thesaurus might be part of a plot to computerize the human brain. I hand-write last minute observations throughout the margins, like: "Isn't Carol Anne, receptionist at Dutch East record distribution, a bitch? I almost had a heart attack after I talked to her this morning. I thought my heart would explode! She displays what Gorbachev referred to in his kidnappers as 'an unbelievable lack of politeness.' If I am ever in the same room with her, I swear I'll wring her neck. Or she'll wring mine—I don't care. Somebody's neck is going to be wrung." I stuff it all in a folder and bring it to my mother's government copier at the navy yard after hours, make thirty copies, and, in the last month of the last year of the '80s, *Rollerderby* is born.

I send a copy to Rachel in Philadelphia and ask what she thinks. "It's funny," she says. "I like it. But it's just not … polished enough. It's never gonna go anywhere this way."

"Well, that's what you said about Suckdog, too," I say. "And all my boyfriends through the years!"

"Well," she retorts, "isn't it true? Another thing that bothers me—and this, too, bothered me about Suckdog and all your boyfriends—is that it's like you're collecting weird-o's for it."

"I am!" I admit. "But doesn't everyone deserve to be collected by someone?"

Rollerderby will later be credited with being the first "personal zine." (It wasn't—Pagan Kennedy started one in Allston, Massachusetts before me, though I won't find that out till the mid '90s.) It came from a disturbed person trying to hold on to anything mundane she could find. I pieced together scraps of what I thought were reality, until eventually the ragged map turned into real terrain. I'm cured! I have friends and interests and money again (against all odds, record companies love advertising with *Rollerderby*). *Rollerderby* even wins me Rachel back. In fact, she goes so far as to transfer from Penn State to the University of New Hampshire! It's true she strongly disapproves of the majority of *Rollerderby*'s subject matter, and of my new contributor friends, and of my continued refusal to go to college, and my antisocial clothes and hair. But she always likes me best when I'm on top—even when she doesn't like the thing that I'm on top of. We pick up our friendship as if we never put it down for two years, and I am as I was back then—before France, before plastic flowers up my butt and feathers raining down, before everyone went crazy. As if nothing has changed since we were kids.

Chapter Twenty

W.C. Niles is a thirty-four-year-old virgin neo-fascist who calls me Mother. W.C. writes that he's giving up the network of underground tunnels he's been digging, where he planned to hide with me post-apocalypse and repopulate the earth with Aryan babies. He wants now to get better. "Got to get used to the sun. Am almost a complete nocturnal. I'm scaring people, and that's got to stop! Must learn to bathe regularly and wear normal clothes. The leaky, pus-ridden knob on my skull already went away. I washed my skull clean and that took care of it. It'll be a year before I dig myself out of the rest of the mire into which I've sunk. I want to be a part! It's your love that has been the liberating force! I was well along to being dehumanized, but I read your words, and into this great, swirling storm of life you dove, and I will follow. At some point, it's going to be necessary for me to move in with

you or at least near you. Those who love ought to be together. I require very little: a large closet will do. If you don't allow us to be together, I'll understand. I'll just live nearby. Love, your devoted son."

I don't let W.C. move into my closet; I won't even meet him for coffee: I understand that he is deranged and might kill me. But I can give him my time, write back. Why wouldn't I? Just because he has a leaky, pus-ridden knob on his skull and is a neo-fascist? That's all the more reason to: Because he is striving, and the mountain he struggles to climb over (himself) is just so tall. Much taller than the mountains my other interviewees—Beck or Jon Spencer or Thurston Moore—have to scale.

In five or ten years, people will start blogs, will find others on the internet who share their aberrant tastes, get really specific using on-line dating. But for now, zines are all we have. They are freak-seeking missiles. Solitary people around the country … around the world … who are strange but outside the traditional, acceptable ways to be strange finally get connected. *Rollerderby* is a hand with hundreds of lo-o-ong fingers reaching into far-flung holes with weird-o's hiding in them. The one thing all of us have in common is a sort of social Tourettes. The lag time built into photocopied and mailed relationships is a good buffer for us.

Matt and Melissa Jasper are English majors attempting to be swingers, residing in Dover. They've already read all

about me in my magazine, and I've read all about them—or at least their interests: crazy people, quack inventors, and Marc Chagall—in their magazine Tray Full of Lab Mice. We decide to meet in person at their place, which is stuffed full of medical models and taxidermied animals and decaying velvet furniture. Melissa is dressed like a princess. She looks like a real princess too, with her very long, black hair that she never washes because the natural grease makes it shine. Matt looks like a witness. The nondescript person who is able to give ever every detail of a crime that happened right in front of him because the criminals didn't even notice he was there. He looks like he would be wearing an overcoat, though in fact he is in an ill-fitting Izod.

I catch myself taking a step back every time my host or hostess advance, and Matt actually asks if his breath smells! I feel embarrassed for him, and tell him it's not his breath, it's me. Then I chomp my teeth in his direction and say I'll bite him to prove it. It's easy to fall into a tone at once flirtatious and cranky with Matt—something about the way he won't look you in the eye—can't, even when you point out that he's not doing it. Under his floppy blond bangs, the eyes stay down. Melissa will hold eye contact—and hold, and hold. She sees I'm squirming, but still holds it. At last my eyes dart away. She approves of my treatment of her husband. I can tell.

As soon as I get home, I write them a letter explaining that I'm like an animal about food—I like to crawl off and dine

on something simple completely unwitnessed, and Melissa reaching into my plate and touching everything and then smacking on it both horrified and mesmerized me. Their reply details the habits of upchucking birds and other examples of disgusting communal dining in the animal kingdom, culminating in the human experience of "meat joy" in the '60s—orgies that involved both eating and rolling around in meat, naked. This feels like the teasing GG and I did to each other. Only this time, there are two of them, and they're really smart. Melissa becomes the first Pink Lady of *Rollerderby*: I print her dreams, and photos of her, and constantly refer to her in essays completely unrelated to her.

I'm attracted to both married people, but frightened of them as well. They take care of brain-injured people for a living. Melissa is matter-of-fact about people's suffering to the point of being cruel. Matt seems kind, but I also get the idea that his generosity might be a cover for a strain of cruelty deeper and more vicious than Melissa's. I never can tell for sure. Matt is a subtle person. He invites me over one time so he can draw on my feet and film it. I don't know what he means by it, but it feels like he means something. He also asks me to drink syrup of Ipecac and throw up for him, and I do. I like to be asked to do things. I'm happy to help people make their bad dreams come true.

I start handing over all my rough drafts of articles to Matt and Melissa, which they virulently assault, and they're always

right. When I turn my suicide essay into a long poem (with rhymes and everything!), Matt calls it an "abomination" and Melissa says it isn't even worth that word. She commands me to turn it back into an essay, and to use "saturnine" in there somewhere, because that word came to her in a dirty dream about a dog. I do turn it back into an essay, and I do use the word "saturnine," and it is good.

My favourite part of *Rollerderby* are Matt Jasper's contributions: accounts of the oddballs he befriends—a teen bank robber, a box car derby champ, the mentally ill daughter of a mobster, the man who invented The Egg Car (which relies on being curved for combustion, and never got beyond the scale model the elderly man built, and peopled with Barbies). Matt respects things that aren't going anywhere. He feels that a pre-existive state is somewhere. Every single person can't be productive—nor should they be. The way unsocialised people—the repulsive or inept or insane—look at things ought to be productive enough in itself.

My dreaminess and half-baked time loop theories give me a journalistic aesthetic almost identical to Matt's. But my libertarian background and the folklore of conquerors I grew up with cause me to relish ruthless overachievers almost as much as the beautiful ugly ones stuck in the tar pits. And defending my mother against my father and Linda's derision just because she has normal hairdo's, education, and jobs leads me to defend all those square in the middle—the normal ones. In

Rollerderby I find myself explaining the crazy people—who are too far gone to explain themselves—to the sane people, and explaining the sane people—who are actually much deeper than they appear, but are too uptight to transmit it—to the malcontents. With a mother in and out of hospitals and a father in and out of jail and no one remembering to watch over me, I was bound to turn out loose—loose in how I think as well as being a runaround, able to straddle seemingly great divides with my long brain-thighs. I believe in love! All kinds of love.

Except I don't know if I love my boyfriend any more. I was exploding theories and realizations and plans at him, I in the chair, he at my feet, and suddenly I realized he wasn't saying anything. I demanded a response, and he said, "That's … that's all good." I became furious, growling: "Is that all you have to say?" He said, "Don't scare me, Pume." Pume is short for Pumice—solidified lava, very abrasive. His nickname for me. I wanted to scare him, scare a response out of him. A terrible bullying rose up in me. I felt like kicking him, and I could have. He would have let me. That made me hate him, for what I'd become in that moment. Then the moment past, and I loved him again. His hazel eyes, which aren't big, and his soft lips, which are. His Claudia Schiffer cheekbones. His bony bum. His total lack of style; his complete concentration on things that don't exist. But I fear I might be outgrowing our reclusive, delicate love. I think I want someone who can

scare me, scare me out of what I believe; someone who can make the whole world new and scary.

One night at 2 a.m., I get a call from a girl in San Francisco whose ears, she says, have no cartilage, so they're floppy and she likes people to hold them in their mouths to keep them warm. She sounds pretty. She says when Suckdog came to town a couple years ago, she couldn't go because she wasn't twenty-one, and everyone and her boyfriend were talking so excitedly about the show and she was very jealous of me and for a long time she hated me, but her boyfriend said she and I have a lot in common and she should send me her drawings—they're Victorian, lots of curlicues and half man-half beasts and mermaids and Siamese twins and dead girls that talk—and he said she should really call me, and finally she did, tonight, but she kicked that boyfriend down the stairs just last night! She starts to explain why—something to do with him talking to or looking at another girl across the room, but then she interrupts herself to sing a song about a "French Toast Man." "I'm teaching myself how to play the singing saw!" she stops the song short to announce. "Wanna hear?" There's some rustling and banging, and then down the phone line hurtles a long moan like from a ghost. I can't believe my ears. By now it's almost dawn, and I know the second Pink Lady has entered my life. Her name is Dame Darcy.

Darcy starts calling five, ten times a day, and sending pack-

ages of things she made me: a flesh-coloured dress with plastic fetuses hanging off where one's nipples would be, or earrings made out of acorns and bells and dead bees, glazed and sprinkled with glitter. And lots and lots of drawings, every one of which I stick in *Rollerderby*—even the doodles on the backs of her envelopes … tall, ghostie cars or elongated trees or flat-looking fish with spikes and horns. She says she's addicted to me. I walk by a bakery and am compelled to enter and purchase a very large chocolate chip cookie, something I've never done before. I always get a cupcake or a doughnut. Cookies are too dry. I go home and called Darcy and before I can say anything, she says, "Excuse me for mumbling, I have a mouthful of extra large chocolate chip cookie." !

Melissa is jealous of Darcy, and Rachel is jealous of them both. They shouldn't be. Why did Rome have a thousand-year golden era of peace? Because they were inclusive. When the Romans conquered a people, they didn't attempt to force their own religion or politics on them; nor did they kill them or cut them off from the capitol. No, Rome incorporated these disparate ways of life into itself, and the empire blossomed and there was a rainbow of ideas. I want my gang to be a cross between the Roman Empire and the movie Grease (thus the name Pink Ladies). My gang is growing. It already has a definite nature: bossy, sexual, and sparkly. We dress up and draw and write and sing even if we don't know how to do any of those things. We show off. We're all scared, but we

won't be any more. We meet in packs in New York City or in the old graveyard in Dover or on the telephone. We travel to each other by train. We crash art openings and "happenings" and bingo, and watch Chinese fighting movies (where people use umbrellas and spoons and things to kill each other, and they can fly) and then re-enact them to the best of our abilities. The minutes of our meetings are printed in *Rollerderby*, along with photobooth shots of us kissing each other or exposing breasts or doing handstands while smoking.

Bill is lost among the girls. Rachel comes over and she and I jabber on and on and laugh, noticing neither that the sun has gone down nor that Bill's still there, until he reaches under a lampshade to switch the light on. Whereupon we both turn and look at Bill, who looks back at us.

"What do you think he's thinking, all this time?" I ask Rachel, as if Bill isn't right there.

"I don't know," says Rachel.

"I don't know," I say. "It's a mystery!"

I like the mystery. I no longer relate to it though, or to him—at all. I don't paint any more, and I'm starting to hate Buddhism. My tongue has turned back into a sharp stick. With his passivity and receptivity, he's like an expanse of desert: a storm could happen right on top of him and he'd absorb it, and never show any sign of disturbance. A storm is happening right on top of him.

* * *

Rachel invites me to come collect specimens with her for one of her classes. Despite the wide perimeters of my *Rollerderby* gang, Rachel doesn't fit in it. She's in another world already, that of biology.

"'Touch-Me-Not' is an *Impatiens*," she says, showing me a little flower. "That's the genus. The species is *capensis*—little 'c.' See how it's all coiled up? When the fruit is ripe, and you touch it, it goes *bo-i-i-ing* and flings its seeds at you. It's not ripe yet Lisa, don't touch!" She slaps my hand away. I'm so impressed that she knows all this stuff that I never will, that she can look at any field or river or creature and know all the systems operating under the surface. It's reassuring to me that she's not one of my Pink Ladies, because they come and go. I'm constantly changing, but the world of hanging gardens and flesh-eating viruses keep certain immutable laws, forever. So does Rachel. So does Dover.

Halfway through the specimen hunt, we stop in at Busy Hill Market for one big dill pickle each. You have to reach into the jar with your hand, and for just a moment, until we wipe off with a paper towel, our hands glistens yellow-green and alien.

At the post office (the field in which I do my specimen-hunting), I stick my hand in the envelope even though I should have thrown it in the garbage, unopened, as soon as

I recognized the spiky handwriting used for my address. It's from a Viet Nam vet who, angry that his fifty letters to me netted only two replies, last sent me a collage of serial killers' faces circling mine (which he'd cut out of *Rollerderby*). There's gray, hairy powder in the envelope. Within minutes, a Cyclops lump rises on my forehead and every other body part I've touched with my powder-coated fingers. I think I might be dying and I go to the hospital, but they just give me Benadryl and send me home. I look at the rest of the day's mail. One young man invites me to his prom; another wants to have sex with me with "a chicken wig." I'm tempted to take both of them up on their offers: I never went to my own prom; and I'd like to find out what a chicken wig is.

Chapter Twenty-One

For our "one last tour" in America, which I still don't know why I agreed to, Jean Louis brings only the clothes on his back: a long-sleeve shirt, which he wears unfastened to the belly button; a coat; and jeans. He wears them even when we "make our exercise" every morning, though the jeans do not bend easily, and are too hot. We run and he shows me kick-boxing moves in a field behind a factory, steam rising from a nearby swamp and off of hot Jean Louis. I offer him a pair of Bill's shorts and a T-shirt, but he refuses vehemently, saying, "I may be a little tacky, but I am not naïve, you know."

Jean Louis has a worm—half a worm—from a jungle in Guyana embedded in his leg. He'd pulled half of it out, and what's left is either rotting in there or still alive. Probably still alive, because sometimes it gets infected—Jean Louis presumes that's when the worm has shat. And one day he wakes

up and part of his calf muscle is gone. We guess the worm ate it. Rachel hurries over to take a look.

"It's a botfly," she says.

"But he says he pulled a worm out of his leg," I say. "Which is it—a fly or a worm?"

"It's a larva. Right now it's in its larval form." She sees we're still confused. "Like a maggot. It's the maggot of the botfly. If it's still alive, it'll crawl out of there eventually and pupate." Bill puts his sandwich down and pushes the plate away. "Just be glad it's not on his face!" Rachel laughs, shoving the last of her sandwich in her mouth. "No, but you do have to go to the free clinic, Jean Louis. First thing tomorrow morning. Seriously. If the infection gets into your bloodstream, you could die. Or at least lose your leg."

"Ah, but I don't go," he answers. "It would not kill me—there is a balance."

"It's not in the parasite's interest to kill the host," I agree.

"I hope you don't want to sneak up on any of those ladies you were planning on scoring with on tour," Rachel says, and she imitates a wooden leg clomping on the floor. She really gets into her presentation: First she's Jean Louis, chasing after the girl with his stiff fake leg, laughing like a madman, then she's the girl, looking over her shoulder, terrified. It is remarkably similar to Jean Louis's real-life attempts at tour seduction.

Jean Louis laughs, and then acts out his own scenario, where he finally gets a girl, and the botfly emerges mid-date. "Mm…

well," he says in a girl's voice, stroking "her" chin thoughtfully. This mythic groupie apparently has a scientific bent.

Rachel stops laughing, and looks at me. "I'm getting upset. Does he know that this thing could kill him?" Due to Jean Louis's somewhat indecipherable accent and malapropisms, people tend to think he has accented, malapropped hearing as well.

"He knows," I say. I like the way he is: not letting a doctor help him, not letting anyone help him. I love his crinkly energy, his curiosity about everything, and then how he reaches a point where he's taken enough in and he cuts it off and shuts down and sort of turns a dark colour. I like how no one but me knows when he's kidding or why he does what he does. It makes me feel like I have a big pie and no one can steal it: everyone but me is allergic to the blackberries.

Rachel leaves. "C'mon, Bill," I say, patting him. "Let's go to bed."

Jean Louis simply pulls his coat up over his face—that turns whatever chair or couch on which he sits into his bed.

Through five states and six shows, Jean Louis grabs for girls' breasts before or after the show, saying, "I have rubbers!" One girl not only fails to succumb to such seduction, she also throws back the compact disc and T-shirt she was about to purchase.

"Well, Jean Louis," I say, "tomorrow we're in New York, where there's something for everyone."

"Maybe if you weren't wearing your show clothes…" Bill suggests. Night and day Jean Louis wears a garish, torn, golfing outfit.

Jean Louis ignores us both. He has been growing increasingly morose. We're getting maybe two hundred dollars per show, and that barely covers gas and food and replacing broken props. What to do with the leftover five dollars a day—that's the contention. Bill and I want to eat in a restaurant once in a while, or at least a diner, and wash our clothes at the Laundromat. Jean Louis wants to put all the money into making more fliers for upcoming shows and stand around passing them out to people, and buy a loaf of bread at the grocery store and eat just that, and never go to the Laundromat. Jean Louis feels there is entirely too much washing of clothes going on in this country. He calls Americans "bars of soap."

On the drive to New York, I don't like the way he looks at all. It's as if his irises have turned black. I don't like him. He says we owe him thirteen dollars for photocopies. I say if he's going to make all those fliers without asking us then he can just pay for them. I'm going to buy a treat. I haven't had a hot fudge sundae in a very long time. He says my hot fudge sundaes are no longer his responsibility—they're Bill's, and Bill can just give him the whole thirteen dollars then, and I can do what I want with my $6.50. I say my hot fudge sundaes are my own responsibility, and if he wants to be such an asshole, here then! I fish out the twenty-dollar bill I've been hoarding

and throw it at him. He picks it up off the ground and slowly rips it into about fifty pieces while staring into my eyes. All women are prostitutes, he says, and then he changes it to shit. "Ah, yes, me, that is it precisely—they're shit."

Bill says nothing. In the show, he plays God. He wears a fake beard and stands on a stool in the corner of the stage, and when his pre-recorded voice makes Godly pronouncements on the backing tape, he gestures with a pipe to show that it's supposed to be him talking. He doesn't want to have to actually say anything, or move. It's just like off-stage, where he sits with eyes at half-mast, making no comment while all this wild fighting and joking (not so much joking any more) whirls around him.

That night on stage, Jean Louis tries to pull Bill's pants down, which he promised not to do. You don't pull God's pants down! And then he bashes my head against the floor so hard in the rape-murder scene I black out for a second. Bill yells at him backstage: "These are just stupid shows, you don't hurt people over stupid shows! What's your problem with women anyway?"

"For you it's stupid shows," Jean Louis says. "For me, it's my life. I know I'm old and stupid—you don't say me anything new. You're like a mosquito, say me these are stupid shows."

But the cork is out of Bill's throat, and he yells for about an hour straight, saying he doesn't want to hear Jean Louis's "philosophy shit"—he'd just better not ever hurt me again.

We adjourn to the people's apartment where we're staying, with one new member to our party: Lydia Zamm. She's a scenester, and a doctor's daughter, with long brown hair and long white legs. She looks like me, except younger. She, too, must be drawn to gross, intense, dangerous older men, because first she tried to make a record with GG Allin and now she's splayed across Jean Louis's lap with her pants down. He spanks her with slow, even slaps and she swivels her head to smile at me and Bill. Jean Louis looks unbearably sad.

I get up and go to the door. Why can't he just fucking grow up? "You can't go out," our hosts say, struggling to take their eyes off of Lydia's butt. "It's not even light yet. We're practically in Spanish Harlem, you know." Bill stands up to follow me, but I'm already gone.

Dingy, gray men are laying out books and clothes and battered shoes to sell on the sidewalks near all the subway exits. Other men are blinking, stumbling; Styrofoam cups in hand. Even the dawn is gray. I see a headless chicken in the gutter, among the trash and broken glass. Gutted cars. Harlem is all skeleton, no skin. It alarms and invigorates me, and I lope down the treeless streets feeling peeled open. Feeling humiliated—like everyone can see that I am turning into something polite and seashell-coloured, that I've broken some tacit promise I made to Jean Louis, or maybe to an entire movement: I can't be eighteen any more.

Upon my return, I see Jean Louis in the doorway. "You would

not quit all this success just because some fights between you and me," he says, thrusting himself out of a shadow. "I don't believe that. Look how you act when they throw us bottles and cue balls in Minneapolis. You become possessed, mad—even more than me. Remember at the Le Pen rally, how you yelled, and fought an army with one rolled-up newspaper? Us, fights is the life. You can't give that up, I know you. You're firing me because you have some plot."

"For the thousandth time, I'm not firing you," I say. "All I said was I'm not doing another tour after this one."

"You have some plot," Jean Louis insists. "You want to put me in jail, for your legend. You have some cops wait me next show in Connecticut. You say, 'Check the passport of the French frog, Mr. Cop, please.' Anyway, I don't mind. You can't do these shows without me. Without me, you are nothing. You'll have to do something different. Like folk." Seeing that he's hit upon my worst fear, he drags it out and spits on it. "Folk," he says with great satisfaction. "Hm, yes. Hah! Hah!"

I feel like killing and raping him. I never feel like this with Bill, which makes me think our love must be less real—might even be folk love! The emotions were more powerful with Jean Louis, but with Bill I actually became powerful. I became a writer. I untangled things that before tied me down. I can ignore Bill for days at a time—for weeks, even!—while I concentrate on something. There's no ignoring Jean Louis. I

was so caught up in him when I was with him that I couldn't see anything. It was only when I read back my own words about him—that I could write because of my quieter life with Bill—that I finally understood how deeply, how messily and uncontrollably, I loved Jean Louis. But it's too late. I've made my choice. Not Bill over Jean Louis; I chose writing. Fights can't be my life any more.

I don't exactly think those thoughts in response to Jean Louis's "folk" assault, but it's there on my face—that I'm calm, that I have something he doesn't know about.

"Watch your face, eh?" he says, his hand raised.

And then, contrary to everything I've been telling myself, I'm back in it. "Go ahead," I yell. "Hit me. I want you to! Then I'll stab you while you sleep. I'll go to France and burn your house down!"

"I will burn it down before you can! I don't care anything, me! I will beat you down!"

He moves, and I see Bill behind him, and my stomach drops. It's like Bill caught us having sex, only worse. Bill has my coat in his hands. He must've come out here to find me, and wrap me in it. The three of us go back upstairs, where Lydia Zamm is adjusting her clothes and make-up. "We better leave," I say, not looking at anyone. "We have to pack everything up, get to Connecticut, unload…." I keep talking, saying things everyone knows already.

"I'll see you later, then?" I hear Lydia murmur to Jean Louis.

How will he see her later, I wonder? We're heading north for more shows, and then Jean Louis has a flight to catch.

Jean Louis is doing 35 m.p.h. on the Henry Hudson Expressway. Everyone is beeping. He mumbles that all this was a trick.

"Can you go a little faster?" I say.

"I warn you," he mutters, staring hard at the wheel. "I am going crazy and could do anything."

"What, like go back to Manhattan and stick your cock in Lydia Zamm?"

"Maybe, eh?" he says. "Maybe that is the only real thing in this shit-life, the finish. I waste my time."

And then he pulls over, takes his passport and his money, and gets out. I get out too, and stare at his walking-away back, dumbstruck. I never really left him. I just left France, and sort of fell into Bill. And now he's leaving me. "Hey, the promoter in Connecticut put a lot of money into advertising our show, eh!" I call after him. "I hope you're going to be the one to pay him back!" But not even the threat of losing a hundred dollars can stop him; he jumps the safety rail, looking small against the wall of high-rises.

Jean Louis is the one person who knows the part of me that is hard, and still loves me. Not even Rachel sees it—she doesn't want to. Rachel and Bill and maybe some others know some of my secrets, but only Jean Louis knows what's buried secret inside the secrets: some kernel of self-preservation, this

indestructible thing that can be any amount of cruel—that might even delight in being cruel. That will do anything it has to. Then, Where will he go without my protection? flashes in my brain. Until now, I thought only of what he is to me, not what I am to him. But I do protect him—simply by being capable of loving him, completely loving him, the lousy beast. I know he has these perverted affairs filled with magic totems and taboos getting broken, but his interactions with these girls are purely phantasmagorical. They use him to piss off their parents or society, or to have something good to put in their diaries at night. Who really loves and admires him, when there are no longer any witnesses to shock, when he isn't strong and weird and wrong—when he's just boring and tired and doubting, like everybody has to be sometimes? I don't know if there's even one other person on this earth who could do it. It almost feels like I should keep the job simply because the position is so specialized, and I have the training. Well, probably Anne feels that way about him, and maybe others. Maybe everybody feels that about everyone they love. But I know there is something unique between us—something awful and complete, which neither he nor I could ever duplicate with others. We're too tired to, even if we did find some great new person—we've burnt down too much of each other; that stuff is gone. Remember too, another voice comes in to say, this is the guy who bashed your head and called women shit and then ruined the tour so he could

go screw one, and who tried to make you think things that weren't true, and who smells horrible. And is noisy like an ape, and—. I lurch toward the safety rail where he leapt over, but he's already disappeared, sucked into the city. I get back in the car. Bill and I look at each other, scared.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Bill and I break up over *Silence of the Lambs*. The way Lecter barely just touches Clarisse through the bars of the jail and she rushes away from him but he's got her anyway, with his slow-acting poison of knowingness … that's the kind of relationship I realize I want. Or, if I can't have that, I'll take someone who could save me from wanting that. I meet, by mail, Dame Darcy's friend Seymour, a writer. Seymour neither is, nor defeats, Dr. Lecter. But he does say that he sees me in Lecter—that's how he gets me.

I follow Seymour—and Bill, since he doesn't know what else to do, follows me—to San Francisco, and then onto Guerneville, California: population 1,040. The rainy season lasts nine months and you can have an entire house for $600 a month, if it's a summer house on a dead end road after sum-

mer's over, with the muddy Russian River creeping up the rotting plank steps nailed irregularly into the rails running from your back porch down the bank to a submerged dock. Nine months of the year, Guerneville is dark and musty. Never completely dark—more sepia and misty and the air feels full of dreams and memories. It's hard to think straight, living in this town. One gets distracted in the mist. Raccoons trill from the dense redwood forest on either side of the crumbling tar road. They sound like doves cooing, except not the least bit calm. Oversized iridescent insects and birds flash like bits of rainbows through the fog. Things are coated with dark green moss—tree trunks, benches, walls. One time the river rises all the way up the stilts our house rests on, and I take a canoe into town.

Into the three-bedroom house we fit: Me, Dame Darcy, Seymour, Bill, and Bill's new girlfriend Cindy Dall. Day and night, everybody's working on projects. There's a whole lot of licking of stamps and sewing and strange visitors. The strangest is Darcy's moralistic Mormon friend with whom she went to high school, who walks around in just his Fruit of the Looms, flexing and telling us how we're living in sin in this "art colony" in the middle of a gay resort town.

Seemingly the entire population of Guerneville's stray cats has sought shelter from the rains in our house. They fight all the time and do uncivilized things like tear open the English muffins and take one bite out of each one. Seymour accuses

Darcy of the English muffin thing, and I do think she might have done it—she tends to do odd things late at night while the rest of us sleep. But to keep peace I pretend to agree with the rest of the household that it must have been the cats.

All the houses on Center Way are empty now except the one on the end, where a scrawny woman, her drunken husband, and their seven, blond children never seem to come out. And of course we have no friends around here, so we're all surprised when one night there's a knock on the door. It's a red-faced, bleary-eyed older man asking to speak to "thuh striped tights." I figure he means Darcy, and yell to her that she has a caller. The man wants to invite Darcy to a birthing!

"Oh," says Darcy. "That's nice. A birth of what?"

"Birth of what?" He punches his chest and falls down one step off our porch. "Only the significantest example of human supremeness: a human child."

"I'm busy," Darcy tells him. "Go away."

With dignity, the man turns to leave, but Cindy and I chase after him. "Can we watch the birthing?"

Not only does he tell us we can come, he also offers us a swig off his can of Wildman Brew. I politely pretend to take a sip, my finger covering the rim; Cindy really does guzzle it. We walk to the house at the end of Center Way. The door is marked "Do Not Disturb. Go Away. We Are Serious." Our guide knocks on the door and says, "Ladies! Ladies! Ladies first!" and pushes Cindy and me ahead into the doorway. The

door opens and we see a calm family of nine blonds watching TV.

"Can't read, huh, Richard?" says a little girl sitting on the floor.

"Rita's already been born, Richard," the dad says. "She's eight now."

I learn the story later from a couple of roofers who return to the house across the street from us. For the last eight years, every time Richard gets wasted he believes Rita's being born. When Rita really was being born, Richard was supposed to go pick up her mother and drive her to the hospital, but he got drunk and forgot.

Cindy Dall is dark to the light side of Darcy. Darcy is blonde and pale-eyed and milky-white all over, Victorian—always covered from neck to wrists to ankles, and vegetarian; Cindy has dark eyes and hair and greenish skin—like one of Matisse's naked lovers. She loves to eat meat and let the blood drip. She wears Daisy Dukes and high heels and little T-shirts with flower decals on them, or skintight jeans tucked into skintight boots with chequered shirts and blazers that are also skintight, and show off her dècolletage. Darcy is a preschool teacher and though she has five or six fiances who take her on dates every night of the week, it's still proper if she's sleeping with all these men because they are all her fiances. And while seemingly every person I meet has something bad and bitter

to say about Darcy—she's a liar, a thief, a user, a cheat—still she does not believe in gossiping, and never once has an ugly word to say about anyone. Cindy, however, believes in saying every ugly word that comes into her mind, for health and honesty. She relishes it. Darcy moves as little as possible. For her, exercise is falling, drunk on champagne, into a ditch after visiting a jazz show or an art opening. Cindy goes to the gym for a really long time every single day. She is powerful in her legs and her mouth and her mind. I am completely under her spell.

Darcy's drawings have a lot of blood and injury, but there's a magical, fairy tale quality to everything that happens in them. A girl's throat is slit, but she lives on, bleeding eternally. Messages come out of her throat on slips of paper when she tilts her head back, like a Pez candy dispenser. In one of Darcy's portraits of me, I'm cutting my rib flesh open while floating in a sea of white. Enlarged, intricate snowflakes that look like beaded Christmas ornaments surround me. My blood is black and my heart, visible between my cute, naked, twin, nippled knives aiming north (that's the way Darcy draws breasts), is literally on fire. She makes slicing one's flesh looks like both the most glamorous and the most romantic thing anyone could ever do. Her drawings are like her bedroom, where she puts pink silk over the lamps and then lounges strategically, so it looks like she's inside a seashell.

Cindy, on the other hand, removes the frosted globe from

the hanging 75-watt light bulb in her and Bill's room. She likes the long shadows and sharp contrasts. In the brutal photo shoots she does for *Rollerderby*, nothing is romantic or magical. She does a take on the famous Cindy Crawford perfume ad, where she's naked in a pure black background and it says "Cindy in her Halston." Cindy Dall, who looks a lot like Cindy Crawford, takes the same pose, except she has a professional make-up artist give her cuts and bruises and blood clogging her fake broken nose. The results are disturbing and depressing and yet oddly, guilt-inducingly, sexual. There's a sense of urgency and, at the same time, suppression. In another photo series, she arranges to have an older, bearded friend lay his hand on her fourteen-year-old sister, who is wearing only polka dot underwear and a T-shirt, in the sister's real, Pooh Bear and shooting stars themed bedroom. The sister looks away. In the next photo, Cindy, dressed as the mother in a hideous blond wig and sweatpants, sits on the same bed, a laundry basket at her feet. She sniffs the crotch of the polka dot underwear, with that same faraway look her "daughter" had in the last shot.

Cindy strings plastic flowers along the living room walls like in an Indian restaurant and hangs dolls from the ceiling beams. She decorates the whole house and Bill's car, and has beliefs about how others need to dress. For me, a house is just a place to sleep and a car is a way to get from one place to another and clothes are mainly to keep you from freezing to

death. Cindy tells me it's a crime to think like that—it hurts other people's eyes. She and I stay up arguing all night long, while Bill and Seymour stay in their rooms with the doors closed, coughing grumpily. Even though Cindy is younger than me, she is the more persuasive arguer. She can remember statistics and is more certain of her beliefs. She and I lean into each other on the saggy couch that came with the house, tussling over the value of fresh flowers, and what to do about lawbreakers, and Boyd Rice—Cindy's idol. I listened to his industrial albums at Andrew's apartment years earlier, and read about his pranks—such as handing a goat's head to Mrs. Ford, the president's wife—in ReSearch and Forced Exposure. Everything about Mr. Rice is a possible prank. Is he a magister in the Church of Satan just to annoy? Did he pose in full Nazi regalia in his black and red basement in Denver just to make people question their own perceptions? He certainly does not seem like a regular devil-worshiping anti-Semite, with his sense of humour and experimentation and love of Disneyworld, Barbie, Peggy March, Olivia Newton-John, The Partridge Family and Bobby Sherman (music and lunchboxes). But I have no room for open-mindedness on the subject of Boyd—I'm pushed against the wall by these late night, round-and-round arguments with a girl whose mind is even more bendy-stretchy than mine, yet has a more solid foundation as well.

I don't sit on the couch any more—I feel like it's sucking

me down. On the straightback chair, I make my decision: Boyd Rice is just a bad man. "What's so funny or daring about posing as a Nazi?" I cry. "The Sex Pistols wore swastikas a decade before Boyd Rice did. Punks in little New Hampshire were wearing them in 1986."

"But we're not arguing about the Sex Pistols, are we?" Cindy replies, calm and cool and with shoes and hair much better than mine. "He's somehow pushed it beyond them … he's pushing us. Maybe he is a neo-Nazi and it's as simple as that. I don't think anything about Boyd Rice is simple though, or accidentally explosive like the Sex Pistols were. I think Boyd Rice is deliberate; I think he is conducting a social experiment on a grand scale. He does things and then watches to see how people react. He might be inhuman—as in, a sociopath. Interested only in his own amusement. He tries to provoke a response, and he's getting one right now, from us."

My jaw hurts. "A subtle intelligence is a gift. Using it to manipulate, for power rather than truth, is plain wrong. You shouldn't be infatuated with people like that."

"I don't care if he chooses power over truth," Cindy says.

I get up, pushing my chair back so abruptly it falls to the floor. I can't breathe. "I'm going," I hiss, "to bed!"

What's wrong with me? Am I in love with Cindy?

* * *

I do some more research. "He sleeps in a coffin," I burst out of my bedroom in triumph to inform Cindy. "How old is this guy? That's like something a twelve-year-old boy would think is cool!"

"Yeah, a lot of things about Boyd are things a twelve-year-old boy would think are cool," Cindy responds smoothly. "But twelve year olds aren't allowed to actualise their fantasies. And once they grow up and could make them come true, it's not that they've lost interest—it's that they don't have the balls. They're too afraid someone like you might make fun of them. Yeah, I knew about that coffin. Someone asked him once if it was 'big enough.' He said, 'Yeah—just big enough for two.'"

I try not to picture that.

I don't care about anyone with plain old power—like a businessman. And I don't want the people whose whole identities come from not wanting power—slackers. What makes my heart race is someone interested in exploring the definition of power. Is that what Boyd does? Or is he a plain old misogynist/racist? Is it possible, in this day and age, to be highly intelligent and highly ignorant at the same time? Maybe with Boyd, there is no answer underneath the questions. Maybe he's neither intelligent nor ignorant, neither racist nor anti-racist; maybe Cindy's right, and he's just laughing at us all. Laughing from his tight little velvet-sheeted coffin.

* * *

It's still raining. One day equals a month here. One hour lasts for days. Seymour and Bill suffer weird ailments of the throat, foot, and digestive track, but won't go to the doctor. There's no doctor in Guerneville anyway—they'd have to take the bus. Darcy claims a ghost threw a plate at her. She exhibits the broken plate as evidence. I write Boyd a secret letter: "You are a bad man." That's the whole letter. I tuck it away. These rains bring out the dead end gestures in us all.

Cindy, who is making music and writing now too, doesn't know why I get so much fan mail every day, and why articles about me keep appearing in newspapers and magazines. Her friends, she tells me as I read the morning's mail at the kitchen table, laugh with derision at *Rollerderby*; they find it "slaphappy."

"I have to start protecting myself against you" she says, putting a red apron on and scrubbing the already-clean stove. "And if you don't want to protect yourself, that's your business."

"What do you mean by that?" I ask.

"I mean that you think you're so infinite. Everyone thinks they're infinite, and love is infinite, but they're not, and it's not. I know that I'm very finite. Sometimes"—she drops the last iron burner back in place with a satisfying snap—"morality is a luxury."

"Now I really don't know what you mean!"

"I mean I want credit for thoughts or opinions you express

publicly that you got out of arguments with me. They're my intellectual property, and since there's no more free land, aesthetic turf is all we have left to call our own. Because you're more famous than me right now, you can completely co-opt my ideas, and no one would know."

"But thoughts don't belong to anyone!" I protest. "Someone else had every one of your thoughts before you did. They're like old tools floating through the air and anyone can snatch one to use on their idea-houses—add something on or knock a wall down. I don't care at all when someone uses one of my thoughts—I feel happy! I feel connected to the humans. Anyway, by the time someone uses one of my thoughts, I'm probably not even thinking that way any more!"

"That's what I mean about how you have no borders, you think you're infinite." Besides the red apron, she wears a man's crisp, white shirt, stockings, and no pants. Her hair is in big curlers. Because Cindy is so sexually vibrant—almost physically vibrating—and so harsh in her thinking, it always feels when I'm in the same room with her that she must be right, no matter what she says. Even though I just now automatically defended myself, I'm already starting to think along her lines: that I'm some sort of gelatinous worm thief burrowing all through her aesthetic turf. I'm completely grossed out by my own image.

Cindy takes the apron off, folds it, places it back in the drawer. She starts to leave the kitchen, then turns back to face

me. "One more thing: Go get your own idol. Boyd's mine. He has been since I was thirteen."

I just sit there, wormy. I don't point out that her boyfriend Bill was once very much mine, and I never accused her of "stealing" him. At last I understand. Cindy wants to copyright even the past and the future. I once walked in on her pouring greedily over old photographs of Bill and me. I knew she was trying to discern the ways in which he and I were close—measuring them against her ways with him, making sure her present ownership completely cancelled out my past hold on Bill. Things have to be all hers. I've never required anything to be mine. I just move through things, and people.

I'm hurt. I really cared about her in my own stilted way. Neither Cindy nor I have normal friendships; we have obsessions. Well, if she wants to now turn our obsession with each other into a competition, I will enter into it. I march right down Center Way in the rain clutching my letter to Boyd. Cindy has written many letters to him, surely more compelling than my one-liner. But she throws them all away. She argues herself out of anything she's working on, halfway through. As I stand there in the downpour and pull the mailbox open and drop my letter down the hole, I think about how Cindy is more beautiful, intelligent and intricate than me, but still I have the winning point: Whatever I do, even when I'm wrong, I go all the way.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Boyd doesn't write back, and that makes him even more intriguing. I call people up and say, "What do you think of Boyd Rice?" They say, "I think he's a Nazi." I say, "I think he is too. I hate him." Rachel thinks I'm just tired of malleable boyfriends, and asks if Boyd wears boots. I don't know about the boots—I've never even seen him! I decide to interview him for *Rollerderby*.

He's in a hotel in Las Vegas when I call the number his music company gave me. He's shooting a music video for his new pop song "Big Red Balloon"—a total switch from his usual noise music. He talks for a couple of minutes about going up in the hot-air balloon, and then someone is calling his name and he has to go. With the empty phone in my hand, I feel like I've been singed by action. I got shot by a stream of hot air

from that big balloon's takeoff. It's so exciting, that he's in Las Vegas, that he's in a dusty hotel room in an artificial city built onto a desert, that he took such a radical departure from his familiar style, that he actually floated away for a video instead of just feeling like he was floating.

I want action too. I break up with Seymour and leave Guerneville for San Francisco with Bill and Cindy. Darcy moves to New York to pursue acting. I give Boyd my new number. Just when I think he'll never call, he does, in the middle of the night. Bill answers, tells him I'm sleeping. "I'm on tour," Boyd barks. "I'm calling from Berlin. Put Lisa on the phone, now." Bill is shocked; he hesitates. Boyd keeps a steely silence, and Bill brings me the phone. Bill doesn't tell me about that until days later. It's hard for me to picture; his voice is always so warm and laughing. He sends me kitten post cards and always has funny little stories.

After I publish my interview with Boyd, his victims seek me out to warn me—by phone, by mail, and in person. One thin, balding, young vegetarian named Neil travels across town to tell me that Boyd is a "sex monster" and a "force of darkness and evil," and says that he broke up with a friend of Neil's (breaking her heart) just because she criticized his beard one time.

"He has a beard?" I squeak.

I can't believe people use these phrases outside of paperbacks. "Sex monster." "Force of darkness." I wonder what Boyd has

done to deserve such gossip. Whatever it is, I want in!

Boyd in turn tells me some of the opinions his acquaintances have shared about me. I'm a cockroach for what I've done on stage and how I've influenced the young people to talk about their pathetic personal lives in fanzines, and one—a skinhead—says I should be annihilated!

I say, "Oh!"

I love that Boyd has both holocaust revisionists and practicing Jews as friends. He is totally outside of the regular liberal underground, yet he has not taken refuge in a simplistic and predictable above-ground right wing ethos, either. GG died the other night, bloated, at a party. An overdose. It seemed an accidental death of a man who had run out of ideas. Boyd has a lot of ideas. I just don't know what they are. Mostly we joke, and refer veiledly—to what, I'm not sure. It feels like there's an inner circle, and once I'm in it, there will be so much for him to tell me.

I'm not sure of the nature of his interest in me. Cindy tells me Boyd is just a friendly guy and he'll talk to anyone. Then one night he's telling me how much I'd love the thrift stores in Denver, and even though I don't care a whit about shopping I say Oh yes I would love to go shopping there, so he says Why don't you?

Seeing him waiting for me as I get off the train, I think, I hope he doesn't crush me! He's big. Tall, broad. Big eyes in a big face. A big walk. I think, He might be the one to make

my awful dreams come true. Even the thoughts he sparks are extra-large.

He opens the car door for me. Rifling through the glove compartment while he buys gum, I find out it's his mother's car. We're staying at his rich, absent friend's house. Is he purposely leaving no traces of himself? What is he trying to hide, that he can't share with *Rollerderby*'s ten thousand readers?

Boyd plays the friend's Hawai'ian records for me, rents *That Darn Cat*, and has sex with me all over the friend's bed, and floor, and across the walls too. We go to thrift stores, he cops feels in the dusty back. I buy a furry little purse. It's like a vagina on a chain. I buy shimmery blue eyeshadow. I feel girly, underneath the weight of him. He explains to me how things really work in this world, and I listen. Like weightlifting—it's the last honest frontier. People are too caught up in their philosophies, he says, which are only strings of words meant to either excuse or obscure instincts, which simply are. But muscles can't lie. No argument can pull a muscle from fat. There's fifty reps a day, or not. No in-between, no around-the-way.

He tells me where his trouble with girls comes from, why they all get so mad at him. He laughs embarrassedly. "It makes me sound like an egomaniac to say it, but it's just the way things keep going: They recognize something in me that makes them want to be submissive, but then they start arguing with their instincts. That's the affliction of the age—people

want something to submit to, they want something to be loyal to, yet they have these intellectual conceits that just won't allow them to do that. The pontificators of our era convince them that submissiveness is weak."

"It's not?" I ask.

"No—it's simply the other half of the equation. As long as you're acting in accord with your nature, instead of putting up interference, you will be strong."

"I'd love to be submissive," I say wistfully. "It looks so sexy—all supple and pliant. But I'm just not."

"See that guy there?" We're in a cafeteria. Boyd points to a solitary diner. "Go take a bite out of his sandwich."

I get up, look the guy in the eye, and bite his sandwich. It's ham and cheese. "It was a dare," I whisper. The guy drawls oka-a-ay. He is amused.

"You're submissive," Boyd says when I re-take my seat. "Who said you aren't?"

It's fun. It's like being in school again, only this time the homework is crazy—and so is the teacher.

On my last night in Denver, we stop by Boyd's basement apartment to pick up something. The stairs leading from the street to his front door are unlit, and aren't visible from the street. They're the perfect stairs for homeless people to smoke crack on, and judging by the litter, they do. Boyd says he has a place in this section of town because that way he gets nine-plus rooms. The building was a girl's school a hundred years ago,

and it's about half-a-block long, and he has the entire, endless basement to himself. He likes to live alone in nine rooms, with all his stuff and his privacy. Speaking of privacy, he says he wants me to wait outside. I say I'm cold. I promise to stay in the foyer. He lets me into the foyer but reminds me not to go any further, and he goes to get the item out of a back room. I can spy some black velvet toreador paintings in the living room—the moment of death … one the bull's, the other the matador's. I see a cement wall carving, like you would find on a fountain downtown, of Bacchus surrounded by grapes. It's about five feet by four. Back when this was a school, a girl hung herself from one of these pipes.

I don't hear anything, and decide to go for it: I run lickety split through Boyd's all black-and-red basement like Thing One or Thing Two, fearing Boyd's wrath should he catch me, but driven on by sheer nosiness. Each room is filthy and cluttered. In the kitchen, on the Formica '50s table, I see the giant, almost-empty plastic bottle of protein powder. It's the size of a grown man's thigh! It claims you can convert fat to muscle without exercising, if you eat enough of this stuff. So there is a way around the fifty reps!

I hear a creak, and run back. Boyd comes up to me, looks angry. He suspects. I try to control my breathing, smile engagingly. "Are you sure I can't come in?" I say in a voice both childlike and sexual. "If I'm going to be staying here next time, I need to see how much cleaning there is to be done!"

* * *

Back in San Francisco, I allow myself to remember the way Boyd stared at me—with such concentration, as if he were creating me—and I have to sit down.

Chapter Twenty-Four

"Have you asked yourself what he's really saying, when he says these things?" says Gary, my Friday night bowling and sushi partner. We're waiting for the man to bring us our red and blue bowling shoes.

"He's saying that different people have different natures, and the thing to do is find out what your nature is, and be it, and then things will be cool."

"He's saying," Gary enunciates carefully, "that most people, and all women, are followers, and 'following their nature' means they simply need to accept that they're bugs for Boyd Rice to step on!"

"No he does not say that!"

"Right. He doesn't say anything, Lisa! Don't be so stupid! Listen to the guy. He uses these mystical phrases, like 'follow

your instincts' and 'fun is the law,' meant to infiltrate your brain, and prepare you for indoctrinisation!"

"Honestly, Gary, I don't think Boyd cares enough about people to spend all that time preparing them for anything."

Gary doesn't understand. No one does. Boyd is a great identity dance partner. He and I are human chess pieces. I act like a submissive girl, and he responds as if I am. Nobody wants to be the bad guy, because then everybody hates you. But if you want a complicated psychodrama, somebody has to play that role—and Boyd, for some reason, is willing. And he's so good at it. He never lets on that it's a game.

Or … maybe Gary does understand. Maybe Boyd is infiltrating my brain, preparing me for indoctrinisation, and I like it—I like the care he takes with me. Maybe I've finally found my Hannibal Lecter.

I have a dream that my mother is the world's Monopoly champ and she's on the cover of a 7-inch record, gloating over a Monopoly board where she owns everything except for Marvin Gardens. Upon awakening, I call her up and ask if she'll do it—write and record a song about being the Monopoly Queen—and she says yes. I call Boyd, ask if he'd like to do a duet with my mother for the other side. Then I call Sub Pop, who put out Nirvana's first album. The president Bruce Pavitt is really excited about it. He calls back—his staff is in mutiny, he says, because my mother is in her fifties, and sing-

ing about Monopoly is just weird, and they also think Boyd Rice is a Nazi and they don't want to be associated with any of that—not old people or Nazis. Or Monopoly! So, Bruce says, I better record it fast. Michael Cudahy, of Urge Overkill and Combustible Edison, agrees to do the music. I ask Boyd to fly to San Francisco—I'll get Sub Pop to pay for his ticket. And then we'll drive across country—picking up Michael in Rhode Island—and record with my mom at the end of our trip, in New Hampshire. Rachel and Melissa Jasper and I will be the backup singers.

We go, and the record comes out perfect in one take. Dreams do come true!

"I'm pregnant." I say it in the bathroom. Cindy is perched on the side of the tub, applying her make-up in a round, handheld mirror; I'm applying mine in the mirror over the sink.

She puts down her mirror and eyeliner. "How far along are you?"

"Just two months."

"You can still get an abortion."

"We planned this baby! I want this baby!"

"People always want a baby, until it's around seven. They like babies as long as they can dress them up, but then when the kid gets its own will and it's not so cute any more, they start hating it. Look around if you don't believe me. No one

will say it, but it's true. How long have you actually been in this guy's presence—not just on the phone?"

I add it up. About twenty days. But with some things, you know right away.

"I don't want you hanging around Cindy any more," Boyd says. I'm back in Denver. We're doing paint-by-numbers at his kitchen table, but using the wrong colours—dark green for the areas that call for pink, white instead of black, and the horses emerging on our canvases have demented looks in their purple eyes. Boyd checked the directions carefully before he'd let me, pregnant, be around open vials of paint. "She's not worthy of you. Not Gary either. None of those San Francisco people are. That's why I left five years ago. They're no-fun-niks!"

I don't tell him what Rachel said, because, in the role he's playing now, he'd have to forbid me from seeing her, too! "Boyd was supposed to be a transitional thing," she said. "The other extreme of Bill. Someone to let you finally live out your father thing and get over it. He smells of alcohol, Leese. The kind that seeps out of your pores even after a bath."

"He was on vacation when you met him, Rache," I said. "He drinks a lot when he's on vacation." Actually, though, I smell it on him all the time. I attribute it to it always being vacation time when we see each other, and the increased olfactory powers all pregnant women have. That seems like dumb

thinking, once I spell it out to myself. But that's the only kind of thinking I'm doing these days. Love and pregnancy work together to dull me, to make not only my body lay down, but my brain as well. One minute I feel as if Boyd is my puppet, and I'm pulling his strings that make him pull my strings. The next, I feel that he's utterly, dangerously out of my control. It takes my breath away. At the crafts store this morning, I told him to get his hand out from under my skirt. I didn't want to give the old lady crafters heart attacks! Boyd removed his hand, but he said, "Don't ever say no to me again." I laughed, and he said, "I'm not joking."

There is something else, though. I tell Boyd what Neil said: That Boyd lies, that Boyd already has a child, whom he's never seen.

Boyd explains everything. That girl who got pregnant, she was an heiress. She wanted a baby and used him. She thought Boyd was good stock. She invited him over and made him have sex thirteen times in twenty-four hours; she claimed to be on the pill. He takes my face in his hands. "You're my little girl. I'm going to take care of you."

He takes me into the room with the futon mattress—I'm still not allowed in his bedroom—and tells me to take all my clothes off. He goes out. He returns with some rope and a tasselled flogger. I bet I know what he thinks he's doing—banging any vestiges of doubt about him out of me. He grunts and takes his time making the knots right.

Boyd's rather unimaginative sadism used to embarrass me, but then he explained, using words like Weltanschauung and … and all those other words, the ones I can never remember later but they're so convincing at the time. They turned his master and servant sex games into philosophy. Something about archetypes (which other people call clichés) always being stronger, more pure, than when people branch out on purpose, veer away from our inclinations just to be "unique" (that word said with a sneer). With Rachel and Jean Louis and Bill, we found our own way. Jean Louis assaulted me with orange juice! But we were indeed veering. We were in tributaries of our own making, which could never feel huge or ancient, because they would never join the main, rushing river. When Boyd ties my wrists and ankles and then ties the rope under the futon, I feel like I'm drowning, and I feel like I'm coming home.

And then I'm on the ceiling looking down and I love how I look, pregnant and tired and tied down and blonde. Boyd's beer sweat drips onto my forehead. There's something luxurious, something southern to it all. It should be muggy; there should be purple orchids.

I jerk upright—well as much as a hog-tied person can. I think I fell asleep! He sees how exhausted I am, but he doesn't ask if I want to stop what we're doing. There is no kindness between us—not in bed or out. He and I know what is what in this world, and we aren't coddling to each other. We do

not condescend. Sex with him, talking with him—all of it—is like sitting back down at the poker table with my father, how it always felt right to lose to him. He'd take my very last nickel, every single time. His lack of pity or consideration or awareness that I was a child felt like respect. I've never been able to duplicate that till now, with Boyd. Except this time, I have power—to make more money, to make babies, to make men love me. I'm so powerful, I can throw my power away if I want. I can lay here beneath Boyd or the ghost of my father and just watch it happen. And someday, I know somewhere inside me, I'm going to write about it—portray them from underneath, where they are exposed. I don't feel the hate, but I know it's there—this pulsing, cold rage and a desire to do to someone else worse than anything that's ever been done to me. I mean, I recognize the hatred—I identify that as what's inside me, pushing me forward, but I don't feel it at all. What this feels like is love.

Those are the thoughts I have while Boyd keeps pumping, and I turn my adoring eyes on him and think how he has no idea what's in my brain.

He reaches for the flogger.

I see my baby on the sonogram, his heart beating crazily—like a waving worm, or Gene Simmons's tongue. He's sucking all my energy into forming his little, perfect body. I barely work on *Rollerderby* any more. I hire a couple of teen-

agers to run the fifteenth issue. I love how all my choices are ordained by the eight-inch swimming boy. I can't drink coffee or alcohol or abstain from vegetables any more. In pictures of mothers with new babies, you see a lot of the tops of their (the mothers') heads, because they're looking down at their baby all the time. It's as if they've lost their face, for a while. I want that. I've always enjoyed sacrificing myself, my decisions, because it feels like I'm escaping myself. That's why I loved prostitution so much—I was someone else all the time. But I didn't love my clients. I love my crazy baby who kicks me hello night and day. "I will be your yesterday," I tell him in the dark in my San Francisco room. "You are my tomorrow." I don't know how I'll be a mom, change myself into that. I've always been such a daughter. Daughters are fucked up. But already the baby is helping me—helping me turn into someone who can help him. I'm becoming so clean.

That's how I feel, lying half-awake, half-thinking, in my room that I leave mostly just to go get food, or to see the midwife. But my dreams are getting dirtier, and in them I'm more trapped, and more vicious, every day.

Soon Boyd will fetch me, and take me to his red and black basement where the young girl died a hundred years ago. He says he bought me a canopy bed. I wanted one of those all my life. He says I'm going to be spending a lot of time in it. At that, I let my hair fall down over the phone to cover my shy smile that feels much younger than a twenty-five year old's. I start to pack.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Anton LaVey is founder of the Church of Satan, but likes to be called "the Doctor." Boyd and I are here in his dark Victorian mansion—a shadow between two similar, but pastel-coloured, Victorian houses on a steep San Franciscan hill. Blanche Barton, Anton's bright blonde secretary and mistress, leans over to give us one sugar cookie each, saying, "The Doctor likes these." She's around thirty years old (to Anton's sixty-five!), sexy and blowsy. Blanche has put on thirty pounds at Anton's request since her arrival some years before, and her boobs keep falling out of her silky dress. The Doctor likes those.

I, too, have put on thirty pounds—in the last few days, it seems! I'm completely fat and blotchy and somehow my bum bones grind against anything I sit on, despite the thick layer of blubber newly deposited upon them. I'm in the final, hungry stage of pregnancy—the one where you have to pack

a snack for the twenty-minute drive to the restaurant. But Boyd wanted to visit Anton, and I trundled after him, despite everything in the world annoying me these days.

Already I can't stand Anton—the way his sailor's cap is set at a jaunty angle, the way Tony the silent manservant hovers at his shoulder like a human epaulet. He sits on a velvet, throne-like chair beneath an enormous, gold-framed portrait of an Edwardian youth in ruffles with advanced haemophilia. At the moment, that boy is the person I most identify with in the room. I can't take Boyd's little smile that he tries to hide, his gratefulness at Anton's overblown words of praise. More and more words. Except for the solitary cookie, no sustenance cometh. When my stomach rumblings get too fierce, Anton drowns me out with his creepy keyboard. It's right there next to his chair, so he doesn't even have to move to start playing it. He performs old tunes like "Gloomy Sunday," talking between songs about olden days, when he was an organ player in a burlesque club, when he was in movies, and a carny, and a crime photographer, and about his pet lion Togar, and how the term "bombastic" is used pejoratively, but bombast just might be what the world needs now…

I'm roused, snorting and blinking, from what must have been slumber, and asked to descend many stairs to a secret chamber where Anton keeps his mannequins. They wear sequins and lipstick. Anton is fond of changing their clothes and dragging them around the house. He explains that people

are either wolves or sheep, and mannequins will reflect their owner's wolfdom or sheepdom and therefore his mannequins are cooler and more interesting conversationalists and sex partners (!) than most real people. He peppers his talk with references to the famous people who have been to the mansion before—Jayne Mansfield, Marilyn Monroe, Kenneth Anger—and I must admit the magic of their names adds some validity to his ideas. So does Blanche. She administers to every need of both Anton and Xerxes, their pale little son, seamlessly, almost slyly. At the end of each of Anton's long, strange theories, Blanche sums it up perfectly in one plausible-sounding sentence that always begins with "The Doctor has always said..."

Blanche announces that we will adjourn to the kitchen. Yay! Alas, the kitchen does not seem to be functional. A stuffed, snarling cat crouches eternally on the crowded Formica table at which we sit. It used to be Anton's pet. Blanche catches my strange look. "The Doctor loved it so, he needed to keep it near him," she explains.

Even at this late hour, and with a dead cat in my face, I still have hope that dinner will be served. But Anton just sits there in his cape and his sailor cap, giving us nothing to chew on but theories. I learn that DNA in sperm penetrates the recipient's brain and, over time, makes the lady start to look and think like the man who has been pumping her. "There is no waste in nature, the Doctor always says," Blanche confirms. Fluoride,

it would appear, has a similar seeping-in effect, and is part of a conspiracy foisted upon us by the American Dental Association. "Which is why we drink from a well," Blanche pipes in. She's nursed, burped and changed Xerxes right in front of us without interrupting Anton's flow in the least. Anton reveals the true function of pee next—the introduction of this topic has Tony the manservant nodding eagerly—but I can't follow because I fell asleep again. I do know the theme is similar to Anton's sperm and fluoride theories, though: mysterious (mostly liquid) forces are at work, penetrating flimsy boundaries of the human mind, and we can either throw a saddle on these forces and do the penetrating, or we can lay back, ignorant and trusting, and get fucked.

For Boyd's sake, since Anton is probably his best friend, I suggest we get the boys together, once Wolfgang is born. Blanche tells us that Xerxes, who is almost one, has never met another child before. Anton is allergic to the sun, so they keep Xerxes on a nocturnal schedule as well. "The Doctor feels that other children would be a bad influence, anyway."

"He liked you," Boyd says as we wait, shivering, in a glass vestibule for a trolley. "He thinks you're a good choice for me."

I found Anton to be a delirious, decrepit pervert, who is probably abusing his kid. And Blanche lets him. I keep my opinions to myself—but I feel revulsion at Boyd sounding

so pleased about that man's approval of me. I'm reminded of when Boyd and my father met, when we were in New Hampshire recording "Monopoly Queen."

Boyd and my father have nearly identical ages, heights, and mindsets. I could tell my father was appreciative. "You'll complete her training," I imagined him saying to Boyd with telepathy. And Boyd was communicating something along the lines of: "No, thank you, for doing such a fine job beginning the training. Lisa has a large capacity for being … convincible. And she has a great work ethic! Things are gonna work out fine." And then they probably silently added a bunch of stuff about DNA and sperm.

It was strange, seeing my father again, after years. The wind-reddened knuckles, the soft arm-fur. How he has to duck to come through doorframes. He's like a gargantuan, practically hairless, skinny monkey wearing a flapping bathrobe, laughing. His bright eyes and bendy body say: "I'm a daredevil. I'm outside the laws of acceptable behaviour. Are you, or are you one of them?"

"They have the same cold, blue eyes, your father and Boyd," Linda took me aside to say.

"The same as mine," I said.

"No—yours aren't cold."

That was probably the nicest thing Linda ever said to me.

My eyes are cold now, though—all of me is! I blow, and watch my breath swirl. "Is that trolley ever going to come?" I

crab. Boyd removes his leather trench coat and lays it over my shoulders. It's so heavy, it's like an anchor. Warm, too.

"I'm a lucky guy," he says, and the snow begins to fall.

I didn't know it could snow in San Francisco!

I was thinking of pitching an article on Anton to *Details*, but my research on Boyd's best friend is making me feel really uneasy about my move to Denver in a few days.

"My father loves animals and children," first daughter Karla LaVey claims. According to second daughter Zeena, though, Anton has starved and frozen their pets (a lion, a Doberman pinscher, a German shepherd), and "loved" them with fists, and a cattle prod, and planks of wood whacked across their furry faces. A police report documents that he beat and strangled unconscious Zeena's mom.

As for loving children—Anton especially loves the girl-children. One of his wives was seventeen, the other fifteen. Blanche was in her twenties when he got her—but someone in her twenties is like a teenager, when you're sixty. And rumour has it that Anton loved Zeena so much that her son Stanton, born when Zeena was fourteen, was both Anton's grandson and son. (I guess Anton believes his own "lineage of kings" spiel.) Officially, the kid is Nikolas Schrek's, a former leader in the Church of Satan. Nikolas shaved a widow's peak into his hair and at one time lived in caves.

Zeena is beautiful. Long, full, blonde, perfect hair; a defi-

ant look in her eyes in every photo. Never smiling. Boyd had Zeena for a girlfriend before me. He says she was a handful. She wouldn't leave the house even to pick up a carton of milk without full-face make-up, hair done, all the accoutrements.

Zeena loved her monster daddy. She was high priestess in his church from 1985 to 1990. She ran his affairs, lied for him. And then, for unknown reasons, she denounced him. Her "unfather," she started calling him. She formed her own religion, with Nikolas Schrek, called Order of the Werewolves. Zeena and Nikolas exposed Anton's lies about everything, from his gypsy heritage to his affair with Marilyn Monroe, in a piece called Legend and Reality. I came to admire him—just a little—upon reading that he wasn't smuggled as a teen into the ruins of postwar Germany to view films of top-secret rituals. The guy does have balls: He never tells little lies.

Zeena does not include in the report that her father seduced her. (She does assert, however, that he allowed her son to be molested by a family friend; I had to wonder if it was Tony the silent manservant, and shuddered.) But Zeena exhibits every attribute of a molested daughter, albeit in an exaggerated, Brothers Grimm version. She crows that she gains "energy lost by the orgasm of my male prey, while simultaneously planting ideas in his weakened state of mind that cause him to do my bidding." If you take out the fruitcake, raised-in-the-occult terminology, she's simply describing an attempt to turn things around. She still sees sex as power, as will-breaking,

because that's how it was introduced to her. Except she doesn't ever again want to be on the wrong side—the squashed side. Zeena's interest in "shape-shifting and invisibility" is further hallmarks of the abused. While it's happening, the little girl tells herself it's happening to someone else. That's when she learns how to shape-shift. She's someone else, she's in a movie, she's an animal, she's a fairy, she's adopted. Most of all, she's invisible.

The molested girl often eats her way into obesity in order to be left alone. When she doesn't do that, there's something truly alarming about her seductiveness. She's so jittery in her simultaneous need for escape and approval. She's lit up like a bug-zapper, and the men swarm her way. "They don't care if you're a man or a woman or if you're ninety," my own father said of his molested-as-children girlfriends. "They don't care if there's a funeral on. The party never stops." He once had sex with a depressed woman twenty-five times in five days, and then complained to me in front of her about the cost of the rubbers, as if she had tricked him into doing it. "We each of us pave our own road to hell," the desperate woman intoned. "Not me," my father chuckled. "Too much work! I'm a hitchhiker on someone else's road to hell."

Sadly for Zeena, the harder she strives to eradicate her father's sway over herself and others, the more she adds to his mystique. Her attacks create defenders. "Zeena should

be hung from a tree and used as a piñata," a musical group called Acheron suggests collectively in a magazine interview after her Legend and Reality is published. She had to go into hiding from one mentally ill Anton-fan with murder on his mind—and then Anton gave him her secret address!

Still, her quest is a valiant one: to destroy the one who destroyed her. This beautiful and nutty little girl tried to take on the monster in the arena of his choosing, using rules he invented. The irony is that the very energy with which she launched her war is what made his legend truly come alive, on a grander scale than Anton himself could ever have managed. Anton and Zeena's story is operatic. She has, in the end, destroyed nothing. Rather, she has created he who created her.

Chapter Twenty-Six

Rachel's been in a car accident. The phone call comes when I'm on my way out the door to meet my new, Denver midwife, who will probably be pulling the baby out of my body any day now, since Braxton Hicks have already begun. Boyd comes home very late each night, so drunk he speaks in tongues. And he's started making fun of me for little things. I can't take anything being wrong with Rachel.

Her mom is saying she skidded on some black ice and went into a pole. Her face busted open on the steering wheel. She might lose an eye. There may have been brain damage. There may be internal injury: She's shitting blood. She's in the hospital for now, but her parents hope to bring her to their house tomorrow or the next day. Rachel will call me as soon as she's feeling better, her mom says, and good luck with the baby.

Rachel calls the next day. "I really look weird," she says. "I look like Greg Golick!" He was the tomato-faced kid in high school who told everyone he had a threeway with us. She tells me that she hit the steering wheel so hard that both her eyes swelled shut, and her knees were smashed against the dashboard. She was blind and so cold and couldn't move her body, and it was two hours till someone happened by and found her there, crumpled up in her crumpled car.

I'm definitely in labour now, but they tell me it could last for days—they want it to last for days, as I'm only at thirty-eight weeks. They tell me to stay in bed, and don't come to the hospital until my contractions are regular and five minutes apart. I keep thinking of Rachel there by the side of the road with her broken face and her dangling legs, wondering if it's dark out and not knowing, because she can't see. I keep panicking, like I need to go get her now, pick her up myself and carry her to the hospital. I forget that Rachel's already in a hospital bed, and her family is there. Still I feel like Rachel's out there somewhere in the dark, calling out for someone to help her, and I keep standing up suddenly as if to go to her.

Boyd's mom is on the phone. I can hear her screechy voice even way over here on my too-narrow hospital bed that feels like I'm going to fall out of it. "I don't know what Lisa's complaining about. I didn't have any problem delivering you."

"It's been seven hours…" Boyd offers.

"You were delivered already, in seven hours," I hear her say.

Something's wrong. I don't know if I just know it or I heard someone say it. I've got the pain all concentrated in these seagulls circling a cliff over my head at the nude beach I used to go to with Linda. They're carrying my pain away. But I keep losing them, they fly out of range, and all the pain drops back down into me again.

"C'mon, you little brat, get out of there!" the nice-smelling nurse Eve says, touching my belly.

"Don't call him that—it's not his fault!" I say, but the words don't make it to my lips. "His name is Wolfgang."

It's been almost two days now. Boyd comes and goes, to the cafeteria and unknown other places. When he gets too near, the odour is like getting punched in the face. The doctor wanted to give me a C-section, but I begged him not to. I finally said okay to the drugs, though. I can't open my eyes to let them know I'm awake, but I hear everything they say. They're gathered at the foot of the bed. Other patients' nurses and doctors are ushered in to have a look. Something is definitely wrong.

* * *

They hand him to me—orange, small, fish-like. "I love you," I say, and fall back asleep.

A geneticist is here to see me. "We've taken your son away for observation. We want to run some tests," he explains. "We won't have the results for a few days. But the tapered fingers, the recessed chin, the low initial APGAR score, and the irregular heartbeat … Wolfgang appears to have a chromosomal deletion."

"When can I see him?" I ask.

Finally I have him, but he only cries and arches away from me. He's trying to get away. He won't nurse. I pace with him on my legs that feel broken, and sing every song I know, and he just tries to get away.

Boyd tries. He bends his enormous head over the tiny, blanketed, angry thing in his arms; he tries singing, he tries reasoning with him.

He looks up, looks at me, his big, cold, blue eyes filled with helplessness.

"I love him so much," he says, and then the helplessness turns liquid and runs down his face.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

On the other side of the swinging doors, in Surgery, death is leapfrogging across the wheeled beds. Every time someone else's child makes it, you wonder irrationally if your own child's odds have been lowered.

For Wolf's second open-heart surgery, Boyd and I decide to wait at home. We lay on the bed with four streams of tears running into our ears and the phone not ringing. "I just want him to be okay," I say. "He doesn't have to be perfect." We have our worn-out phrases that we pull out each time he's in danger; we worry our phrases like blankies.

"I know," Boyd says. "Me too."

Some hours later, they call and we go to him. His eyes are puffy; there are blood-caked draining tubes coming out of his chest, his nostrils, his bellybutton, his penis. He's cuffed

spread eagle so that he won't jostle anything. A huge oxygen hose is taped into his mouth. IVs and sensor wires crisscross, attached with bandages to his fingers and toes and other, seemingly random, places. He takes up about one square foot of the giant hospital bed—a tiny, round spider pod body with eighty sprawling tube-legs.

In a way, I comment, he looks healthier; looks like he's put on some weight in the last few hours. The nurse explains that his whole body is swelling up. I smile as she talks; I nod. I won't remember any of this, two days from now. All I will know will come from a photograph I took of him, which I won't remember taking. That first time that he was screaming in pain and they wouldn't let me hold him, and he was hungry but they wouldn't let me feed him, there was an explosion of fury and pain inside me like I never felt before. I thought that I might kill those doctors and nurses, that I could kill God himself. It was a prehistoric rage that didn't fit inside my body and it was going to rip me open, but instead I stayed very still and calm and nodding. Ever since then, I've been having these sort of emotional blackouts. And Boyd has been having the more traditional kind—the beer/wine/vodka/bourbon blackout.

The water in the mop-bucket keeps turning black, no matter how many times I change it. It's useless to try to clean this place. The one open window (the other one is boarded up)

opens directly onto the busy street, and a continuous waterfall of exhaust fumes flows through it, making out of our kitchen a sewer for cars. Even litter blows in, as there's no screen. I can't do anything about this house, or Wolf's body, or Boyd's drinking. In my windowless office, though, I can turn on my computer and make these words do whatever I want. I rearrange paragraphs and reality and I get it right and I am good. People think of writing and painting as loose, as anything-goes, and of maths and manufacturing as tight, as requiring expertise. But these days I write like putting doors on a car, or solving a geometry problem—like there's only one answer, and I keep fiddling till I find it. It's not talent that I feel when I get it right; it's goodness. Like I've buttoned down one small pocket of the world and what I put inside is safe now.

Henry Holt & Co. called—the ones who put out the textbooks I used in grammar school! They want me to write a book. So I signed the contract, and now I have six months to put together fifty thousand words—without even an outline or an idea. I feel strangely able, though.

I put the first half of my book advance into an envelope, in cash and gold bullion, marked "Wolf's education fund." I keep pulling the envelope out and patting it with satisfaction. I never cared about money. Now I'm maniacal about it. It's like if I plan for his future, he will have a future. He won't die on the surgeon's table, and he will need this education money; he won't be retarded, like they told me he could be. They can't

say for sure till he's two or three or even older.

Now I just need to figure out how to have Boyd earn some money. I've been going through Boyd's boxes of mail (some of it four years old!). People love Boyd. They call him their God. One woman sent a Polaroid of where she'd cut his name into her thigh! He takes the money they send for his records and then he doesn't send the record. Instead, he'll buy a second hundred-dollar Bobby Sherman lunch pail for himself, or a fifty-dollar Dark Shadows doll. It's part of Boyd's philosophy that money follows joy, so whenever he enjoys himself, that's him working. Were he to do something he doesn't enjoy, like use an X-acto knife to cut boxes into mailers for his records and take them all to the post office (which is what I've been doing with every single one of his back orders ... my Yankee pride is horrified that he's been cheating his customers)—why, that would be chasing money away. Boyd can walk into freezing water up to his neck without flinching or play other games to show himself how much will power he has, but he doesn't see any purpose in applying all that power to anything that's not a game. Having a child hasn't changed him at all.

I push back from the mail and pace around like I do so often these days. I wait till he's started his third cup of coffee before talking to him. "You have such great ideas, Boyd—like your plan to create a found photos gallery. You just need a secretary or a manager to organize them, to do the business end of things."

"I've tried having managers, Lisa. They always need to put their creative spin on things." His handsome facial features are all askew in an exaggerated sneer. "Those people will 'manage' to mess up even the simplest good idea. Besides, my message is too extreme. Most people simply don't get it. And they shouldn't—they wouldn't know how to use it. Someone like you, though—I can see you on Jay Leno. Your ideas are much more palatable than mine."

"Palatable? You make me sound like a watered-down cup of tea! Anyway, I'm not on Jay Leno now, and we need to do something. We can't keep taking money from your mother, and mine. Wolfgang can't grow up in a basement. All he sees out the window are people's feet passing by."

"Things will fall into place."

"Well they haven't so far! We have to push them into place!"

Boyd looks at me like I'm the stupidest, least Satanic person in the world.

He says, "You are not the person I fell in love with."

"Neither are you," I spit back.

He jerks his leather trench coat off the back of the kitchen chair, stares at me. I think he's waiting for me to apologize. "I'll be at The Lair."

The Lion's Lair is a twenty-four hour bar down the street that Boyd helped decorate, so it looks like home—black and velvety and filthy with smoke—and he deejays for them, so it

sounds like home, except there's no me nagging or Wolf crying. And they give him all the free booze he wants. Because Boyd is a minor celebrity, people passing through Denver often stop in to see if by chance he will be there, dressed in black, spinning incongruous beach party records alternating with white noise, shooting clever barbs into anyone who approaches him, and they love his insults—it's like kissing the Blarney Stone and being grateful to come up with a mouthful of dirt.

I was wrong, that last thing I said to Boyd: He is exactly the person I fell in love with. In fact, he's the same person in every way as when he was nine. He says so himself—with pride, like that's what saves him from becoming palatable. Except he's a nine year old with fans and loads of alcohol and coffee and sex and travel.

I vaguely remember my father going out and my mother sitting at the table tensing up her mouth and pulling on her fingers like I am now. He humiliated her. Still she stuck around for more: his experiments and traps and rules felt like attention to her. Where does all the lust for cruelty come from, I wonder? Giving it and taking it. Maybe it's just that we all do what we're good at. Some people are good at building scary cages out of their anger and confusion; other people are good at moving into them.

I fiddle with the thought of Boyd like a Rubik's cube, defining and re-defining him, looking for the symbolism and clues.

He's such a blend of opposites: frivolous and dead serious, forceful and passive, high and low class, super-intelligent and ignorant like a thug. Actually, there's nothing high class about Boyd. I mean more that he runs with famous people and iconoclasts, he inspires people, he's playful—yet he is crude and lazy, going always for the low blow. I'm still sitting in the kitchen turning thoughts of him round and round when the real him comes home, drunk but not too drunk.

"I know why you started that fight this morning," he says. "To get me off track." Then he emphasizes it: "I know. About the girls."

"What are you talking about?"

"I found the picture."

I try to remember what picture. I feel frightened and guilty. I feel like running.

"I'm keeping it, for evidence." He goes into the room where he keeps his papers, comes back with a photo between two fingers, holding it high as if I might try to snatch it from him.

"That's a *Rollerderby* reader!" I cry, relieved. "They send me pictures of themselves all the time. Those girls are his nieces. Who did you think they were?"

"Yours."

I wait for him to say more, but he doesn't. "You actually think I have two daughters I never told you about? That's just crazy!"

"Is it?" he asks.

"Remember I had to have the nurse show me twice how to put a diaper on Wolfgang, because I'd never done it before? Did you think that was an act, and really I did know how to change diapers, because I had two secret children?"

He holds my gaze. "I'm never surprised at the depths of people's purposeless duplicity." He lets the photo fall from his fingers, and wanders away.

I pick it up and stare at the children. "They don't even look like me," I say, trying to convince the table of my innocence.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Boyd's mom Mary and Wolfgang and I fly to New Hampshire for Christmas while Boyd stays behind in the basement to "set and think some." When Matt Jasper and his second wife Bea and their little baby meet us at the airport, I almost start crying at the sight of Matt's smiling face. He's talking to me, asking questions, and I am so grateful. It hits me then—how alone I've become, how unsmiled at. After living in Denver for a year, I barely even know what the city looks like. I know only the insides of the basement, and the hospital where I take Wolf, with its fluorescent lights and fluorescent nurses all in a hurry. One by one I've dropped my friends, just like I dropped going places. Boyd won't let me drive the van his mother gave us; he says I'm a dangerous driver. He threw away the second set of keys, and keeps the one set on his person at all times, so I won't "sneak."

Because, he says, he doesn't want anything to happen to me. Or to Wolf.

One day it hits fifty degrees, and Matt's family and Mary and my mom and Wolfgang and I all go to the beach. It's Wolfgang's first time. He squawks and points at everything and his whole body shakes like a little dog's. I blink in the natural lighting and unfold into the open spaces. I sit on a big rock next to a statue of a lady while everybody plays down below; I'm trying to figure out how I got so deep into this situation—how I came to let someone not "let" me drive.

At first, Boyd was easy-going and fun ninety percent of the time, and suspicious and surly ten percent. Gradually those figures reversed. At first, I was defiant and independent, and then one day I got tired. I think I understand the process, looking back: The first time Boyd told me, for example, not to talk about Jean Louis, I protested. "But we created those shows together, and journalists ask about it."

"You're with me now," Boyd answered simply.

I went ahead and talked about him anyway, and Boyd caught me. He didn't say anything about it, he just brought me into the music room to listen to "Lightning's Girl," a '60s drag-racing tune about a guy who comes onto Lightning's girl when Lighting is away and that was a big mistake for everybody involved.

The next time I did it, Boyd had to go lie down in the dark. He was angry for two days. And then the next time someone

asked about Jean Louis, I got this feeling in my stomach, and without thinking I changed the subject. And I haven't talked about Jean Louis since.

I guess in a way I liked it. I had a recurring fantasy as a kid where a bear breaks in on my camping trip and kills my friends and uncle and has sex with me. So many of my fantasies were like that—a big, hairy, forceful, disgusting male blasts onto the scene, hurling my friends and family against trees (his love is just so intense it doesn't allow for any outside interests on my part). I know that what the bear has done is violent and wrong, but I also know that it's all because he's so drawn to me, he can't help himself. Boyd's demand for complete loyalty, his restrictions, his rules—how I longed for all that from my own absent daddy at six years old! But to get it now is like trying to jam handcuffs built for a six year old onto a twenty-six year old's wrists. They don't fit. I'm too big. It's not working.

And yet seeing the trap doesn't stop me from being in love with him. Even hating him doesn't stop me from being in love with him. I'm still going to go back to that basement.

I overhear Mary tell Boyd, on my mother's telephone, that I'm having an affair with Matt. I thought Boyd was kidding, when he told me he was sending his mother along to keep an eye on me. He wasn't. The evidence Mary reports is Matt and me making "goo-goo eyes" at each other. Also, I'm a slut, an

alcoholic and a pornographer (My father, who loves to create ruptures and call it "being honest," pulled out a copy of *Rollerderby* to show her.). Not only that, but I put Wolf only in size one clothes. "You don't know," she shrieks into the phone. "Sometimes a size two might fit him, but Lisa believes anything anyone tells her. She's crazy, Boyd! She's so naïve, she believes all the size one tags."

Mary has gone through six hairdressers in the year and a half I've known her. One time Mary's hairdresser suddenly came down with the flu mid-way through Mary's poodle perm. The hairdresser lied down for the twenty minutes the chemicals need to take. She came back kind of woozy and took out all hundred puny rollers, and rinsed Mary, but didn't blow her all the way dry. Mary was so pissed, she not only withheld her tip, but also lectured her on her incompetence while the poor woman clutched at her mouth and finally ran off to heave. Boyd told me this story as an illustration of how the world is a lazier, less competent place than when he was a child in the '50s!! When I said that wasn't fair—everybody gets sick, and the woman still managed to complete the perm, Boyd went ballistic, saying "fair" is his least favourite word. He said I'm always on the side of the hairdressers and the waitresses (to whom Mary will never leave more than a dollar, no matter how much the bill comes to or how many times a dish has to go back to the kitchen due to Mary's everflowing dissatisfactions) of the world against him and his mother. It's

true! I am! And that old warthog senses it. She knows that I'm trying to winnow her boy away from her, and lead him to a land where waitresses and hairdressers get huge tips and smiles—even the ones with the flu who don't blow you all the way dry.

Mary once complained that Boyd breakfasted with her every morning of his life till I, and then Wolf, came into the picture; she took him on vacations everywhere even when he was thirty-eight years old. Now he has breakfast with me, and she takes her vacations alone. With all suspicions about me finally confirmed (with the grateful look I shot Matt at the airport, and the size-one clothes she spied me continuously pouring Wolf into), maybe the old woman's patience will be rewarded: Her son will wake up, and see my true nature—and hers—and then she will gain back all that she has lost.

Rachel calls me at my mother's late on the night before my flight back. We haven't spoken in months. She says Boyd called her—something he never did before.

"It was so strange," she says, "like walking into a dream." She's practically whispering, as if he could hear, even though she's living in Oregon now, and Boyd is in Denver, and she's calling me in New Hampshire. "We talked for an hour and a half. Leese, he had me convinced that you're insane, that you're irresponsible, that you're the cause of all the problems between you and him, and that you're a bad mother. He told

me your neglectful mothering caused Wolfgang to need an extra operation."

"What?"

"That's what I said! That's when I was like, Whoa. Because I've seen you with Wolfgang. I spent a whole week with you. I said, 'She was always extremely attentive to Wolfgang when I saw her. She always does research and takes him to his therapies and tries to keep him clean. What do you mean, how did she cause him to need an operation?' And he wouldn't answer. It was like he knew that the spell was broken, and all of a sudden he supposedly needed to get off the phone. He's so beguiling, it's frightening. Leese, can I tell you something and not have you laugh at me?"

"Yes."

"You're in danger."

"I know."

Chapter Twenty-Nine

I call Hello into the basement, but there is no answer. In my ten days away, I forgot how claustrophobic and maze-like this place is—in part because you can never quite see. In the centre of each room there's a puddle of light from a dangling bulb left on twenty-four hours a day, but light can't bounce off black walls or a red ceiling. Or a carpet of discarded black clothes and McDonald's wrappers. It looks how it did the first time I came here, only worse. I make my way through the rooms with Wolfgang in my arms, my mouth hanging open. I reach the kitchen. The sink is filled with crusty dishes. The coffee pot is on and the coffee has burnt down to a thick black sludge on the bottom. Vodka in the freezer, no food in the fridge. The cat has no water. Now the bathroom. Shit covers the toilet bowl, inside and top. It's not only really gross—it makes no sense. How does someone get so much shit all

around? The ring in the bathtub is thick and black. Both sink faucets are broken and running freely.

I open the door to the final room. A giant Nazi flag is taped to the wall. Right next to the Tomorrowland Disney poster. I clear a spot on the floor for Wolf to play, give him some toys, and I sink down onto the futon beneath the Nazi flag. Other people's water moves through the pipes in our ceiling. The inhabitants in all the normal apartments above are coming home from work now, running their baths, cooking their dinners, saying Hi to each other. Then the sounds of their activity slow down and stop—that's how I know, in my windowless room, that night has fallen. I feel so sad and scared for Wolf and for me, it's like an actual hole inside my body.

Boyd bursts through the door smiling, carrying flowers and presents: a Dolly Parton make-up book, Dolly Parton lipstick and sparkle earmuffs. I don't say anything—not about the mess, or the presents. I'm still in shock. For Wolf he has a wooden dancing skeleton puppet, and he plays with it with him, and makes different animal noises. Wolf is delighted. When Wolf falls asleep, Boyd carries him gently to his crib. And then he takes me to bed.

Despite everything—everything decrepit and dishonourable I discover in Boyd's soul, despite the shit all over the toilet, I'm still totally attracted to him. Perhaps my body knows something I don't—it's confident that he and I need to be together, while my mind isn't sure about anything any more. I know

he's the same about me. No matter how low his opinion of me sinks, no matter how much of a tricking, cheating liar he and his mom think I am, still we melt into each other and it's like we're clouds and animals at the same time, every cliché there's ever been about sex and obsession all at once. It's violent and mystical and it can't stop happening.

Afterwards, Boyd wakes up Wolf. "Dynasty is on, little man!" he tells him excitedly. He says to me: "He loves Dynasty, especially the theme song, and the cascading lines for the opening. It mesmerizes him! I have to videotape him watching it." In the doorway, Boyd turns to look at me. He's trying to gauge whether to say something. I flop my leg under the covers, and I guess my supineness decides it for him: "I made a resolution," he says, with the same excitement in his voice as when he told Wolf about Dynasty. He jaunts off with Wolfgang tossed over his shoulder without clarifying the nature of the resolution.

That night in my dream he puts me in an astronaut suit and ties me up in some spaceship coat closet and says he'll be back in a few hours to have sex with me. I know that he might just leave me there to run out of oxygen and die, but the prospect of what will happen if he does return is so enticing, it's all I can care about.

* * *

Boyd is drinking less. He's finally finishing his new CD, and he's being kind to me. He looks good—less bloated. It's like he had his little drunken fit of rebellion against me trying to clean him up, and once he got that out of his system, he decided to clean himself up. I'm doing better, too, at not nagging or criticizing. Even Wolf's health has improved, and Boyd and I actually get to go out on a date! We go to Mary's to drop Wolf off, and find her even fussier than usual. I give Wolf a good-bye twirl, which feels stilted and show-off-y in the stiffness and the quiet, and say, "Okay, be a good little beast for Grandma!"

"He is not a beast!" Mary appears to be addressing her comments to her cat Purrball. "He is a pure little angel. What horrible names she calls her own son. You wouldn't call your kittens names, would you, Purrball?"

"He likes to be a beast," I say. "Makes him feel tough."

Mary won't look at me. She's mad because Boyd looks good, because Boyd is going out. She says to her cat: "And look how rough she plays with Wolfgang. She doesn't know how to handle a one year old." She turns to Wolf. "Look at you! Your bad mother, always dressing you in dingy clothes. I bet your mother never heard of the word 'bleach'!"

"Lisa does a good job washing up after us," Boyd tells her, "but car fumes from the street just keep pouring into the basement. There's nothing anyone can do about it. That's one reason we're moving to New Hampshire in the spring. That

and the lower crime rate, and the better schools."

Mary shuts up. Boyd never went against her before. Come to think of it, she never shut up before, either. Her silence while we situate Wolfgang and gather our things unnerves me. When we pick him up after our date, she still hasn't uttered one word.

Two days later, Mary comes to the basement to give Boyd an ultimatum: "It's me or that slut."

As Mary clearly lays out the situation, I remember that before she retired, she was a well-organized secretary. "I love you," she tells him. She drags the "I" out for about twenty seconds. I'm standing in the background, holding Wolf, trying to be invisible. I don't want Boyd to blame me for this. "If you choose her," she continues, "I won't give you any more rides." (Our van died.) "I won't give you any more money, or babysit Wolfgang, and I don't want to see or speak to you or Wolfgang ever again."

Boyd tells her to get out. She does, proudly, with her stiff parrot-walk and her giant shoulders. She's almost six feet tall. There's silence, and then Boyd whirls on me, looking like a trapped animal. "You did this," he seethes. "You've always had a pathological hatred of my mother. You're jealous of my relationship with her, because nobody in your family loves you. It's always pressure you put on me—all you women!"

He squeezes his ears tight with both hands and pushes past me, as if his head's on fire and he has to find water to dunk it in.

I'm still working on my invisibility. There's a hole in the wall in the bathroom. "I punched it," Boyd says blandly, as if he were telling me a package had arrived from U.P.S. "You didn't scrape your plate before putting it in the sink again this morning, even though I told you to and you promised you would. You have no respect for me, and I don't like that."

But he must be more nervous over his loss of control than he lets on, because he doesn't have anything at all to drink that night. He's tossing and turning, and the next day, he comes back from the grocery store shaking, with no groceries, all red. He says he was having a fantasy of picking up the shopping cart and bashing me with it, and he couldn't stop seeing it. He is obviously frightened. He looks at me with wide eyes like he's a little boy and I'm going to figure this out for him.

"You're under a lot of stress," I say, my voice faltering.

"Thanks," he says. He sinks into the chair, looking relieved.

I like to read about my life in letters. They're like paper airplanes on which I fly out of our one little window. "Lisa, I love you. I guess *Rollerderby* is a big big super big thing now and I know you don't have time to write back to me, so I'll

just tell you some things I think about. I am fifteen and nobody will let me do anything so I have plenty of time to think. Suckdog is the best thing and I love to listen to 'Drugs Are Nice' over and over and over again. It is so weird how it is exactly like me and my friend Lauren. This stupid kid was in my room and Suckdog was on and she asked if it was me and Lauren. This is a fan letter but what else can I be but a fan of you Lisa. When I get big I'm gonna do good stuff too and I'll send you whatever it is I do. You will lick it. I lick you.—Beth Bodmer, Grapevine, Texas."

In the snatches of time I get to write, my fingers fly across the keyboard. My book is to be called *Dancing Queen*, and it's the happiest little book in the world. It's about running with packs of girls, and being poor, and neighbours throwing whole picnic tables at other neighbours to solve problems instead of brooding about them; it's about kissing, and fancy underwear, and stuffing everyone into my mother's Honda Civic and driving to Happy Wheels, where we'd glide like kings and queens on glitter-skates through space and time and spotlights. It's about the America that once was my life, before my life got reduced to only two things: taking care of Wolf and being afraid of Boyd.

"People are so sensitive these days," I write in defence of talk shows, hooting construction workers, skyscrapers, mass murderers, Kmart, and the consumption of too many sundaes. "They think they're French or something. Americans

have forgotten what's great about being American. It's not our sensitivity. It's our impatience, our changeability, our excitement, our openness, our cheer, our sexuality, our very crassness." My *Rollerderby* readers are going to be surprised when *Dancing Queen* reveals my big national pride; patriotism is so un-underground. But people in exile always love their lost country.

"Dear Lisa," I read. "For a guy, reading *Rollerderby* means like having a third (female) eye or a third ear, or maybe a little vagina inside the brain. You inspire and fulfil me.—Carlo Prosperi, Milano, Italy"

My diamond ring is gone—the one Bill Callahan gave me. The rest of my jewellery, all worthless, is still there, in my jewellery chest in my office. I say to Boyd, "Have you seen my diamond ring?"

His eyes bore into mine. He says, "No." From the firm way he answers and holds my gaze, I see that he was prepared for that question. I see that he did it. And then I think I see a little smile play at the corner of his mouth.

My mother calls. I can't tell her anything that's going on, or she'd just end up in the hospital again. "I found a baby picture of you," she gushes. "All that black hair! I was out of it when you were being born, of course, but when they brought you

to me—that was the one moment in my life when I was sure there was a God. Because I sure as hell knew neither your father nor I could have created something so perfect! I tried nursing you, but it hurt so much I only lasted a couple days. I'd cry, and when a tear would fall on you, you'd look up with those big eyes and stop. You knew. You only weighed a few pounds, but you were so gentle. Of course," she laughs, "all that changed!"

Because I like to think the opposite of what everybody else thinks, I usually refer to babies as "vicious" and "scheming." But maybe we really are born innocent, and the desire to hurt people, and the weird need to be hurt, comes later, as an attempt gone awry to get back to that first, sweet, total connection to somebody.

I wake up to a noise. I go to the TV room at the other end of the basement. Wolf is screaming hysterically and trying to shake his dad awake. The whole room stinks of alcohol. I take Wolf to bed with me, and the next day I tell Boyd he has a drinking problem.

"And you," he sneers, "have a pathetic little world."

He claims now that he never said he'd move to New Hampshire. He says I'm delusional.

The basement is like a living thing to me. Like a snake that had Boyd halfway down its throat, and I was trying to pull him out of it like I once pulled a frog out of a garden snake's

mouth. I really thought I was going to free Boyd, and he'd say, "Wow, I can breathe!" and hop away with me. Instead of yanking Boyd out, I've been sucked down in. And Wolf along with me.

Of course he chose his mother. She says, "Of course you drink—you have to, to live with a bitch like Lisa." Mary takes care of everything, while I have done nothing but harass him into exerting himself. Why, does Satanism not say that when you're already in perfect sync with your instincts, effort just slows you down, gets you off course? Your pleasure is your path. Mary is Satanic, about her boy: Everything that's difficult, everything that is not Boyd's pleasure—that's what's evil. That's what must be destroyed. How could he have been so mistaken, he must be asking himself, as to take me seriously even for a minute? Me, who cares more about strangers' "rights" than his happiness—even the rights of inanimate objects! Admonishing him to not litter, and to fix the faucet so it doesn't "waste" water (As if it's preferable to waste his time than to waste water!), instructing him to say you're welcome when a store clerk says thank you. I have the soul, Boyd tells me, of a librarian.

"Dear Lisa: You have reached cult status, in that you have a following (myself included) that is really into you, that worships even (or maybe especially) the minutiae of your existence. There is, I think, always an amount of cannibalistic aggression

in admiration. We adore you as a star, but at the same time, our rapture hinges on the possibility that you might fall and shatter, that your public body will take on finite, disposable dimensions, so your figure can then be mourned. So when I say that I have admired you from afar, and even sought to emulate you to a pathetic degree, it has not been without its secret malevolence, its deleterious underpinnings.—Sean Kennedy, San Francisco, California"

He's started using the word "nigger." The other day, as Mary drove us around on errands, Boyd and his mother both were saying it: all the niggers, all the Mexicans. I just stared out the window, trying to think of something to think about, while they played off each other, stealing glances at me and then looking at each other and breaking out laughing. It was downright sexual.

One of Wolf's Eustachian tubes is so enlarged it links with his nasal cavity, and there's constant infection travelling about in there. He has superhighways in his head instead of tiny gutters leading only to one or two holes, like most people do. The ear leaks brown; it smells awful all the time. Once a week, a nurse and I hold his weak little body down while the ear-nose-throat doctor sticks a miniature vacuum in the ear for what feels like a half-hour. Wolf must think that if he could only speak, if he could make us understand how horrible this

procedure is, then we would never do it to him again. But he just screams, and he can't make his scream into anything that anyone around him will react to. I sweat horribly during the vacuuming. I see through his eyes; his tormentors are all calm, smiling people—and I'm helping them. The indignation he must feel!

The doctor wants to schedule a mastoidechtomy—removal of the middle ear. I say, "My home situation is kind of uncertain. I can't really..." I trail off.

"Are you concerned about domestic violence?" he asks.

"Yes."

I guess I must have that look about me—the look of someone cornered. I've lost weight. I even make myself nervous, when I catch sight of my reflection. I look like I'm already dead.

"Do you think things are under control for now?" the doctor asks.

"No. Maybe. It's different from day to day."

"There are places...."

"I know. I'm just trying to tie up everything for Wolf first. He's not easy to move with! I'm getting all his medical records together, ordering extra equipment. All his g-tube supplies, stuff for his broviac IV."

* * *

Shaun Partridge, of The Partridge Family Temple, who does cocaine and ran for mayor, comes to visit, fresh from having made out with a young girl who thinks she's in love with him. "I told her I gave her elm's disease," he guffaws. "She started crying, and then she called her gynaecologist … to get a test for elm's disease!" He and Boyd are almost falling off their chairs.

Shaun would be quite good-looking except for the perfect pig snout he has for a nose. It quivers when he laughs. He and Boyd laugh and laugh and laugh about taking advantage of gullible people. I feel like I'm in a nightmare. When Shaun leaves, Boyd turns on me, all the humour drained from his face.

"What? What?" I cry.

"You're in love with Shaun."

Boyd has shaved his head. Thick, mahogany hair coats the sink.

I no longer think my own thoughts. I only try to guess his thoughts, his next move. It feels like someone's sitting on my chest, stuffing cotton into my nostrils and down my throat; I can't breathe. The next day, I can't stand up. Boyd drives me to the hospital. I have pneumonia and dehydration. They put me in a little tent where the oxygen is sweet. I've never been separated from Wolfgang before, but when I call—they're at

Mary's—Boyd says they're having too much fun for him to stop and take Wolf to the hospital to see me.

I lie in my tent getting high on oxygen and I understand what he's doing, how it all comes together. The use of the word "nigger," the bizarre accusations, even the hole in the wall, are all an art piece. For Boyd's art, he uses human beings instead of paints or musical instruments. The audience is the instrument.

Boyd started his career of social terrorism when he was just a kid—dropped out of school in the tenth grade and tried out pranks on his neighbours in the trailer park. He telephoned one woman impersonating Animal Control and told her that her son was hiding a pet boa constrictor in the yard, then he hung up and listened to the woman screaming at the boy, shaking him, making him squeal, and Boyd felt power. He realized that he could "suck people into this alternate reality and make them play" by his rules. Like his father the paranoid speed freak did to young Boyd and Mary. Later, when he started making records and performing live shows, he still didn't use instruments—just single, piercing tones or overlapped tape loops of someone saying something possibly menacing, like "make red" and it sounds like "rape." People hear "rape" but Boyd never used that word. And so who's really sick? Who's the misogynist, the violent person: The listener who hears the word "rape" when it was never there; the mother who believes a voice on the phone over her own son, and beats him over a

snake that never existed—or Boyd, who didn't even leave his house, who just pulled a couple strings? And now he's showing me how I live in fear, not pleasure. That I'm so knee-jerk, it's laughable. What has he really done to me? Sometimes he'll stomp his foot in my direction, just to see me jump. But that's just me being jumpy—he's never touched me. I'm the one obsessed with abuse. He's never abused me. He never took that flag and shoved it down my throat, asphyxiating me with it; all he did was hang it up. The swastika symbol was used by the Greeks long before the Nazis took it, and by the Egyptians before them. It's just some lines, some colour. Yet I'm so freaked out by a symbol, by a word, I'm in the hospital over it. That's his current art piece: That he's done nothing. That it's everyone else who's sick. That's always his art piece.

I find out in the hospital that I'm pregnant.

Chapter Thirty

There's no food. "I have to go to the store," I say. "Can you put in some money?"

"I'll give it to you later," Boyd says.

"That's what you always say. I don't want to be like your mother. I want us to be partners." Did I actually just say that?

He breathes out, then in. "You ... are so ... low." He picks up a chair, walks toward me with it.

"The baby!" I remind him.

"Fuck you!" he roars. "Fuck you! Fuck you!" But he throws the chair at the tiled coffee table instead of at me.

I go into my office, take three hundred-dollar bills out of the envelope, hand them to him.

"You need a break," I say.

"But this is from Wolf's education fund!"

He's acting as if this hasn't happened twice before.

"I know," I say, "but it's also to make our family better. I mean, it's in Wolf's best interest for you to be relaxed." I'm concentrating hard on not letting my fear and hatred and disgust show. I force myself to smile. "Why don't you go to Joel's cabin in the woods?"

Boyd rubs his hands over his bald head. I see sweat or spit on his upper lip. "I don't know," he stutters. He never says he doesn't know. He stuffs the money in his pocket, hugs me hard. His whole shirt is wet. "It's gonna be okay," he whispers into my hair. "I really love you, you know. I told Allison Anders about the baby. I talked to her for a really long time." Allison Anders is an old girlfriend of Boyd's who did *Gas, Food, Lodging*. "She says everything is going to work out. There's something magic between me and you. Just don't mess it up. Don't push me."

Apparently Boyd needs one hundred dollars a day to live out in the wild: He's back home in three days, peculiarly subdued. He smells like Wolf's ear. He hands me a bouquet of flowers, saying, "I realized the only logical solution is for you to get an abortion. Otherwise everything is going to fall apart. And then," he points out, "you'll have a sick kid and a new baby and no one to help you.""

"I don't want to kill my baby," I say. I have to stay calm. I have to think.

"Don't pin this on me. I'm trying to save our family."

"But you've always known how I am about abortion! Remember I said even if I had a rape-baby, I'd keep it? You approved of that about me! You called it 'one of my little conservative quirks.'"

He shakes his head at me slowly. Steadfast, complete denial.

"What?" I cry, feeling hysteria rising. "Are you saying you didn't say that? Are you saying I didn't say what I said? That we had no agreement?"

"You tricked me," he says.

"I tricked you? I specifically told you I was not on birth control! You're the one who changed his mind!"

"You portrayed yourself," he says in a measured voice, "as someone you are not."

The fire in me goes out. My body droops. I put the flowers in water and go to bed. How many times has Boyd put an equal sign between opposites and called that logic? To be his slave means freedom. To murder a family member means saving your family. I go back and forth between thinking he's truly disturbed in the mind and thinking he's quite sane and calculating and this is part of a long-term plan to make me think I'm crazy. All night, I hear him outside my door pacing and muttering—raving—about murder, and that the baby is

Shaun Partridge's. Every time he stops and there's silence, I get the eerie feeling that I made it all up—but then it starts again.

In the morning, I dress carefully. When I emerge from the bedroom, Boyd is there, in a chair facing the door. He looks me up and down over his coffee cup. He stands up and he's shaking so bad he has to lean against a wall.

"What the fuck are you doing?" he finally growls. The way he's standing makes it look like he's barring the door.

"I'm just going across the street to the bookstore." Don't pat your pockets, I remind myself. Don't look down to see if the coins are making a bulge—he'll notice.

He stares at me for a long time before letting me go.

I look back to see him striding over to the phone. I know what he's doing: If Shaun answers his phone now, I'm on my way over to his place. If he doesn't answer, that means he's already left to go meet me somewhere.

Just as Boyd suspects, I'm not on my way to the bookstore. But I'm certainly not meeting Shaun Partridge! I'm calling my father from a payphone. My father doesn't like people who ask for help, but I don't have any friends left, and if I told my mom what was going on she'd just get sick and have to go back in the hospital.

"Boyd is quitting drinking, and it's really weird," I say. "He's more like a drunk person sober than he ever was drunk. He shakes and he doesn't make sense."

"That's Delirium Tremens," my father replies confidently. "I had a girlfriend or two go through that. He should be experiencing extreme agitation right about now, inability to sleep, hallucinations and elevated blood pressure."

"Well, he was talking all night about killing 'somebody.' Maybe if..." I stop to swallow. "Rachel came to help when Wolf was first born, but she just cried the whole time. She's really messed up still from her car accident. If maybe you could fly out here to Denver and take Wolf for a week, or we could fly there and let you take him, maybe he really could quit drinking. Or at least it would smooth out me leaving."

"He's the biological father," is my father's answer. "You're going to have to work it out."

"I'm scared," I say.

"Well," my father says. There's a long pause, and then he just repeats himself. "You're going to have to work it out."

So, I have to choose. Wolf or the new baby. Wolf has an eighty percent chance of developing early onset mental illness and a hundred percent chance of learning disabilities, the geneticist told me. He will need extra stimulation and a lot of therapy and care to overcome his difficulties. And if I'm not vigilant, an air bubble could pass through his broviac IV into his heart and kill him instantly. How can I be vigilant and giving extra stimulation if I'm scared and pregnant and then caring for a newborn all alone and living … where?

* * *

I decide to get the abortion in Oregon, with Rachel. We have an argument the night I arrive. "Everything feels like it's going in the wrong direction," I say. "Having Wolf was supposed to … I was going to keep him so safe, and that was going to fix how unsafe things felt to me as a little girl. Sort of equalize the universe. But Wolf isn't safe. He's so sick and always will be. Horrible things happen to him and I can't stop it. This other kid, the fetus—odds are he's healthy. I could keep him safe—but I'm destroying him."

"I knew it!" Rachel pounces. "I knew you got pregnant again on purpose! Boyd is abusive, he's a bum—you wanted to give another kid him as a father? You haven't changed at all; people are still experiments to you. I'm sorry, but I have to ask this: Are you having this abortion so you can experience it? And then you can write about it?"

For the first time in our ten years together, Rachel has truly offended me. "I have changed," I tell her. "You don't even know me."

Rachel snorts, but I see her eyes well up before she turns her back on me. "This is hard on me too," she says with her back still to me. "How do you think I like seeing you like this and I can't do anything to save you?"

* * *

I finish pasting together my *Rollerderby* book (a compilation of issues 1—16) on the morning of the abortion, at Rachel's kitchen table. I had to change the dedication, which included my two children.

Tears run down my face the whole time I work. They keep running the whole walk to the clinic, where they give me a Valium, and that just makes me cry in slow motion. I started to refuse the Valium, automatically, as it could harm the baby—then I remembered.

I open my legs and let them do it—three women. They are at once gentle and mathematical about it, measuring things, consulting. One of them brushes my hair with her fingers. They flush salt water up me, and wait, and then suck at the baby with a vacuum cleaner instrument until he pours all warm and salty out of me into a plastic basin, dead. Only some of him came out. They have to go back in to get "the rest."

It's over in a matter of minutes. He didn't even fight for his life. He had all his trust in me. It's as if he were in my arms and I laid him down on train tracks and he didn't even try to get away from the approaching train, because he knew in his bones that I would snatch him back up before it was too late.

Back at Rachel's, I call Boyd to find out if he can pick me up at the airport tomorrow. He says, "Shouldn't be a problem." There's a pause, which I'm guessing comes, on his part, from boredom. He doesn't even ask if the baby is gone or not. He knows I always take care of everything. I think about my

first letter to him: "You are a bad man." Was that only two years ago? What did I think a bad man was, back then? What wonderful thing?

This was Boyd's decision, but someone else did the action. That's the way it always is with him. No, I can't blame him. Boyd has no power in this family. I've always made the decisions. I did this thing. And there's no way for me to make it up to the baby now, or to the universe. Shame fills my body; it feels like the vacuum cleaner sounded. It is obliterating.

Back home, I think I catch Boyd glancing admiringly at my once again flat stomach. I've had a fairly constant Tourettes-like compulsion to call him "worm," "pig," "shit-face." My hatred is like actual shit in my mouth, but I swallow it down. I clench my fists and smile and say nice things to him. It's part of my new plan for how I can get out of this situation while still keeping Boyd in Wolf's life. Wolf has experienced enough kinds of pain already; I want to protect him from the extra-sharp one of abandonment. I remember what it felt like to watch greedily each passing truck to see if it was my father's in spite of knowing he was three-thousand miles away with Linda and her kids.

I pick up a newspaper for the first time in two years and find a little apartment down the street for Wolf and me. We can move in next week. I tell Boyd about it, pointing out how much time this will give him to work, how all his dreams will

come true. I nod sympathetically when he talks about how all these idiots have been holding him back. I'm aiming to make Wolf look like no pressure to Boyd, and to make the brief contact that will be necessary with me, Wolf's mother, look like something pleasant.

I guess I went overboard, because suddenly Boyd is reneging on the deal we worked out where I would bring Wolf to him two or three evenings a week. He says: "I'm afraid you'll try to use the drop-off/pick-up times to ensnare me again. What? What's the smirk for? You manipulated me into loving you once; you might try to do it again. I don't feel comfortable with you living in Denver. You could stalk me."

I laugh out loud at that. Boyd looks as if I kicked him in the face. I try to come up with some lie about my reason for laughing; Boyd hurt is a dangerous thing. Instead—it's awful, like a nightmare—I can't control myself. I'm laughing more and more, trying to shove it back in with my fist, going, "Sorry! Ha, ha, ha! Sorry!"

I heard something. It's Wolf. I pop up in bed. Can't see anything. He's coughing and coughing. Now I remember. It's our last night in this basement. Wolf is with his dad. I follow the sounds of his coughing to the TV room. Wolf is coughing in his sleep in the playpen. The TV is on; Boyd is lying on the futon with his eyes closed, but I don't get the feeling he's asleep. Two empty bottles of Robittusin are on the nightstand,

and Wolf's empty Benadryl is in the trash. Boyd must have been unable to sleep, and drank all three bottles.

I turn off the TV and clear my throat and say, "I know you don't like me to go out alone at night. Do you want to go to the store to get Wolf some Benadryl? We're all out." Going out at night had become one of the things I was not allowed to do, though it was never said that way. It's starting to hit me that, a few hours from now, and for the rest of my life, Boyd won't ever again be able to tell me what I can and can't do. Nor will I have to look through the trash and on nightstands for clues as to his current state, as to how safe or unsafe I am.

Boyd answers in nonsense words and noises. I say: "Okay, I'm going to the store then, do you understand?"

He says, "Yes!" He gets up to get a drink of fizzy water, watches me put on my coat and hat and boots and scarf, so I figure he really does understand what's happening.

It's exhilarating to be out in the middle of the night under the street lamps in the freezing cold. I feel like I weigh twenty pounds, like I'm made of ribbons and insect wings. I think this might be what happiness feels like—I can't remember!

I walk back in through the bullfighter room, through the music room, into the kitchen, throw my purse and hat on the table, and then I hear Boyd's voice behind me: "Where were you?" He's totally naked. Bald. He looks bigger somehow, taller and ... red. I don't recognize him. His face doesn't look like his face. He looks like a naked soldier:

strong, purposeful, intent. He's advancing upon me.

"I was at the store," I cry. "I told you! I have the receipt! It's right here in my purse!"

I try to reach past him to my purse, but it's like he didn't hear me. I reverse direction, trying to get back outside. I'm walking backwards, crying, "Boyd! Boyd, it's me! It's Lisa!" but I can't move fast enough and then he's on me.

Chapter Thirty-One

When I re-enter the basement with the officer to collect my belongings, Mary is standing there in the middle of the first room, surrounded by bullfighter paintings and Boyd's collection of pastel-colored ash trays in the shape of women's naked, headless torsos. Boyd must have given her instructions from jail, because things have been done: The Nazi flag is gone and there's a fat lock on the door to the bedroom, where my canopy bed is—the bed I rented the truck for. Mary tells the officer that the locked door leads to the landlord's storage area. Because Mary is old and the basement is confusing, he believes her. He does call the landlord when I ask him to, but the landlord is not in.

"You'll have to take the matter up in court," the officer says.

"But I'll be in New Hampshire," I tell him. "I can't fly back here to appear in court."

He turns up his hands. Wolfgang's crib is in the locked bedroom too. I paid two hundred dollars for that crib, and it didn't have a scratch on it—someone will get fifty bucks, selling it.

Thankfully, Wolf is asleep, or half-asleep, in his car seat. I leave him in the kitchen with Mary and the officer while I throw armfuls of paper towel rolls and cans of tomato soup into the cavernous truck. Mary is ignoring Wolf, who would wake up and play if anyone took the time; she's concentrating instead on telling the officer excitedly how I'm the one with the drinking problem, and how her son is "a good man."

"They always are, ma'am," he sighs. "They always are."

It takes me fifteen, twenty minutes to pack. My clothes are in the '60s style that Boyd likes. I won't be wearing those any more. And Wolf's clothes are all getting tight. I leave everything behind except Wolf's medical supplies and a few of his toys, the pantry items (which I take only to keep Boyd from getting to use them—I have no place to put them, once we get to New Hampshire), and my computer.

I go back for one last look around, and find myself alone with Mary. I can see the officer over her shoulder in the kitchen, filling out paperwork and rocking Wolf's car seat with his toe.

"You made Wolf sick," she hisses. She looks eager, hungry. "You turned him into a zombie. I always thought someone should take him away from you."

"Someone like you, maybe," I shoot back, and the officer coughs warningly. I lower my voice. "That's why you were always trying to convince everybody what a bad mother I am. So you three could live together. And then it could always be like when I was in the hospital with pneumonia and you all camped out in your living room."

"Oh, Lisa, you are such a liar, you don't even know what truth is. Boyd didn't beat you up—he just pushed you a little, not even hard. You made those marks on yourself! He told me so when I went to see him in jail. I went to see him in jail. You didn't! He's all alone in there, with those … criminals!" I walk away from her into my office, snatching up random objects and jamming them into my purse. She's on my heels. "You think you're some kind of writer, and you couldn't even make up your own story. You just copied what Boyd's father did to me—the strangling and all that. Only you didn't know, did you, that I stayed with him for seven years afterwards?"

"What, like if I'd known that, I'd stay with Boyd for seven more years, so I could be just like you, my hero? And teach my son, too, that women deserve to get beat on and still do all the cooking and stuff and pay for everything?"

"I don't have to listen to this!" Mary shouts, and now she's running, and I'm chasing.

"I did know that you stayed with your husband after what he did to you, Mary. And I know that when he moved his new girlfriend into the trailer, you moved out, but you still made

the payments every month until the guy finally died. And I know that if your little plan worked and you and Wolf and Boyd all lived together, Boyd would get control of your social security checks, and then he, too, could live off you for the rest of his life. He hates you, you know."

We're back in the room where we started. "You piece of shit," she croaks. "I ought to slap you to pieces!" She raises her hand, and I put my face right up there—waiting for it, burning for it. If only she hits me first, I can hit her back, and hit her and hit her everywhere, kick her—her face, her body, her hair, her ugly sweater. She may be in her sixties, but the old battle-axe is stronger than fifty young men. She's stronger than Boyd. We hold our positions, staring into each other's eyes, and then the officer is between us and Mary's hand goes down and my whole body wilts. He has Wolf's car seat by the handle and we head for the door single file, all of us with our heads down.

I was the loins. Because she was too old to have Boyd's baby herself. I feel like I'm going to pop with the realization of it. But then I'm up high in the cab, and finally there's some place to put this adrenaline rush I've been on for days: straight ahead, into the road. I drive and drive and drive, with a rather silent Wolf beside me, through the rain. It's a great pleasure to drive, after being forbidden to do so for so long. The streets are flooding.

In the night, Wolf starts coughing and he can't stop. I try to

see in the cab light if he's turning blue. I try not to panic as I realize how alone I am and that I don't even know where I am. I follow the "H" signs until I reach the Emergency Room of a hospital in a city I don't know the name of. But Wolf's breathing difficulties clear up on their own while we're waiting to be triaged, and I just put him back in the car seat and we head out again. Every few hours we stop for gas and disgusting sandwiches. Still we say nothing, Wolf and I. We have no idea what life will be like. All I can do is drive, and all he can do is ride, through the freezing February rain until eventually we cross that bridge over the river at Hilton Park where I used to play as a kid, and where Captain Thomas Wiggin and Captain Walter Neal, in 1623, had a fight over Dover where one of them brandished a sword and the other said, "Okay, you can have it," and the one who gave up claimed a little corner to the south, and called it Portsmouth, and three-hundred-and-sixty years later, in the 1980s, the Portsmouth punks called the Dover punks—namely, Rachel and me—losers, because we were from Dover, where nothing ever happens. And then, at midnight on this tenth day of February in the year of our lord Nineteen-Ninety-Six, we're at my mother's.

She left the door unlocked. On the counter is a cellophane-wrapped package marked "FOR LISA." I pull out dehydrated meat and cheese and tea bags and a cup with garish snowmen painted on. This revolting selection is supposed to make me feel better. It kind of does.

My mother recently had another surgery, so she's sleeping on the couch, as it's easier to get up from. Wolf and I take her bed. It's the same one she had when I was a kid, and it's like a balloon deflating under me every time I move. Boyd must be out of jail by now. I picture him luxuriating in my canopy bed built for a princess, on my firm mattress purchased especially for a fetal-position sleeper like me. He's drooling and sweating and spilling. He's dreaming, and then he's awake, looking up at the gauzy white material strung like clouds between impossibly tall bedposts (I always thought of them as my four, skinny sentinels). He smacks his lips and sighs and—as I leap out of my mother's deflated balloon bed and write the last three, triumphant paragraphs of *Dancing Queen*—he finds a new position and goes back to sleep.

At the end of *Dancing Queen*, Cordelia Teatherly bitterly turns her back (in stone, eternally) on the monolithic headstone of Henry Law, who jilted her in 1861. She left explicit, secret instructions that her statue was to be an inch taller than Henry's, and, should she die first (and she did), for the stonemason to wait until Henry was dead, to find out just how tall his stone would be. It must have taken her entire estate, that statue—Henry Law owned half of Dover, and his stone is pretty big. I love bitter Cordelia Teatherly and all the Americans who—even if they do everything wrong, "even if they look obnoxious or even stupid

in a certain light, they're still wonderful and magnificent to me, and they're free, free, free."

This was me. Stupid and, at last, free.

Chapter Thirty-Two

Angela calls after seven years of silence to say she saw an article on me in *Details* and just in case I'm ever thinking of saying anything about her, don't. She's in cooking school and has, she says, "a real life now." This reminds me of when GG Allin asked Debbey Puff about her time touring with Suckdog, and she said she doesn't talk about that any more—she has "a real band now." Or when Rachel started going to college and that was entering "the real world" and she left me in—what, the unreal world?

We wanted to change the world! Using real names, real details, was my little contribution to the revolution (well, that and peeing in a litter box). It's a distinctly female style, what with our tradition of diary writing and gossip. So far only the male style has been considered legitimate—all that fact-

checked, logical and chronological, uninterrupted procession of thought, and the man-habit of turning his lover's life into fiction and the turned-into-fiction lover doesn't get to keep her life's story any more than, in an old-fashioned marriage, she'd get to keep her name. And now Angela wants to be written out of my history. So I start referring to her as Angela instead of her real name, and I start calling Jeff Jeff, even though she's not even with him any more, because some people would recognize him, and then her, if I used his real name.

I poke around, make some calls, and discover that our whole post-punk, DIY movement (our downfall might have come through never having one good name) is dying, or dead. During the years my life revolved completely around the machinations of Boyd and Mary, big business was swooping in on anyone with any potential for mass appeal, like Henry Holt & Co. did with me, thinning and separating our herd of crazies, until finally we aren't even a "we" any more. Stores that used to not care have started censoring fanzine cover material; distributors demand barcodes, which are expensive. Small presses or labels, formerly run out of basements or bedrooms, now take on too much and go bankrupt, creating a ripple bankruptcy effect. People are dicking other people over.

"I can't believe how much it's come down to money," I grumble on the phone to my friend Darby in California, who is thinking about killing her zine *Ben Is Dead* (I think the

same thing about *Rollerderby*). "People I thought were my friends so we never signed contracts ... we had ideals, we were revolutionaries, and now they're willing to rip me off for money? People I did coke with, like Ted Gottfried from *See Hear*. He just out and out won't give me the fifteen-hundred he owes me."

"He got me too!" Darby cries. "For three thousand!"

"Can you believe even a cokehead will rip you off?" I laugh.

"Ahh, Lisa, the fun's gone out of the whole thing. When you can't even trust druggies, you know it's over."

And yet, not one of us managed a successful transition to mainstream. (*Dancing Queen* sold only seven thousand copies—that's practically zero, in the outside world.) You cannot translate Nietzschean self-immolation to a mass pop audience. "Nirvana did," Rachel counters, but I don't count them. Ultimately they were still traditionalists, while we wanted to change the very foundation of what music was, what it meant to be a girl/boy, what performance was, what movies were, what writing was for. We were going to break down every barrier—between performer and observer, between bad art and high art, between public and private. To break the audience member or the reader in two, so she could rise up like the phoenix out of the ashes of her old, dead self. It was the one way we could see out of what was frozen in us—was to destroy it. Well, I don't think we thought of it like that.

I think destruction and chaos and distrust of any definitions was just what we knew—it was what we grew up with. We were children—frightened, violent, dreamy children. We wanted to save people. We were not skilled. Still we reached way beyond what we knew and what we were. We failed.

And now we're sinking like Atlantis but without the legend. No one has made a good movie about us, or a good book. I came across a little entry about myself in an encyclopedia. It made me feel like I was already dead:

> Lisa Crystal Carver's visionary writing in *Rollerderby* made her perhaps the most famous writer of the zine boom in the early '90s, along with scribes like Pagan Kennedy. Through her interviews, she was responsible for introducing to many the work of Dame Darcy, Cindy Dall, Bill Callahan, Boyd Rice, Jean-Louis Costes, Nick Zedd, & G.G. Allin.
>
> Her Suckdog circus shows are also legendary, bringing the artists listed above to basement shows in nearly every state of the union, where they would perform noise soap operas, hurling themselves sexually and violently upon the audience, forcing individual audience members to take part.

Okay, I'm dead. Now what?

A constellation of misfits gathers in my new, light-filled apartment. Along with Matt Jasper, who is struggling to breathe from under the writhing pile of his now four children, there is the dirty librarian, the virgin cartographer, the

man who dresses like a cowboy and has terrible gas, the older fellow who does origami and who shines every Thursday at the roller-skating rink—all the people with nowhere else to go. We look at each other uncomfortably while slowly getting drunk and then someone blurts out: "Have you ever thought that by 'aliens' the government is using code for actual aliens? From outer space?" And, suddenly: "You know, I read at the speed of eternal dreams. Sometimes I can pull a wavelength out of the sky and then it appears in the next paragraph like magic. Does that sound crazy?"

Wolf is my guide through a magical underworld of Dover I never knew existed, made of rocks, trucks, spiders, ghosts, blood, slush, bugs, bones, dirt, gods, found keys, and "clues" in scraps of garbage. I peek around his pushing-forward shoulders, trying to see if my destiny has gotten completely away, through shadows and puddles beneath the spreading trees of Pine Hill Cemetery. We examine the different coloured moulds growing in the cracks of the gravestones—orange, yellow, pale green, ash.

His most prized possession is a set of real screwdrivers I bought him, which he carries with him at all times, in their velvety case. While the other kids at the playground slide and swing and socialize, Wolf goes under the jungle gym to look for screws, and tries to dismantle it. I think he's seeing things—hallucinating—but I don't know how

much of that is just the way kids are.

Friday nights, I go to Temple. No one who raised me—not my family, the underground, nor Rachel—ever had a whole lot of use for peace or beauty, but upon my less than triumphant return to Dover, I found I did have use for both. Or at least I wanted someone to talk about them to me, and none of my friends would—they're too embarrassed. So I went around visiting different religious leaders, and the one who recommended "taking the hoary coating off your heart" was the rabbi. That sounded so dangerous to me—like having no skin, like having no home—that I wanted in. Of course, I don't exactly fit in at Temple. For one thing, I'm not Jewish.

Boyd has taken up cigar smoking. He tells me so—shyly proud—on one of his rare phone calls. He's proud because he's doing something new; even now, he's following fun is the law, as if nothing's changed, as if there isn't a small heart in existence where once there was none—and as if it weren't still breaking. Boyd talks about a tour someone's setting up for him in the eastern block countries.

"Oh, really?" I say, trying to keep my voice light. I don't want to scare him off from calling Wolf, because it means to much to the little guy—but I'm deeply, red-ly (that's worse than green) jealous. Of both the new cigar habit and the eastern block tour. I'm cut off from the luxury of mildly self-destructive behaviours now, and I've had to turn down every

career opportunity that involves travel or big chunks of time.

Oh—and he has a new girlfriend. A nineteen-year-old accordion-player. Are her fingers extra-muscular? I wonder to myself. I once heard that accordion playing is very physical. I picture her hands slender but her fingers bulging, manly. I pretend my own hands are strong; I squeeze the phone tight.

After hanging up, I realize he never asked to speak to Wolf.

I brush my teeth for a very long time and then look in on the sleeping Wolf—probably dreaming of flying cars. He made me lug home some scrap metal we found by the side of the road—I got cuts in three fingers. He said he would invent, with the metal and his screwdrivers and five-cent screws, a car that flies so he can go see his dad. I told him someone already did invent a car that flies—it's called an airplane, and someday his dad will get on one and come see him.

I look at him in the light from the hall, chomping on his pacifier named Buddy: his down-turned mouth like mine, his deep-set eyes like Boyd's, and a red, bulbous nose that he could only have gotten from W.C. Fields. He would have been a strange, special person even without the chromosomal defect linking everything up haywire, I feel sure. I see in his face his nightmares, his solitude, and his need. The nightmares come every night, and instead of crying or clinging to me for help, he growls at them. He's an abandoned kitten taking on a bear. He growls his little growl and fights, and loses, night after night after night.

Even asleep, he is such a boy, smelling of dirt and sweat and soap. You swallowed my freedom whole, I tell him. I'm bitter and I still can't sleep at night. I'm only twenty-seven years old and already I can feel the worry lines forming on my face—but still I got a better deal than your dad, with his new countries and his new girl to plunder. I got you and your screwdriver set that you hold so carefully, and your walk so slow. I got you and your love of mold and moss and all things that smell bad, all things cracked, all things broken. I hope you'll always be like that, even if it brings you nothing but trouble—loving, fervently, all that is unlovable. Being kind to the undeserving. Someday you're going to speak for the less than handsome and the snuffling of the world, and you'll be taken advantage of—and you're a better man for it.

Chapter Thirty-Three

Rachel broke up with her boyfriend, quit school, moved back to Dover, and found work in a bridal shop, where she hears many sad things. Future mothers-in-law take over and insist on wearing sequins to the plain girl's wedding; future grooms say they'll call the whole thing off if their fiancée doesn't lose five more pounds by Saturday. Sad stories gravitate towards the post-accident Rachel; they know they'll find a good home there.

One eye is lower now—she's a subtle Picasso. She goes to different doctors, but none of them can reverse what happened when the steering wheel smashed her eye socket and pieces of it got pushed back into her brain. She sees things out of the corner of her eye constantly, the shadows of people sneaking up on her.

* * *

"I get confused," she says when I meet her for lunch one day. With her hands in her lap, she looks like a little girl. "I've been drinking every day."

"We always wanted to drink every day, when we were younger," I say, trying to be encouraging. "Remember? It looked so good in the detective novels. But it's expensive! And then we'd just forget. We'd drink three days in a row, and then get distracted by something."

"My sense of direction is just gone," Rachel continues, as if I hadn't spoken. "All the words jumble when I try to read." Two big tears fall out of her eyes and plop into her untouched fried egg.

She looks so pretty still, like the bombed-out building in danger of collapse I passed every day in Philadelphia over which taggers had spray-painted the most beautiful tropical scene ever. It's such a waste: Rachel and I both have always had rollercoaster looks—one good-looking year, two not, then maybe a great run of three good years in a row. Why couldn't the year she hides inside be one of the not-so-good-looking ones?

As I walk Rachel back to her place, I notice columns of mist rising from various spots among the trees on either side of us, as if there were tiny fireplaces scattered throughout the forest. Decaying vegetation giving off heat and melting holes in the

slush-crust still covering the darkest spots of the forest floor, I suppose. Green and orange and pink buds stud each branch like goose pimples on very skinny arms.

It's barely forty degrees, yet both of us wear only tract-less shoes and sundresses—two or three of them on top of each other, like we did in high school. We feel we look breezier this way, instead of just admitting it's cold and putting on sweaters. We like to think of ourselves as two palm trees rising out of snow banks. Even with her car wreck, and my Boyd wreck, we can't stop hoping. It's a habit.

My father takes Wolf and me to the fair. Wolf does diarrhoea in his pants, and my father claims the kid never has diarrhoea unless I'm around. (!) On the ride home, Wolf is asleep and the sun beams yellow through my father's hair. He is a balding lion.

"Those people you killed," I say, and I'm shocked that I'm saying it—I never planned this. "Why did you tell me about them?"

He doesn't show any sign of having heard me. He takes a long drag off his cigarette, throws it out the crack at the top of the car window, and slips a fresh one from the pack. "I never told you anything the way it really happened," he answers finally. "Not even when you were five years old. I'm not that stupid. Everyone has to rebel against their parent at some point. I knew it was coming with you, even though you

said it wouldn't. I fed you just enough wrong facts that if you went to the police, they'd laugh in your face."

So he was preparing for battle even when I was five years old. And maybe so was I.

Pulling up to my apartment, he turns in his seat to face me, and for the first time in my life, I look directly at him, this person who has dominated the course of my life. I see an old man with sooty lungs and slanted glasses, so that the left half of his face appears to be drooping. There's a tiny piece of fried bread dough in his beard. I have one more question, though I didn't know what it was till just now. "Did you know my mother hit me, growing up?"

He looks offended. "She wasn't supposed to do that."

"What was she supposed to do? You left me with a sick, poor woman who was on so many steroids she was probably certifiably insane."

"Hey—I lasted five years with your mother, your formative years. No one else would have stayed so long with that woman. I put a lot of time into you, a lot of work. I'd already made you who you are by the time I left."

I yank on my door handle and get out, then reach back in for the sleeping Wolf. "She wasn't supposed to hit you," my father says again. It's the voice of a betrayed man.

* * *

Like the dirty old knife-fighting dad in the Johnny Cash song "A Boy Named Sue," my father always knew he wasn't the sticking around kind. Maybe he trained me in my tender years to feel threatened and alienated so that, even in his absence, I could never be influenced by the crowd. Or maybe he had a more selfish reason: My fear made him just a sliver stronger, safer—it secured his position. Everyone but he and I—including my mother—was dangerous and stupid. Then he was gone, and I was left with all these impulses I did not know what to do with. Regular, human impulses that I had been trained to suppress: like to trust people, to tell my secrets to them. I confessed nothing. I distrusted everyone. I distrusted myself. I was looking for another perfect outlaw union. Any man who was cold and superior made me hopeful—could he be the one?

And then, at last, there was Boyd. So like my father—confident, unorthodox, completely unapologetic. Mostly, I was struck stupid with lust and fascination and the miracle of having found what I thought was lost forever. In some reptilian part of me, though, I calculated the opportunity. Now that I was big enough to fight my father, he was too old and broken. It wouldn't be fair. With Boyd, though, I could go back in time, or bring my youthful father forward in another man's body, and at last we could fight it out as equals, and see whose ways were better.

I lost, of course. Not only the philosophical fight, but my

health, money, and a baby too. The one I aborted. I was terrorized, robbed, beat on. And yet, despite how truly awful it was, I wonder if I planned to lose all along. For only after Boyd was done with me did I finally understand there had never been any union between my father and me. I'd been used. The promises and threats I was raised on—my father never intended to bring them out of the twilight, into the flesh. As long as they remained in shadow, I could never prove them wrong, and they continued to work on me. Through Boyd, they became actions, and at last I could see power over others for what it really is: paltry, unfair. Greedy. Scared. With that, I could finally stop protecting my father; I could let my hero-worship die. Somewhere along the sad, silent drive to Dover, that morphed in my mind into triumph: At last, I told myself, I was free.

But now I wonder. I've lived the last ten years by that John Cage idea that every seat is the best seat. That getting ruined is just as valuable as, say, getting respect or health insurance. Maybe more valuable, because you feel pain stronger; loss is a more indelible experience. And so I have accepted, and not judged—not experiences and not people. Matt Jasper calls it Pyrrhonism—the old Greek philosophy of nothing being certain and therefore one cannot assign a better/worse value to anything. But now I'm questioning Pyrrhonism, along with our American underground philosophy of something having worth only if it goes all the way—even if it's bad stuff.

Because now I realize how much people like my father and Boyd count on women thinking along those lines: that she wins by losing, that she becomes rich by getting robbed. That she can save a man by letting him ruin her.

My mother and I are watching her dying TV—a hand-me-down from Mrs McCooey, who no longer wanted the foreheads of the actors in her soaps to drift to the right while the rest of the face acted like it didn't notice. But the sliding heads of my mother's oversized basketball players only add to the wildness of their manoeuvres. These running, twirling, leaping men possess all the grace my mother never even tried to find in her own life.

"I don't know how to tell you this," my mother says through the hand she's fluttering over her mouth, "but ever since I've been watching the Celtics, I'm..." She's already stage whispering, but she drops her voice even lower. "I'm attracted to black men!"

I burst out laughing. My mother grew up in a small town in Vermont where she never even saw a black person till she was twenty years old, her first time leaving New England. She went on a college trip to Texas. It was 110 degrees, and chickens were dying in the streets. She never left again.

At fifty-three, my mother is still waiting for her real life to begin—when some rich old guy who doesn't want to have sex is going to come along and marry her. Or maybe some

twenty-two-year-old, seven-foot, black sports star who does want sex (and doesn't mind her scoliosis and colostomy bag)! My mother always seemed a ridiculous figure to me. But from my current pit of abject failure, it's pretty hard to feel scorn about someone else's dream that will never come true. I can see now what I never understood before: my needy, un-heroic mother does have a certain grace. It's the way she watches. The way she waits. It's childlike, in the sweetest sense of the word. Despite everything that's happened in her life, she still really thinks something's going to happen next that's so good, so wonderful. It doesn't have to be big, and she doesn't want to walk on anyone's back to get it. She trusts that it's coming to her for no reason, or for the reason that she's good inside (like children believe that they're good). Watching my mother watch the black men, her little paws on the comforter twitching, I think maybe this time she's right. And Rachel, and me. And the rabbi, ready to rip dead skin off hearts, and then all hearts will be on fire. And Wolf, believing he can use trash and five-cent screws to turn his life around and fly away. Maybe all five of us are right, and something so good, so wonderful, is just about to happen.

Chapter Thirty-Four

I'm rich! And popular! I'm a love and sex advice columnist; a sick sex internet chat hostess; an independent films judge. I'm doing interpretive dance to Fabio with executives I grab out of cubicles and it's broadcast over people's computers live, and they call it radio. I'm "the Brutal Astrologer" writing a weekly horoscope column for a magazine not much bigger than a credit card, and made out of plastic, called Modo. The words run like a ticker across the piece of plastic, sent by radio transmission. A start-up pays me to get plastic breasts and then write about it.

These billion-dollar corporations want to capitalize on emerging technologies and to capture the fringes of society. So they establish a baby company, pour a few million dollars into it, hire me, and then as soon as the offshoot company isn't a huge, instant, moneymaking hit, they kill it, leaving me sud-

denly poor and jobless again. And then someone else is calling me to start a new, not-very-clear job (they tell me to make my position up as we go along), and I'm rich again! Canada and Sweden keep sending for me too, to be on TV and just to talk to people at club openings for a thousand dollars a night. Other countries love how American *Dancing Queen* is.

If life with Wolf is hard, I don't tell anyone. I don't even write about it in my diary. I say instead the things I'm proud of. I say the things that make him look good. When he says and does things I recognize more and more clearly as early signs of schizophrenia, I don't despair. I tell people, "He has an unusual imagination!" I make him *Rollerderby*'s new CD reviewer. And when I do my job—write, or open clubs, or dispense relationship advice, I laugh and dance and try to get people to really live. I'm travelling; I'm growing rich and I really am having fun. But I have never felt so isolated; I have never felt such discrepancy between what weighs a thousand pounds inside my body and the float-y, sexy, feathery things coming out of my mouth and flying fingertips.

Jean Louis calls to tell me, at two dollars a minute, how much he loves *Dancing Queen*. "You say the very basics," he says. "You, Rachel, the small city. The life is very close to you. Politics is your mother eating chips, looking at the news. The leftist philosophy a century ago was just like you. People were working in factories and they wrote about that. It was good,

then. But a hundred years later, it becomes abstract ideas, political correctness. So it has to be destroyed. You destroyed, with the shows, and in the private life. But you are not like Psychic Youth, and all the punks—you don't just leave it ruined. You want to build something new. Me too."

He is being sued by the French Jewish student organization and France itself, because they say the lyrics on his CD *Livrez Les Blanches Aux Bicots* [Throw The White Women To The Arabs] are trying to incite racist murder! He had to sell his apartment to pay his lawyer, and he moved into his basement—but not before police came to his apartment in the middle of the night and trashed it, looking for evidence. He is very excited. It's a paranoiac's dream come true—what's inside his head is finally matched by the outside. We joke about him making a CD all about the judge—love songs—and the judge will be so sickened he'll throw the whole case out.

He stops laughing and says he suddenly feels he will win his case: "When I talk to you, I feel my innocence."

I feel my innocence too. I feel the world stretching, yawning, its spine cracking. The world is becoming large again, becoming perfect.

I testify for him by fax, explaining to the court as best I can the nature of our shows, how and why we came to take on characters, including racists and murderers. I email Jean Louis a picture of Wolfgang; he sends back in attachment the newspaper photo of himself standing before the Amazonian

rainforest he accidentally burned down. He looks frantic before the towering flames, with nothing on but ridiculous silky short-shorts. I wait for his emails the way ten years earlier I waited for his letters. The way skin wonders when a hand dangling nearby will brush it again.

Chapter Thirty-Five

At last he's here, this man I'm still legally married to, in his dirty clothes and his eagerness, and it's strange. We circle each other in my too-small living room, carefully never touching. We decided on doing one more "one last" tour. I tell him about my years away from him, when I went crazy, and then made a magazine that crazy people love, and then I was swallowed whole by a sickly baby, and then I got beat up by an unemployed fascist, and then I landed a high-paying job that doesn't actually, physically exist. All the stuff I never tell anyone, because I'm ashamed. Jean Louis turns it into a story, finding what's compelling in the mess. He hangs off the couch like a vulture or an owl, feeding my story back to me. I crouch on the floor at his feet, hugging my own knees. My arguments with Cindy that got me interested in Boyd have become "entering the dark woods."

"These woods," Jean Louis whispers conspiratorially, "have the smell and shadow of the devil, and his will, too."

What will happen next? I wonder, even though I know.

Rachel never found Jean Louis attractive because he looks like a weasel. But all the cute and perfect button noses look so ineffectual to me, compared to Jean Louis's endless snout. "Weasels are hot," I told Rachel when we last argued over guys' looks in general, and Jean Louis's in particular. "And he's the King Weasel!" He's the best storyteller.

"Anton sits in his velvet throne," he continues, "the bald mummy; Boyd his tool, the living dick. Boyd brings the parade of girls to Anton-devil. Finally you were chosen like the Virgin Mary to be the mother of the holy son, Wolfgang. The devil wanted the number one mother for his child." We both look towards the room where Wolf is asleep, and we remember that it's real; that this is Wolf's real life.

"I am very curious to know what will be Wolfgang's future," Jean Louis says. "It is a lot of fear, but a lot of glory too. This boy is going to surprise us. You say me he has the troubles, but for some weird reason, I see his future in an optimistic way."

Soon it will be dawn. And because he said that about Wolfgang, what I feel for him is deeper and sadder and fuller than anything I ever felt when we were together. It makes me shy, and silent. I feel him watching me for a minute, and then he pulls his coat up to his chin, like a blanket. His old time to sleep signal.

In the morning, we laugh with Wolf, with each other. Wolfgang knocks down Jean Louis's computer, which has all his music on it and no back up. Jean Louis doesn't yell at Wolf at all. He treats him respectfully and with charm, the way he treats foreigners. He checks his computer and it's all right. We go to a museum of mouldy, taxidermied animals. Wolf is a little wild, and we have to leave before the end of the tour. We seem to have forgotten about the show we were supposed to be working on. We laugh about everything. Then, when Wolf is asleep or with a sitter, a strange hostility rises up between me and Jean Louis. We look at each other with mean eyes and tight mouths. It's as if Jean Louis and I were in a race and we were leading the pack, and then I saw this other, little guy who had fallen, and I had to stop to help him, and the pack ran off without me, laughing and yelling. And now Jean Louis has come back for me (this is a really long race); he found me in the nice house I built for the little guy. He sees that I'm struggling; he wants to take care of me, but he doesn't know how. It makes him angry! He's not American. He doesn't know anything about children. He doesn't know how to live in a nice house. And he doesn't know if he can stop racing—he doesn't even know if I'm asking him to! I want to ask. It makes me angry, that I won't ask. It's so tiring, my average day, and so endless. I watch Wolf suffer. I do it all alone. I say nothing. I don't let myself cry. It would be so nice to be inside the arms of this man, who is a big mess, but a

good man. He remembers who I used to be. He could pet all my edges away, and I would cry and cry and cry.

When the middle school is letting out, Wolf and I go into the little forest the kids cut through, as is our habit. We stand still like deer and the kids don't even see us. One boy goes running and crashing right past us like a speared wildebeest. A minute later a girl follows—tall and blonde with eyes slanted down. "I can't fucking run!" she calls, and stops, her hands on her knees, huffing. The boy doesn't say anything, and goes crashing back in the opposite direction. It doesn't make sense. The girl trudges out into the street and twirls around, her arms out, her head back, singing: "I want to get hit by a car!" The boy continues to zigzag through the little forest, and the girl bellows one last proclamation before heading home: "My ankle hurts—I can't think straight!"

When you look in on inept first love, it's cute and silly and unimportant. When you're in it, the pain is so bad—like growing three inches in two hours, and all your bones and muscles are ripping, and no one respects or understands what's happening to you. I think this is what's happening between me and Jean Louis now. It feels extra ridiculous in people so (comparatively) old.

What I'd like to do is cut my hair. I want to move. I want another baby. I want no children at all. I want to be able to want Jean Louis like I used to: unrealistically, where no one else matters. I want to get dermabrasion—sand the outer

layer of my flesh off. I want to work hard, write with nothing else mattering. Instead I fear I am cashing in on my name. I don't really want any of the emotional balance I have now or the money. This stupid forbearance. It makes me feel dizzy.

Patience and things going good make everyone in my family nervous. We don't like good. We like miracles. My aunt Jody just killed herself, after finally getting a job she loved, friends, a doctor husband. She started by sabotaging things in little ways—her marriage, her friendships, her finances. She was trying to get back to the place where she had nothing, and anything could happen. Finally she maxed out her credit cards and walked into a "seedy" (as described by my cousin) hotel in North Carolina, put the chain on the door and—I imagine her falling all smoky onto the bed and then propping herself up on one elbow to fumble with the paraphernalia spread out on a chipped nightstand—o.d.'ed.

My cousin thinks Jody killed herself on purpose. I think it had to be an accident. When you want to die, you don't have the drive to max out your credit cards. You don't care. You only buy things crazy like that when you still have a lust for life—a reckless, bad-direction lust. I feel pretty sure it was hope my aunt Jody felt in that hotel room. Hope like hot coffee with no cup to pour into. I picture her, at fifty-eight, behind the chained door, transforming one last time into a middle school girl in the middle of a street—arms

flung wide, twirling, begging the rushing cars to hit her but not really meaning it at all.

That night, I take a walk alone. Some people have their lights on and I look in their windows to see what decorations people collect. A lot of candles, all unlit. I understand now that I'm not going to Jean Louis.

The problem is not that I have a child. I've always pictured Jean Louis with a kid, teaching him what he can and can't eat in a jungle, in a desert. The problem is that I have this child. Wolf is always going to be a sickly boy. He won't be going to any jungle, any desert, any time soon. I can't keep Jean Louis away from those places.

It's hours later when I walk back in the door, and Jean Louis says "eh?" softly from his couch—which I think means: "Which will it be?" I allow myself the option, one last time, of going to him, and then I rush past him into my room instead, mine and Wolf's.

I come out of the bedroom early the next morning and Jean Louis is already awake and pacing. Instead of saying good morning, he yells: "You have made me your little dog!"

"Well what else am I supposed to do," I holler back, "with a big depressed lump who hasn't cooked one meal the whole time he's been here?" We're shouting each other down and blushing, and then Wolf comes out, sucking his thumb, trail-

ing his blanket like a cartoon of a boy, and it's over.

"You have this … thing, this … special tape?" Jean Louis asks gently. He means a tape gun. I go and get it, and he's tossing his things into a box, taping the box shut, and then we're all in my little Geo heading for the bus station. We get out and the wind is blowing so hard it feels like it will rip Wolfgang out of my arms. Jean Louis holds onto his big box; he turns back before boarding the bus and his hair points straight up like an Anime cartoon and he has to yell to be heard: "I make the worst mistake of my life!"

I smile and nod. He said the same thing the first time we split up, too. That guy loves to make the worst mistake of his life! I strap Wolf back in his carseat and then I strap myself down and I watch Jean Louis's bus pull away. I feel left behind. But strangely, what I feel more than that is joy. That he is alive. That he didn't change, and I didn't ask him to.

"There goes a big sinner," I say to Wolf.

"I'm a big spinner too," Wolf replies. Wolf often turns around and around and around like a dog chasing his tail.

Fyodor Dostoyevsky said God loves a big sinner; He hates only the little sinner. Actually, I'm not sure he said that. I've lived by that quote, but then I re-read all his books and I can't find it anywhere! Anyway, a little sinner would have tested love on a sixty-dollar phone bill. Jean Louis, bless him, needed to spend six hundred dollars on an actual plane ticket before hurting everybody!

He's going back to his basement. He likes it—he loves to give up everything nice and sunny, because he still equates "real" with slimy and dark and hidden. And with suffering. He has to keep working against the way things are done, no matter how it is that they are done. Somebody has to still take on the father, the one who molested Jean Louis when he was eight, and who drove his brothers to suicide. That particular father has since faded but his spirit lives on in church and state and "the norm." Jean Louis is still ferociously fighting him from below. And from attics and basements and people's couches—even now, in his forties. He fights on stage and in the courtroom. Whereas me, I think I forgive everyone. I've realized how much we all have in common, how sad everyone is underneath it all. Even the father.

And so the best man of my life is gone—again. As is the time of my life, it would seem—the decade when I was deranged in a kind of sexy way, and creative, and wide open. Well, okay then! I can give it all up. That old life was haunted anyway. It really was kind of creepy! Not because of Jean Louis, but because of what hovered over his shoulder, and mine, whispering to us, egging us on.

On the ride to the station, Jean Louis called himself a coward for "giving up sure happiness," for being unable to relinquish his fantasy of being always a stranger. But he is no coward for leaving me. He is someone who made a decision, when indecision—for another day, a year, maybe a lifetime—would

have been so much easier. Maybe I don't like his decision, but I respect him for making it. Our forgotten underground ran on the same principle: Better to leap in the wrong direction than to stay still too long—to hover—just to avoid possible disaster. Jean Louis is still leaping. That's his glory. Where's mine? Where's the glory in merely not running, not fucking up any more? The glory is in it being so hard, in it being the hardest thing, and I'm doing it. Because that was my decision. For Wolf, who might not even benefit from my efforts at all, who might still end up in an institution. The glory is that there's no glory.

I was wrong about my aunt Jody. It wasn't hope she felt in that hotel room; it was greed. She was eaten alive with jealousy of all the young ones hogging the streets, stalking around in ridiculous clothes, tearing and twirling and being ridiculous and selfish and spilling their glory recklessly. It's hard to simply step aside from that swirl, just because it's time, because it's someone else's turn, and because some small person needs you. It's hard when you know that all you can hope to be left with is dignity—which, in comparison to the sprawling, painful splendour you once had, is really rather pale.

Chapter Thirty-Six

My father is working three jobs to finance his latest scheme—going to Russia and Eastern Europe to have sex in hotels with impoverished foreigners with children to feed. He describes this as "having adventures."

When I enter my father's drafty bachelor's pad to pick up Wolf, I see that the video I asked my father not to show him again is on. Wolfgang is snuggled under my father's arm, peeking out through his own fingers. The men have just begun their doomed descent into a dark tunnel where the giant bug is waiting. As the giant bug snaps the first man's head off, Wolf screams. Blood squirts from the empty neck.

I clear my throat. "Wolf's nightmares are getting worse," I say.

"So in cavemen times, when there were no VCRs, boys had no nightmares?" my father mocks. "Is that how you think?

Nightmares teach you things you need to know." He's implying that with my cosy, new life, I have long forgotten the important lessons nightmares bring.

"If you don't stop that tape," I tell him, "Wolf will not be coming back here."

My father stands up. "You know," he says, "you have gotten really fucking annoying."

Wolf laughs and points at me. He says, "Fucking annoying!" and throws his head back laughing. All his nervous energy, all his fear from watching the bug movie and watching my father and me argue, is raining out of him all over me. "A bug's gonna cut your head off!" he tells me with bright and crazy glee.

I yell at my father for the first time in my life. I yell: "Wolfgang is not your pawn! You've always used children to spite their mothers, and you're not doing it to my kid ever again!"

I grab Wolf and jump into my car and he jumps into his and chases me to my house. We all get out of the cars, and Wolf goes running over to my father and leaps onto his legs.

"I'm sorry," Wolf sobs. "I didn't mean to make you mad. I wanna go back to your house. Please, Grandpa!" But my father just peels him off his legs and shoves him in my direction. "Grandpa doesn't like me any more!" Wolf wails.

"This is between me and you," I growl at my father. "Tell him he didn't do anything wrong. It needs to come from your lips."

My father refuses, saying, "He knows exactly what's going on here. Lisa, you've had a hair across your ass for years and we're going to have it out right now."

"No we are not. I've said everything I have to say."

I'm willing him to leave before my legs give out.

"Well when you have time sometime," my father spits, "we are going to settle this." He folds his 6'4" body behind the wheel of his tiny Geo Metro, and he's gone.

He just doesn't get it, and I don't feel any need to inform him, that everything got settled between him and me a long time ago, the night Boyd strangled me and threw me against walls and bashed my head against the futon frame. That was when I stopped caring about my father's twisted point of view, stopped caring about the terrible things that happened to him as a child, stopped trying to be the one person who could answer his idea of loyalty—which meant to forsake and ridicule everyone but him. When Boyd released his hands from my neck and stood up, dazed, like a big, stupid oaf and smacked his lips with the satisfaction of having given in to impulse and I scrambled up off the floor and scurried past him, that was the moment my father lost his hold on me.

Let him go find some daughter-figure if he wants, and "settle this" with her. Now that I think of it, he is doing exactly that, over and over. He found his last girlfriend in some bushes. Just her legs were sticking out. He pulled her out of there, slapped her awake, took her home, washed her up and

made her his own. He keeps finding these drunks and taking care of them in all the ways he didn't take care of me, when I was his little girl. That's fine, but I'm done with the game of substitutes. I have a real little boy I want to take real care of in real time. I hold my arms out to him, and he rushes into them.

"Well!" I say. "What a scene, huh? How can we turn this day around?"

"Go to the beach," Wolf suggests immediately, his tears evaporating.

"It's getting dark," I say. "It's gonna be totally freezing, you know."

"I know!"

I throw our winter coats and every blanket in the house into the trunk. In the back seat, Wolfgang is full of plans. For starting an ant colony, and making the biggest drawing in the world, and sewing a special coat for the tree stump in the yard because "that guy must get awfully cold out there in the wind!"

I say "uh-huh, uh-huh," and think about that almost-year my father had me all to himself, in California when I was fifteen. I don't let myself remember it at all, normally—the way a quit smoker will reluctantly turn away from even one little cigarette. That wonderful, awful, lonely, electrifying time that changed my life, that made me into the kind of person who goes looking for a destiny—and if she doesn't

find it, will create one, no matter the cost.

My father systematically destroyed, using sarcasm and insinuation, my unimaginative acceptance of the life my classmates back home were moving into almost as one. The other day I ran into the local boy who took my virginity and wanted to marry me before I left for California and my father. He's a lawyer now, living in Somersworth with his wife and two kids. The Somersworth school system is the best, he told me. I bet he never threatened his wife with a shopping cart, and I bet she never destroyed a stage, naked, in Paris. So many mistakes never made. But they must wonder sometimes what their life could have been. I don't have to wonder, because my life was. I am glad of every strange way and person I chose, and I am grateful to my father for forcing me to choose. He taught me fear, and he taught me fearlessness. He taught me that being destroyed won't destroy me. Destruction and loss are nothing to cower from. They're a chance to begin anew.

And yet, these are not lessons I want my son to learn. I don't want him hunting down self-destruction because it's the only way out he can see. Yes I survived it all. I became a more interesting person. In some ways. But there is still that hole in me. Even now, when I no longer have use for it, the nervous energy shoots through me. And there are ways that I am just plain sad.

When we finally reach the beach, it's not so cold after all. And even though he's still talking non-stop, Wolf seems re-

laxed. It's like he was just waiting for some big hand to reach down and cut his obsession with Grandpa off for him. It's too late for me—for all my bluster, I know I'll never be able to save myself fully from my father … but I was able to save another little kid. I really did it! I stick to it, too. Despite my father having his girlfriends call me over the next few weeks to tell me I'm a bad person or I only have one father or, when that doesn't work, one gives me the message that my father's so riled up she's afraid that, if I don't make up with him and let him have Wolf, he's going to shoot my head off with a rifle. For days, I keep the shades drawn and a portable phone in my hand at all times. I imagine scenarios. I decide I will offer my father a banana, or something equally improbable, should he get into the house with a weapon, and that'll discombobulate him just long enough for me to get past him and run. But that's not his style—he would come knocking with a smile, get invited in. Or borrow a car so I wouldn't recognize his, and strangle me in the grocery store bathroom, so no one would suspect him. I almost get in an accident several times, scanning the drivers of every car beside and behind me. Then it hits me: This is the same trap I've seen him chuckle over using on other people so many times. I start laughing out loud at myself for still being so dumb. My father hasn't killed anyone in twenty-five years—and the ones he did kill, he never told them about it beforehand.

My father's third party warnings, I remember now, are game moves; there's nothing real in there at all. That was just the last roar of a dying lion. The sun is on me now.

Chapter Thirty-Seven

Rachel and I are picking our way across the splintered, faded railroad ties; she's telling me about her dramatic affair with a sociopath named Sugar. Sugar is a dryfucker. He can only have sex if the girl is not wet. So he either sticks it in fast when Rachel isn't expecting it—like, he'll leap out from behind the washing machine, or he says such cruel things she dries out down there with mortification. In a funny turn of events, his vile, unpredictable treatment of her seems to be curing her brain damage and ulcers, when nothing else worked.

"Just please don't have a baby with this guy," I say.

"Leese—come on. I may be dumb, but I'm not stupid."

"Well that makes one of us."

"Ha! Oh my god—have you found anything out about Chris Sakey yet?"

My old schizophrenic boyfriend became obsessed with the owner of a nightclub in Portsmouth—The Elvis Room. He stabbed her seventeen times. The doorman dragged him off her, earning a few stabs himself. Chris was put in prison, and the nightclub owner and the doorman had adjoining hospital rooms. And they fell in love and got married! It was written up in Good Housekeeping, in an article on couples that met in unusual ways. The accompanying photo shows the pair beaming. We don't know if Chris is still in prison or if they put him in a mental hospital.

Rachel is walking down one of the steel rails, her arms out like airplane wings. "Remember Chris Sakey always muttering "I am a shark, watch me swim, in the water where the lights are dim?" Can you imagine being inside his head all the time, trapped in there, forever? And they never give you the right medications in prison. They don't care if you're suffering. Anyway, about Sugar—I know what I'm doing. This is the last one—the last guy like this."

I probably shouldn't, but I believe her. Sugar reminds me of the bristly hairbrush Rachel used on herself as a novice masturbator, many years ago. It's strange how she and I have always used sickness to get to health. It's like we want to know only what's real, not what's good. Or we were like that. I wonder if we're different now. There was always this "real self" we were trying to get to, beckoning to us on the horizon, always just out of reach. And then when we found someone

(or something) who looked dangerous or overpowering, we ran to him. He could be the one to help us rip off our current skin, we thought, tear the hoary coating from our heart—and so make us lighter, faster, in our sprint to catch up to that Real Self out there in the distance.

I really believe that this time we've done it: We caught up with ourselves. And it's just like in a movie or a lesson some old person tries to teach you: what we searched for was right in front of us all along. What we are is exactly where we are: two old friends walking down the tracks, a little older, a little broken, and cracking each other up so bad my bum hurts from when I fell down laughing right onto a rail. For a second I had a memory of Boyd and Shaun Partridge laughing so hard, but they laughed over other people's misfortunes. Rachel and I laugh over our own, and over nothing. We laugh just because we're together, and because when we walk together, it's like we can walk back into what we were so long ago, and also because we know it's going to be like this when we're eighty, too. This is what happiness is: that we've changed, and that we haven't.

I say that to Rachel, and she says, "Yeah. I just wish everyone else knew you like I know you. Instead of as someone who, whatever weird thing is going on, you're out doing it, observing it."

I'm surprised. "I don't just write about weird new things," I say. "I write about God and death. Mail-order brides."

"Yeah but you're never sad about God and death. The mail-order bride doesn't feel regret—she's somehow glamorous. You make everything interesting. You presented your relationship with Boyd in *Rollerderby* as gothically romantic! As these two minds wrestling in this funky house. And it was that, but it was also claustrophobic and dirty and abusive. And he made you get that abortion! Something that had a huge effect on you, and you've never mentioned it. You write about eating soul food with Jon Spencer's new band, or you're on HBO asking people about anal sex. And that's a shame, because I know you have so much more to offer: real insight and wisdom. You are philosophically seeking. You've taught me so much, and you don't want anyone to see any of that."

We think we hear a train, and then we know we do. We leap off the tracks and it whooshes by us in a blur. The wonderful thud thud thud. We stand still watching until it's completely gone, then we climb back up on a rail with our arms out, one airplane right behind the other.

"Rache, maybe you haven't noticed, but my real self is pretty totally unlucky and alone right now. No one likes the unlucky and alone. Look at my poor mother—she is repulsive to people!"

"But she wallows. She sucks the life out of people. You are so fair and dispassionate about your situation. Your day is taking Wolf to specialists hours away, watching him put his head through the glass on purpose, watching him torture the

cat before you got him on Zyprexa. The shame he would feel after doing those things, and the way you help him—that's your life! I have self-loathing and Sugar and no friends but you; I can't sleep because my ass is getting so fat I'm afraid it's going to creep up in the night and suffocate me. That's my real life."

I examine her from behind. "Your ass isn't fat. It's just right."

"Well you've always liked a big bottom. I can't trust your judgment in that area. Don't change the subject! I think you think you can't be funny any more, if you talk about serious things. But you are funny—you can't help that. When you joke with me about the things Wolf does, it's dark humour, but it's rooted in something real. What you present to the world is light humour, rooted in nothing. You keep it fun and fast-paced. No one can relate to that long-term. Struggle is what makes life rich—not success. Your New York friends you go do coke with and smoke Luckys and have naked parties—even their lives are changing and becoming more complicated."

"I just don't want to write about Wolfgang's problems and trying to fix them and making some gains but mostly he's just falling and falling. I don't mind going through it, but I don't want that to be my legacy, or his."

"Who does want their legacy? There's this old man manager of a pig farm in the Midwest who was just in the papers. He

kept complaining about how the pigs were being treated, but nobody listened, so he called Humane Farming and reported them, and the place fired him. So now he's old and has no job and no money, but he got that nasty pig farm shut down. They quoted him as saying, 'Well I always thought somehow I'd be a hero. But I didn't think I would be a pigs' hero!' I've never known you to be someone who would slow down for the less fortunate, the less charismatic. You never minded insanity, but it had to be quick, sharp insanity. You valued mental sharpness above all else. You totally changed your mind and your life for this kid, this mentally and physically delayed kid. You went from one extreme to extremely the other extreme! And at a pretty young age—that's profound. How you handle him, what you've learned from him—that's a rich legacy. That's who you are."

I'm glad that I'm behind her and don't have to make any eye contact. I feel flustered and awkward and it's all I can do to not fall off the rail. But I'm storing every word she says inside somewhere so I can take it out later when I'm alone.

"You're someone who has always made me want to be more than I am," she continues, "who even now makes me believe that anything is possible! It's the definition of 'anything' that's changed, is all. Without you, I'd be dead. These panic attacks are like slipping down a roof, scraping down the shingles with your fingernails. I can get through them because of what you've taught me about strength, and besides—you need me!

I always remember that, whenever I get that old urge to off myself. I bet that pig man had a friend like you."

I swoop down on a good, flat rock to skim over the gravel, which is so flattened down around the rails, it acts the same as water. My rock makes three skips. "Rache, neither of us were molested as kids. Well, maybe I was a little emotionally. But you had it pretty easy. Why do you think we're so weird?"

"Sometimes people are just like that, Leese. There's not an answer for everything." She picks up her own flat rock and chucks it—I know she's trying for four skips, to beat mine, but she can only pull off three. Now we're both scanning for the best flat rock of all, elbowing each other out of the way while pretending we're not. Finally we get tired, and sink down in the sunshine. "Don't you wish rock soup actually tasted good?" Rachel says.

I close my eyes. "Well, anyway," I sigh, "I like my kid. Despite all the troubles, we have a healthy relationship, and he's male. So there's a first for everything!"

My favourite line anywhere, ever, is another one of Dostoevsky's—and I'm sure he did say this one; it's in The Brothers Karamazov: "In most cases, people, even the most vicious, are much more naïve and simple-hearted than we assume. And this is true of ourselves too." That's what embarrasses me, what I work so hard to hide from myself and everybody else: that I might be simple and good. It doesn't sound nearly so good as being a complicated and bad woman! But goodness

might be much deeper and more intricate than I gave it credit for, and even the gentlest love is the fiercest thing there is. Probably a good half of our problems—our generation's, our movement's, and especially Rachel's and mine—came from closing our eyes hard and thinking we could wish everything nice and everything easy away, and be characters in a novel—the really exciting, soulless ones.

Then again, I might be entirely wrong about that. It's fun going along with Rachel, discovering these truths like the most perfect, flattest rocks, casting them away, and then rediscovering them.

On our way back, Rachel stops short: "Look!" She's pointing to a big-breasted figure traced in the sand. "I guess it's really, officially spring now."

The first warm day of every year, Dover's own Mad Tracer of Naked Women comes out. He makes his busty ladies wherever there's sand, and then bows solemnly to them: Rachel saw him once. He's been doing it since at least 1979. We know he once lived in the halfway house. I would love to interview him for the final issue of *Rollerderby* if I could find him, but he remains elusive.