

Victoria in Rehab

It was a Wednesday night meeting, in a windowless conference room on the first floor of the Portland Elks Lodge. Victoria was wrestling with Step Four, “We made a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves.” Step Five was even worse—“Admitted to God, ourselves, and another human being the exact nature of our wrongs”—and Victoria dreaded it. She had been a bad mother, and a bad wife. She was lucky her daughter was alive. She was trying very hard to do the right thing.

It was July in Oregon. Victoria wore a flowered sundress with three-quarter-length sleeves. She had been sober (again) for six months.

There was a pigeon that night: a woman in a leather coat who looked like she’d seen some rough nights. It was hard to be the pigeon—Victoria remembered. She hadn’t belonged at first. Though she had tattoos on both her shoulders, Victoria was married and drove a new Volvo station wagon (her old one damaged beyond repair). But she felt at home among the sad sack alcoholics, the blue-collar losers in life. After all, she had fucked it all up, same as they had, even though she had started out with everything.

They were waiting for the meeting to start, standing by the coffee urn, holding Styrofoam cups and Nutter Butter cookies. Manuel was on the other side of the room, one eye on Victoria, as always. He was taking his sponsor duties seriously. She winked at him, and he walked toward her.

“Hey,” said Manuel. He gave Victoria a hug, and his fingers covered the wingspan on her eagle tattoo. “How’re you doing?” he asked. It was still disconcerting

when Manuel, a heavysset Mexican American man, spoke to her with such earnest encouragement. Victoria likely couldn't have taken it from anyone else. Certainly not from her husband, Uli, who seemed to have given up on her at last.

Manuel was well-known in Portland; to have him work on you you had to wait five years or so. Unless you knew him from AA, in which case he'd do your eagles after hours and for a discount.

They made their way to their seats, and Orlando, in a leather jacket, called the meeting to order. Victoria figured she'd speak last, try to be fearless. Manuel got up first, crossing his arms over his barrel chest. One forearm read, "Anna," the name of his first wife, and the other read, "Eloise," the name of his second. He talked about his son, about trying to be a better man for his son.

Victoria drifted off while Manuel spoke. She hated her sober life. At night, instead of drinking beer in her own yard, she sat hunched in a room at the Larkspur Lane Extended Stay Hotel, trawling Craigslist and Ebay looking for a fairy bed, for pictures of frogs, because her daughter, Sunny, loved frogs.

Victoria had driven out to Corvallis for a purple rug, then bought a matching lamp at Target. Her lawyer had told Victoria not to contact Uli, not to go to Sunny's school, not to peek in the window and watch her playing with the plastic kitchen, with the bowls of thick primary color paint that the teachers put out after nap time.

Victoria had hated her drinking life, too. She resented motherhood—having to quit the band and put off law school to have time for Sunny, the awkward stroller, the other fat parents at the park. Standing by the window, waiting for Uli at the end of the day, she had felt so powerless and bereft. Victoria wanted to be the one on the subway,

arriving home and slinging a briefcase on the counter, accepting her daughter flying through the air into her arms.

Instead, Victoria had been the one in the kitchen, covered in jam or shit. She was the one who hadn't started dinner, who hadn't given any thought to the window treatments, who didn't make enough money to hire a fucking nanny and go back to her music. She was the one who started the six-pack before Uli came home, before happy hour, before lunch.

Victoria's reverie was interrupted when Orlando said, "Anyone else?" Manuel looked at her pointedly, and Victoria stood up. She walked to the front of the room, and tried to tell the truth. "My name is Victoria, and I'm an alcoholic," she began.

"Hello, Victoria," said her fellow fuck-ups.

"I've made a lot of mistakes," said Victoria. Manuel nodded sagely—Victoria had told him about the accident. "I've been sober for six months," said Victoria. She felt her palms begin to sweat, and pressed them together. "I'm on Step Four. And I've made some really bad decisions. I, uh, I ran away from home when I was eighteen. I got into drugs, but I got better, I was just drinking. Which I thought was okay, I thought. Uh, I'm not making a whole lot of sense."

Victoria took a deep breath, slipped one foot from her shoe and put it back. "I got in a very bad car wreck while I was drunk," she said rapidly. "I can't remember anything about it. That's one of my problems, the blackouts. I was sitting in the yard, having a few beers...and then I don't...I'm afraid of what I've done. I..." her voice trailed off.

But she knew the Step, and she knew what she had to do. “My daughter was in the car,” she said. “I woke up the hospital and I didn’t even know why I was there.”

Victoria looked up, expecting to see hatred, revulsion. Instead, she saw rows of people staring at her with kindness. She opened her mouth, planning to say everything. Even Manuel looked at her with rapt attention, even the pigeon.

“That’s all,” she lied.

Part Two

The Relapse

Manuel was inside the diner, staring into a coffee cup. A red nylon jacket covered his tattooed shoulders and arms. It had been a while since Victoria had been to AA, long enough for Manuel to grow a strange sort of goatee, a thin stripe down his chin.

She was sitting in parking lot of Dot’s Diner. Rain washed over her car, swept cleanly away by the wipers. Sunny was abandoned to sleep in the back seat, her head slumped to the side, mouth slightly parted. She breathed out loudly, and Victoria smiled. Finally, Victoria didn’t have to listen to Uli’s snoring and now Sunny had started. It was the same strangled wheeze—Victoria would never escape it.

In the passenger’s seat of the car was a bottle of wine, wrapped in a brown paper bag.

Victoria turned off the car and stepped into the downpour. She couldn’t carry an umbrella and Sunny, so she flipped her collar up, as if it made a difference.

Sunny stirred when Victoria unstrapped her, opened her eyes and then closed them, sighing contentedly and wrapping her legs around Victoria's waist. She was so big! Only five, but Victoria could remember when Sunny was the length of her forearm.

She struggled across the parking lot as fast as she could, but by the time Victoria shove the door open, both she and Sunny were drenched. Why hadn't Victoria's ex put a raincoat on Sunny that morning? Or had he—and had Victoria forgotten to look for it in Sunny's cubby? No, she had looked: blanket, lunchbox (with most of a deli sandwich inside; Victoria ate it), jeans with mud circling the hems like shackles.

"Hey," said Manuel, rushing to the door and taking Sunny, who was still asleep. "Why you gotta do it yourself?" he said irritably. "Why don't you ask me for help?"

"I'm sorry," said Victoria.

Manuel settled Sunny into the banquette and Victoria slid beside her, placing Sunny's head on her thigh, running fingernails through her hair. Sunny resumed her snoring.

"Whoa," said Manuel.

"Just like my ex," said Victoria. "The exact fucking same."

Manuel put his wrists on the table, surrounded his coffee with his thick hands. He looked as if he could lift anything, but Manuel's real talent was delicacy: his tattoos were detailed and gorgeous.

"It's been a while," said Manuel.

Victoria took a few strands of hair, twirled them around her index finger. Then she placed her palms flat on the warm table. "I think I might get a hot fudge sundae," she said.

“You don’t come to meetings anymore,” said Manuel.

“I know.”

“Why did you call me?” said Manuel.

Victoria was silent. The waitress came, and she ordered coffee. “I thought you wanted a sundae,” said Manuel.

“My ex is getting married tomorrow,” said Victoria, touching my daughter’s hair again.

“Oh,” said Manuel. He leaned back in his seat.

“I’ve been sober a year. I guess I thought...”

“You didn’t get sober for him,” said Manuel.

“Didn’t I?” After a minute, Victoria whispered, “I have a bottle of wine in the car.”

Manuel sighed. Then he met her gaze. “You haven’t done anything yet, baby,” he said. “You called me. You’re here.”

She nodded, her eyes filling with tears. “I’m having these dreams,” said Victoria. “This one dream,” she amended.

“That’s normal,” said Manuel.

“It’s like memories. From when I...”

Manuel looked at her steadily. “I think I’ve...,” she said.

“What?” said Manuel.

“I’ve done something,” said Victoria. She blinked, and saw the staircase, saw the glass decanter. Her hands itched, remembering the feeling of the dress, wet with blood, the cold of the water.

“Tell me,” said Manuel. And so she told him.

“Oh, fuck,” said Manuel.

Sunny startled awake. She sat up and reached her arms out, yawning. She blinked twice. “Hi, mom,” she said.

“Hi,” said Victoria.

“Can I get a treat?”

“Yes.”

Sunny yawned again, then said, “Who’s that guy?”

“I’m Manuel,” said Manuel.

“OK,” said Sunny. “I think I want ice cream. Is it time for me to be a flower girl yet?”

“No, honey,” said Victoria. “Not till tomorrow.”

“I’m going to be a flower girl,” said Sunny, to Manuel. “My daddy is marrying Casey. I get two moms.”

“You only have one mom,” said Manuel.

Sunny looked confused. “I think,” she said, “I’m going to have a hot fudge sundae.”

“Good choice,” said Manuel. He didn’t stand, but Victoria could tell he wanted to go. She felt him, leaving her. After Sunny had ordered, Victoria said, “What should I do?”

“Don’t tell anyone what you just told me,” said Manuel.

Alex's Body

Alex's body came back to Texas on a giant plane. I waited in the airport with the other families. Ignoring Gerry's protests, I had come to the Texas National Guard facility at Austin Bergstrom alone. I sat in a plastic chair, waiting. The airport smelled like barbecued chicken.

"Coffee?" said a man in a cowboy hat. I looked up, into red-rimmed eyes. I nodded. In a few minutes, the man returned with two cups. He gave one to me and one to an older woman sitting near me. "I didn't know what you want in it," he said, "so I gave you everything in it."

"Thanks," I said. The sweet, milky coffee was perfect.

"Your husband?" said the man.

"My brother," I said. "I don't have a husband."

He nodded slowly, then said, "My son." He gestured toward the woman, who was not sipping her coffee. "She's sedated," he said.

The woman looked at me. She wore a pink dress and her hair was gray, in pin curls. "A husband's better," said the woman.

"It's my brother," I said.

"Anything," she said. "Anything is better than a son."

There was a small ceremony as they unloaded the coffins. A priest spoke, but his words made no sense. Alex's coffin was simple, with a folded flag. There would be another funeral later in the week.

It was a roadside bomb. Alex had been riding in a convoy, on his way to tend to some victims of another roadside bomb.

I didn't know what the fuck to do with Alex's body. We had been brought up without religion, but my mother was buried in Beth Israel Cemetery in Houston, so I decided to have Alex buried there, too. I liked thinking of my mother and my brother together, wherever they were, now that they were gone.

A rabbi named Rabbi Goldman met me at the funeral home. He said he would take care of everything. He even held my hand as we chose a simple, wooden casket, with holes bored into it, "to let the worms in," as Rabbi Goldman said. "The body will return to the earth," said Rabbi Goldman.

We cut a black ribbon, and he told me to wear the bit of fabric on my left side. This was the *Kriah*, he explained—rending of the garments. I would have happily torn my Gap sundress to shreds, started at the neckline and just torn that baby in half. Whatever it took, if it made me feel better. Rabbi Goldman told me that this would not be necessary.

He said lots more, but I wasn't really listening.

At the graveyard, as Rabbi Goldman chanted the memorial prayer called the *Eyl Malei Rachamim*, I stared at my mother's gravestone. I had not attended her funeral, but a year afterward, my grandparents brought us to her Stone Setting. Alex and I stood in the muggy Houston afternoon, surrounded by our grandparents' friends. I'd wanted to bring hydrangea, my mother's favorite flower, but my grandmother told us that flowers

counted as *ostentation*, and I could bring a rock instead to place on the gravestone. I didn't want to bring a rock. I held my right hand as if I was carrying a bunch of invisible hydrangea, and I bent down and placed the secret flowers on the grave. I knew my mom would understand what I was doing.

That night, Merilee told us we could no longer mourn our mother. She stood in front of the television and spoke in her important voice, her hands on her hips. Alex and I wore pajamas, and kept poking each other in the ribs as Merilee explained that the Stone Setting was all about closure. We were not to go back, we were to *move forward*. "The stone is now set," she said grandly, and then she went to wash the dishes and we watched *Family Feud*.

After Alex's funeral, a woman about my age with reddish-blond hair approached me. I held tight to Gerry's fingers. "I'm Suzy," said the woman. "I was a friend of your brother's."

"Hi," I said.

"I wish I had been able to keep him," she said. "In Austin, I mean."

"I wish you had, too," I said. "We...we didn't really organize anything, but maybe you'd like to come over tonight?"

"I would," said Suzy. "I'd like that very much."

"How's five?" I asked.

"Five's fine," said Suzy.

She arrived at five-thirty. Gerry went to buy some wine and cheese, leaving Suzy and me alone in my stuffy living room. “Tell me about Alex,” she said, fingering a lopsided clay bowl Gerry had made in a college pottery class.

“You know him,” I said.

“I guess,” said Suzy, not correcting my use of the present tense. “But he always held himself back from me. When I told him I’d like to meet your parents, for example. They sounded so interesting, their life in Cairo, the view of the Nile and all. He showed me an album one night, but then he told me he wished I’d stop asking about them. I guess he thought I was so small-town. I’m from Sugarland.”

“My parents don’t live in Egypt,” I said.

“He showed me pictures.”

“That must have been their honeymoon, or when they first met.”

Suzy narrowed her eyes. “Where do they live?” she asked cautiously.

“My mother’s dead,” I said.

“I’m sorry,” said Suzy. “I didn’t realize....”

“My father’s in jail,” I said. “He hit my mother in the head with a glass decanter and killed her.”

Suzy’s brow furrowed. “What the hell is wrong with you?” she said. “Why would you say something like that?” She stood up. “I’ve got to go,” she said.

Gerry opened the front door. “Baked brie,” he said. “How does baked brie sound?” He walked inside. “What’s going on?” he said. Neither Suzy nor I answered.

“I’ve really got to go,” said Suzy.

“I didn’t mean to upset you,” I said.

“What happened?” said Gerry.

“She didn’t know about my parents,” I said. “Alex never told her. He told her they lived in Egypt.”

“Jesus,” said Gerry. “Egypt?”

“It’s true?” said Suzy. She sank to the couch.

“It’s true,” I said.

“But he never...,” said Suzy. “I thought we were...,” she said.

“He thought my father was innocent,” I said.

Suzy took a ragged breath.

“You know what?” said Gerry, “I’m going to bake some brie.”

“I want to go to a bar,” I said.

“Me, too,” said Suzy.

“Eat some cheese,” said Gerry. “Then go.”

At the G&S Lounge, Suzy ordered a gin and tonic. I ordered Jameson on the rocks. In the dim light, her hair took on a darker tint. Her nose was long and fine. “I guess I didn’t really know him at all,” said Suzy, shaking her head. “I thought he was the love of my life.”

“He told me about you,” I said.

“Oh, really?” said Suzy. “What did he say?”

“That you were wonderful.”

“Is that the word he used? Wonderful?”

I sipped my Scotch and winced. “I don’t remember,” I confessed.

“We were wonderful together,” she said morosely, and then she started to tear up again.

The bartender put two drinks in front of us. “From the fellow at the end of the bar,” he said, tipping his head towards a muscular man in a leather biker jacket.

“No thanks,” I said, at the same time Suzy said, “Thank you.” We laughed, and drank.

Desiree's Fantasy

Certainly, Desiree hadn't planned on falling in love with another convict. She was living back in Martin City, trying to make a go of things without Steve. The local barbecue joint, Jack's Stack, had just been named "Best in Kansas," so Desiree's mother had convinced Jack to take on Desiree behind the counter. A job in Martin City was nothing to turn up your nose at, even if it involved standing around watching people eat meat all day. Desiree took orders, refilled the barbecue sauce dispensers, made sure there was bread on the tables, and sliced the pickles. Desiree was a vegetarian. She was living on filched pickles and Diet Coke.

At night, Desiree went to the Coffee Spot, which had internet access for five dollars an hour. She wanted to fall in love. Desiree had met Steve in a bar, so she knew the class of men she'd find down the street at Don's Depot and no thanks. She went on Match.com and filled out a profile, being honest about her age (43) and weight (132 on a good week, 138 around Thanksgiving and Christmas, what with all the turkey). She didn't see it was anyone's business that she was divorced, so she just checked "single," which was damn well the truth. After two horrible dates, she realized Match.com was as bad as Don's Depot, and perhaps worse, because you had to go through a bunch of coy bullshit before even showing up for lunch and finding your date was a decade older (Handsomehal@aol.com) or fifty pounds heavier (sportzphan311@yahoo.com) than his on-line profile promised.

One night, alone in the small apartment she'd rented on McGee, Desiree saw a TV special about Izaan Mahdian. He had deep brown eyes and a mournful,

straightforward way of speaking. He said he was innocent, and Desiree just believed him. (She'd believed in Steve, too, of course, but this was different. Or maybe she was simply the type that wanted to believe, whatever the circumstances, and trusted that eventually one of her causes wouldn't let her down.) He was much older than Desiree, probably her father's age, if truth be told.

Fortified by Camel Lights and Bud Lites, she wrote a short letter—a bit about Steve and the meth, a funny story about the day Jack's Stack ran out of *cabrito* and served chicken instead to the city slickers, how much she liked the movie *The Bridges of Madison County*—and stuck it in the mailbox before going to work in the morning.

One week later, she received a reply. Izaan wrote beautifully, talking about books she might enjoy. He wrote in a florid script, taking care with each letter. Izaan said he wished he could take her to the library in Alexandria, Egypt, the land of his birth. It was the biggest library in the world, he said. Izaan wished (he wrote) that he could go to Borders Books and Music with Desiree and buy her a copy of *Palace of Desire* by Naghib Mahfouz. It was a beautiful love story, wrote Izaan, set in Cairo, Egypt. Izaan thanked Desiree for her letter and her support. It was by far the most wonderful thing she had ever received via the U.S. postal service.

That afternoon, after Snow's closed, Desiree went to the Coffee Stop with Izaan's letter. She paid for an hour on the computer, and read all about Egypt. She was afraid to type Izaan's name into Google, but she did it anyway. Many people believed he had killed his wife, but some people thought he was innocent. When her hour was up, Desiree logged off and drove home. The sun was low in the sky, and she thought about murder. What if the man *had* stabbed his wife while his two children slept outside in

their tree house, she thought. What sort of a person could do such a thing? Then again, when Desiree had married Steve, she had never thought he could come to such an end—hollow-eyed, a nasty skeleton. He had stolen Desiree’s own jeans, and he could fit in them. He had worn her T-shirts, the ones she’d once worn as they jogged together near their first rental home. They’d had a dog, but now he was gone, too.

Desiree got home before dark. She turned on the television and heated up a Lean Cuisine. Well, she wasn’t going to marry Izaan, was she? What harm could he possibly cause her, locked up in jail outside New York City? He could be like a teacher to her, not a lover, just a friend.

Desiree’s mother and father had helped her out after Steve—they’d paid her deposit and given her money to set up heat and electric—but Desiree had just never gotten around to hooking up the phone. It was nice, in a way, feeling as if she could control who called her and who didn’t. If her parents wanted to see her, they could just as soon drive across town and see her. If Steve wanted to see her, well, he could find a way, too.

There was a knock, and Desiree opened it to find her friend Marybelle at the door with a pitcher of something pink. “Well?” said Marybelle. “Are you going to invite me in?”

“What’s in there?” said Desiree.

“It’s Pink Fantasies and you know it,” said Marybelle.

“What about Gary and the kids?”

“Fudge Gary and the kids,” said Marybelle. “It’s Mom’s Night In.”

“I’m not a mom,” said Desiree.

“Oh, zip it,” said Marybelle, shoving Desiree and plowing into the living room.
“This place smells like your mother,” said Marybelle.

“She was here earlier,” said Desiree. “She did my laundry and brought it over.”

“That’s pathetic,” said Marybelle. “You can do your own laundry, for Pete’s sake.”

“I don’t want to,” said Desiree, her hands on her hips. “I’d have to go to Mo’s Laundromat. And it’s not easy slinging barbecue, you know.”

“Cry me a river,” said Marybelle.

Desiree walked into the bedroom, leaving Marybelle flipping through channels. She changed into her pajamas. “My clothes smell like pork chops,” she said, getting her two glasses (a wine glass and a beer stein) from the kitchen and settling next to her best friend on the couch.

“Yum,” said Marybelle. She pointed to the TV, which was showing *Grey’s Anatomy*.

“Sure, fine,” said Desiree. Marybelle filled their glasses. “To all our fantasies,” she said, and they clinked glasses. Desiree took a long sip of the vodka and pink lemonade. “You go first,” said Marybelle.

“No,” said Marybelle. “You go first.”

“O-kay,” said Marybelle. She had taken off her boots and socks and now she stretched, curling her toes.

“You need a pedi,” said Desiree.

“My fantasy,” said Marybelle, “is that my kids will sleep for three days. Ken and I will go canoeing, like we used to, and drink beer at the quarry, and he’ll give me three orgasms a day and I’ll be skinny again, with good skin tone.” She sipped. “Et tu?”

Desiree closed her eyes. “My fantasy,” she said. “I have a few. First of all, I’d want Steve back, the old Steve.”

Marybelle was silent.

“But okay, given that’s impossible,” said Desiree. “Given that’s impossible, I wish for a new love.”

“Now we’re getting somewhere good,” said Marybelle. “See, I can’t wish for a new love.”

“It’s a fantasy,” said Desiree. “Of course you can.”

“No,” said Marybelle. “I can’t. But sometimes I do.”

“Anyhoo,” said Desiree. “Let’s get back to me. I wish for a new love who will take me all over the world and teach me things.”

“Things other than how to blow up your own home making crystal meth?”

“Right. Other things. Like about books.”

“Sounds nice,” said Marybelle. “What does this new love look like?”

Desiree pictured Izaan as he had looked on television, in an orange jumpsuit.

“Skin the color of a chai latte,” she said. “Brown eyes. Dark hair.”

“Like a Mexican?” said Marybelle.

“Like an Egyptian.”

“You want to have sex with a terrorist?”

“Jesus, Marybelle!” cried Desiree. “Egyptian does not equal terrorist!”

“Sorry,” said Marybelle. “I’ve never met one.”

“One what?”

“Neither,” said Marybelle. She sipped again. “It’s your freaking fantasy,” she said. “I don’t blame you for wanting something different.”

“Thanks.”

“So where do you think you’ll meet this mystery man?” said Marybelle. “I think the guy who runs the Gas Gulp is from over there somewhere in the Middle East.”

“Can you keep a secret?” said Desiree.

“No,” said Marybelle.

“Oh well,” said Desiree. “How about I tell you anyway?” She ran into the kitchen and returned with Izaan’s letter. As Marybelle read it, Desiree watched her nervously, periodically taking gulps of her drink. By the time Marybelle (a slow reader) was done, Desiree felt a bit woozy and warm.

“Wow,” said Marybelle.

“Isn’t it the most beautiful thing you’ve ever read?”

“Where did you meet this dude?” said Marybelle. “Seems like he’s got a lot of time on his hands. Is he like a bank teller or a teacher or something? Ken’s boss at AutoZone would never let him write so much during work.”

“Well, okay,” said Desiree, trying to frame the words correctly.

“Okay what?” said Marybelle. “Did you meet him on Christiansigles.com? Is he Christian? Is he single?”

“He is single,” said Desiree.

“Is he Christian?”

“I don’t know,” said Desiree.

Marybelle nodded soberly. “Well,” she said, “people can covert from Muslim to Baptist, right?”

“So he’s in jail,” said Desiree.

“Oh no,” said Marybelle. “Another tweaker, Desiree?”

“No!”

Marybelle rubbed her hands together. She was wearing her long hair in a French braid. Her jeans were snug, and her red sweater was cropped to show a bit of her tummy.

“Honey,” she said. “I am not liking what I am hearing.”

“His name is Izaan,” said Desiree. “He’s in prison because he allegedly killed his wife. *Allegedly*. You know what that means, right?”

“I’m not stupid,” said Marybelle. “Innocent until proven guilty, I know,” she said.

“Right.”

“But he was proven guilty, right?” said Marybelle.

“Well, but he’s innocent. Or he might be. I don’t know. It’s just my fantasy, okay! Can’t I even have a fantasy?” Desiree felt hot tears throbbing behind her eyes. “I just want a Goddamn fantasy!” she said.

“Please do not use the Lord’s name in vain,” said Marybelle.

“You say ‘fuck’ all the time.”

“That is not the Lord’s name,” said Marybelle. “Calm down,” she said. “I’m just looking out for you.”

“I know,” said Desiree.

“Let’s order from Papa John’s,” said Marybelle.

“Okay,” said Desiree. She went into the bathroom and hid Izaan’s letter in her medicine cabinet, next to her Advil and her NyQuil.

The Woman Formerly Known as Sylvia

Mid-morning, Madison Avenue was an elite playground. Nannies, their placid faces enclosed in the hoods of cheap parkas, pushed strollers past markets selling jewelry and fruit that shone like jewelry. Snug in sheepskin blankets and boots, rose-cheeked babies gazed regally at their future domain. Women shaped like whippets moved quickly to Yoga class or to Gracious Home, slowing to nod politely at dowagers walking Welsh corgis, *the same breed as the Queen*.

In a red wool coat she'd bought in a sort of daze after a root canal, Sylvia felt sweaty and out of place. Standing in front of the Ettliger School, she raised her arm in the air and waited for a taxi to notice her. Sylvia was forty, halfway between trophy wife and dog-show-loving spinster. If she married Bill, she would reside on these golden blocks, but she would never belong. Think about the *krona*, Sylvia admonished herself. Think about Afghani pimps and prostitutes! It was so hot there in the desert, for one thing, and did the robes come off whilst turning tricks?

A cab slowed at last, and Sylvia gave the driver the address of the Eldorado, 300 Central Park West. He nodded curtly and turned the wheel with the heel of his hand, leaping into traffic and dialing his cell phone simultaneously.

“Pardon me?” said Sylvia.

The man met her gaze in the rearview mirror, but began to speak in a language she thought could be Farsi.

“I was hoping...that you could refrain from using the phone...um...in traffic?”
Sylvia cursed herself for her timid tone, the way she'd allowed her demand to sound like

a question, to in fact *be* a question, as if this rotund man who needed a shave had a right to veer in and out of traffic like a madman, yammering into his expensive cell phone—my goodness, was it the new Blackberry Curve?—in a language that made it impossible for Sylvia to eavesdrop.

“Central Park West?” said the man.

Sylvia nodded.

“Okay,” said the driver, and he continued his chat. It sounded like a genial discussion, and Sylvia found herself wondering if perhaps the man was lonely in this strange, big city. Perhaps Sylvia could invite him to dinner, make him a nice *tagine*, or was that Moroccan? A nice roast chicken, and he would thank her by holding her hand, moving his thumb—the thumb that was now texting a message into his phone, his pretense of watching the road completely dropped as they barreled through the park—moving his thumb across the top of her hand, meeting her shy gaze with a smoldering stare.

“Whew,” said Sylvia, “is it kind of warm in here?” The man didn’t seem to hear her, and she opened the back window a few inches, enjoying the arctic blast across her face.

The cab stopped, but Sylvia did not gather herself, pay the driver, and step back into the bustling city. She was so very tired. When a doorman from the Eldorado—a man with a pompadour and a mustache, Italian—rushed from under the awning to welcome her, it took Sylvia a slow minute to snap out of it, to become herself again.

The lobby of the Eldorado was enormous, big enough for entire Icelandic towns to camp out until things turned around. The floor was marble (they'd need some AeroBeds) and the ceilings soared above Sylvia. "Am I in the Sistine Chapel or what?" she said, smirking at the mustachioed Lothario, who looked puzzled. Sylvia flashed him one more smile, and then remembered she was no longer attractive. She cleared her throat and said, "Sixteen L. Ellen Lowie. She's expecting me." The doorman nodded, and dialed on a rotary phone.

"Mrs. Lowie?" he said, his voice more indicative of Queens than Florence, "Yeah, there's a lady here to see you? Okay, I'll send her up."

"Thank you so much," said Sylvia. She followed his directions into a giant foyer, averting her glance away from a gilded mirror and taking in a painting of strangely elongated people crossing a bridge. Suddenly, a child on roller skates slammed into Sylvia, knocking her down.

"Oh my God," said the child, blinking rapidly. "I'm so totally sorry."

Sylvia rose, a bit unsteadily. Her left knee felt tender, and she rubbed it.

"Are you okay?" said the child, a girl who looked around ten years old.

"I'm fine," said Sylvia, and she continued on her course to the elevator, limping only slightly.

"Where are you going?" said the girl, pulling at the strap of her helmet, which was covered with stickers that said SEX WAX.

"I'm going to see a man about a horse," said Sylvia.

"What?"

"Just a joke," said Sylvia.

“I don’t understand,” said the girl.

“I’m going to see a woman about a planned endowment,” said Sylvia.

The girl looked at Sylvia levelly, perhaps deciding if Sylvia was deranged. “Is it my grandmother?” the girl asked.

“Is your grandmother Ellen Lowie?”

“No,” said the girl. She shrugged, and skated away. Sylvia found the elevator, inserted her Keycard, and rode to the sixteenth floor. The elevator door opened into a small lobby, which Ellen Lowie had decorated with an oriental rug, an antique table piled high with unread newspapers and mail, and an elaborately-framed painting of cats in a basket. Sylvia knocked on the door, squared her shoulders, and waited.

After a few moments, when no one had answered the door, Sylvia knocked again. Of all the buildings in New York, this was the one where Sylvia’s mother had dreamed of living. Sylvia sighed, remembering Pauline’s last, sickly days in the cramped 11th Street apartment, which smelled not of furniture polish, but of mildew.

Finally, the lock clicked, and Ellie Lowie opened the door. She wore a cherry-red suit and gold high-heeled sandals. Reading glasses rested on her large bosom, held around her neck by a chain of chunky wooden beads.

“Sorry, honey,” said Mrs. Lowie, “I was just watching *Dr. Phil*.”

“Hello,” said Sylvia loudly, holding out her hand. “Thank you so much for taking the time to meet with me, Mrs. Lowie.”

“Pregnant pre-teens,” said Mrs. Lowie. “Disgraceful. Call me Ellen, please.”

“It’s a pleasure, Ellen,” said Sylvia, following her into an opulent apartment.

“Do you mind?” said Ellen. “I’d really like to see what Dr. Phil has to say to them.” She shuffled to the living room, where she sank into a large chair that was placed awkwardly between a wall of bookcases and a grand piano. “Have a seat,” said Ellen, her eyes glued to the television, atop the piano.

“Thank you,” said Sylvia. This was simply a social call, the first—Sylvia hoped—of many. As alumni or parents of alumni grew older, Sylvia began popping in to see them, mentioning the ways in which they might help the Ettlenger School. She followed up with their interests, sending clippings about ornithology, for example, or calling to mention a PBS show about Egypt. As Sylvia grew closer to the elderly people, she coaxed them to promise gifts to the school upon their demise: planned gifts. A few years before, the widow of a Wall Street bigwig had debated until her dying day about leaving her entire estate to Ettlenger or the Catholic Church. The woman was a lover of opera, and Sylvia secured box seats at the Met and took the woman to every performance for two years. Her name was Violet Bremer, and when she died, she left her fortune—thirty million and change—to Ettlenger. In her will, Kate instructed that a pair of mother-of-pearl opera glasses be sent to Sylvia. When Sylvia opened them, she held them to her eyes, noticing for the first time that a flowering vine wound around the fire escape outside her kitchen window.

While Dr. Phil lectured a frizzy-haired pre-teen with an enormous belly, Ellen munched on Chips Ahoy cookies, offering the bag to Sylvia, who declined. Sylvia made a list in her head of all her chores for the afternoon: plan dinner for Bill, pick up dry cleaning, attend afternoon meeting with Rose Betty and the board, meet with her sponsor student, eat something at some point, go to Crunch Fitness, pull files to plan the week’s

visits, start to organize winter clothes for storage and consider spring cleaning, read a bit more of *John Adams*, had it been too long since she and Bill had made love (Sylvia trying with all her heart to be set aflame by Bill's pudgy, pale physique, his warm, nutty scent)? It seemed it would be a great number of hours before Sylvia would be asleep.

"Well!" said Ellen, turning to Sylvia but not clicking off the television, "He told those strumpets, eh?"

"He sure did," said Sylvia.

"So what can I do for you, honey?" said Ellen.

"Nothing! Oh, goodness. I just dropped in to tell you what was new at The Ettlenger School." Sylvia couldn't believe she had just said *oh goodness*, like a doddering spinster on one of those British comedies. But there was no time for self-flagellation! Sylvia pressed on, moistening her lips in preparation.

"I know what's new," said Ellen Lowie, pre-empting Sylvia's clever summation of the Ettlenger girls' squash team championship match. "My granddaughter goes there, for Pete's sake," said Ellen.

"Right. Henrietta. And how is she enjoying herself?"

Ellen shrugged. "She's a tomboy," she said, matter-of-factly. "Whereas I was a beautiful little girl. The prettiest and the most popular. Back when that meant something."

Sylvia wasn't sure what Ellen thought school was like now, but she smiled gamely, considering again the squash team anecdote (a silver cup filled with Sprite figured prominently). "Do you have any requests for me?" she tried. "Any thoughts

about how Ettlinger could be better equipped for this new generation of...women leaders?”

“Hm,” said Ellen, pressing her index finger to her plump lips. “How’s the basketball team doing?”

“Four and three,” said Sylvia. “Would you like me to send you some VIP tickets?”

“Okay,” said Ellen wanly.

“Wait until you hear about the squash team championship game!” cried Sylvia. “It was a chilly afternoon—”

“I don’t give a monkey’s bottom about squash,” said Ellen.

“Well, my goodness,” said Sylvia.

“No windows!” said Ellen. “No scenery! Just peeking over that little rail and that *thwack thwack* sound.”

Sylvia stood, defeated. “I can’t thank you enough for your valuable time,” she said.

“Thwack, thwack, thwack. Talk about a headache.”

“I do hope you know how important alumni are to the Ettlinger community.”

“If I’m going for a headache,” said Ellen, “I’ll take champagne!”

“Have a lovely afternoon,” said Sylvia.

Ellen guffawed, and waved her wrist in dismissal. Sylvia saw herself to the door. When she stepped off the elevator, the girl in the SEX WAX helmet crashed into her again, but this time, Sylvia did not fall.

“Your grandmother thinks you’re in school,” said Sylvia.

“Yeah,” said the girl.

On her way home, Sylvia passed the Jefferson Market Library, a gorgeous structure rising toward the sky like a cake. When Sylvia was a child, her mother would take her to the Children’s Reading Room. Sometimes, Pauline stayed. These were the days Pauline wore slacks and comfortable, weekend shoes. But sometimes, Pauline wore lipstick and high heels.

There was a janitor’s closet behind the Young Adult bookshelf. The lock was on the outside of the door. Pauline would let Sylvia choose a few books and settle her in the closet with her lunchbox. She locked the door, promising to be back in an hour. It was cold in the closet, but there was a light bulb with a string, and Sylvia paged through her books and ate lunch. It often seemed as if Pauline was gone much longer than an hour. Once, the light bulb burned out.

In later years, Sylvia figured Pauline met their father during that time—she imagined an elaborate tea, with little cakes and a silver pot. When Sylvia turned eight, these visits to the library stopped—Pauline just left her in the apartment by herself. She must have been desperate to lock her daughter in a closet, Sylvia could see that now. But she always came back and Sylvia never had to go to the bathroom too badly. Pauline seemed happy to find her. She hugged Sylvia tight, and bought her a Creamsicle.

At home, Pauline changed back into her nightgown, leaving her dress—some were taffeta, some silk, all expensive—laid out on her bed, as if waiting for a more exciting woman to claim it.

