
The Fickle Gods

Though she was running almost ridiculously early for her doctor's appointment that morning, Bonnie didn't mind. She liked going to doctors. She had a pretty fair tolerance for dentists, accountants, and lawyers too. It was a professional age. She delivered herself with gratitude to their buzzing offices, sought out their informed opinions, their brisk, impersonal evaluations. They made her feel located; they made her feel known. After nine-odd years of graduate school—the last five spent crawling through the tunnel of her dissertation—people who not only talked about things but actually went around *doing* them were like evidence to her of some casual secular miracle. In their presence she became calm and penitent, open to the ministrations of grace.

Christ knew, she was in need of some grace today. In addition to her usual strenuous bout of pre-dawn vomiting, there had been at breakfast a rather nasty and gratuitous argument with her kids which had left her utterly depleted. It was almost as if they knew what was up. But how could they? She herself didn't know. Not officially. Not *clinically*. Which was why she had made her appointment with Dr. Siraj.

And yet Alex, her eleven-year-old, had appeared to be seeing right through her that morning, to the tiny Rorschach blot at her center, that coiled, unformed mass. Arms folded grudgingly over his cereal bowl, he'd sat regarding her through slitted eyes with a kind of irritable and defensive propriety, as if, being first born, he now held exclusive rights to any further application of that concept. How many times did a belly have to swell before it was full? Something was very wrong with this picture, in Alex's view. For one thing, there was no man in it, unless you counted Leon, the boys' feckless, long-absent father. Or, to take an even more dubious example, Stanley Gottfried, their mother's occasional boyfriend, whose existence Alex, though they had met dozens of times, only barely registered as the spectral and attenuated thing it was. Good thing, too. Because Stanley, the theorist, had constructed an entire new existence for himself out in Toronto the year before, with another, all too literal woman. A younger woman. A childless woman. A woman who read not Babar but Baudrillard. No, there was no counting on Stanley Gottfried.

Exactly how this had all transpired—how her train had arrived in this dismal, lonely station—Bonnie couldn't say. She'd had a therapist once, back when the state was flush and her health coverage beneficent, who operated from the premise that all human difficulties were, as he put it, "multiply determined." Her divorce, the '78 Red

Sox, the Hundred Years War . . . so many random and/or hidden variables were attached to these disasters, in his view, that any retrospective assignment of causality and blame was a folly and a lie. Why bother brooding over causes and effects, was his general message. Unfortunately Bonnie had come to him with just that in mind. She liked brooding. She had a singular talent for it. The therapist would not indulge her, however, so their sessions tended to run short. Soon they stopped running at all. Still, his pet phrase had stuck to her over the years, like a bandage on a wound. It had almost begun to take on a ring of divination.

Thus in the matter of her appointment with Dr. Siraj. There was the fact that her watch was set fifteen minutes ahead of everyone else in the time zone. There was the fact that Storrow Drive at that gray interim hour was uncharacteristically traffic-free. There was the fact that she'd cruised right into a parking space upon entering the garage, thereby avoiding the usual slow, hopeless, spiraling ascent up the ramps. Finally, there was the fact that she'd dismissed her Expository Writing class a half hour early—having, as she informed them, not yet finished grading their essays from the week before, which was perfectly understandable, she could well have added but didn't, given that she had not yet started. All these factors combined to ensure her arrival at the hospital some forty-five minutes early.

So be it. Now that she was here, she could, if she so chose, go up to the fifth floor at once, get the insurance paperwork out of the way, and still have time to sit and relax amid the creamy mauves and grays of the Obstetrics lounge, leafing through back issues of *Vogue* (their glossy covers webbed and torn, their fashions and celebrities no longer in currency, quite) and registering, if only half-consciously, the flow of women in and out of the room. The teenagers trooping sullenly behind their mothers, the nervous young wives attended by nervous young husbands, the gals her own, unmentionable, age, the ones with good haircuts and Chanel suits and leather-bound weekly calendars who, having driven themselves over on their lunch breaks, would take up positions behind the big drooping coleus plants in the corner, talking soberly into their cell phones—these were her sisters, Bonnie would think tenderly, her fellow passengers on the same vast, creaking ship; borne by the same inexorable tides, towards the same unseen shores. But today she preferred not to see them. Today, with her bad mood and threadbare jeans, her frayed, shapeless sweater, she felt every inch the solo tourist. So she passed the elevators by and went into the gift shop instead, browsing for treats.

To atone for her temper at breakfast she picked out two expensive logs of Toblerone chocolate for the boys, and, because she had a weakness for chocolate, one more for herself. She had a weakness for red licorice too, so she got some of that as well. Her weakness for fresh flowers, especially in winter, she had sufficient force of will to resist for the moment; this somehow entitled her to indulge yet another weakness, the art cards. There was a Tintoretto she did not recall from previous visits. She loved Tintoretto. Of course it was easy to love him: he was dead. He was Venetian. His work was radiant with life, he imbued everything he saw with a voluptuous glow, and those singular demands he made on the spirit—faith, abundance, the capacity for ecstasy and submission, sympathy and release—were the very terms of life's brief, all-too-binding contract she most craved to concede. It was easy to love his *paisans* Titian,

Veronese, Botticelli, and Raphael as well. And she did. She loved them all, the whole thrillingly prolific Renaissance crew, with great ardor and fidelity, slipping out to the Museum of Fine Arts in makeup, black leggings, and silk scarf to pass guilty but rapturous lunch hours whenever she could; that is, whenever the fickle gods that oversaw work, schools, parking, and the museum's ever-retracting hours of operation could be appeased; that is, about five times a year.

Well, she thought, handing a dozen postcards, along with the chocolates and her Visa, to the blind man who worked the register: Italy by proxy, it would have to do. She'd spent two weeks there once when she was twenty; the experience had long since nestled comfortably into a shadowed, fragrant grove in her brain. A summer tour of the great cities, her breathless attempt to connect the dots, to sketch out, from the Old World's flaking chiaroscuro, a hint of a design. Having read Walter Pater at an impressionable age, Bonnie had come to think in such terms, to believe rather ravenously, along with the rest of her art history class, in the hard, gem-like flame. It remained the one immaculate ideal in her life. How she'd longed back then, in her slender youth, to immerse in that flame—peel off her too-white, too-tight, unmarked skin, burn up her mind's small dream of a world and enter the hot swarm of another, aglow. For we have only an interval, Pater had said (dutifully she signed her name to the receipt, saw herself reflected in the cashier's dark glasses); one must wrest from life its very juice, seize every one of its latent pulsations.

Pulsations! Dear god, it made her shudder to think of all the pulsing she had done on that trip, all the pulsing and the peeling and the juicing and the burning . . . and for what? She remembered a cool late morning in Florence, the sun wan and vague behind the mountains of Fiesole, towers rising over the cupolas, stone bins on the window ledges spilling yellow roses and oleander like ten thousand princesses letting down their hair. Back at the *pensione*, snoring dolefully, was a tall, uncircumcised French-Canadian she had met on the train. His name was lost to her now. But she remembered the curiously delicate sensation, as she closed the door behind her and tiptoed out into the hall, of his cold semen trickling inquisitively down her tanned, unshaved legs—how simple it was in those days, how mindless, being on the pill!—and then a moment later she was out, wandering off *isolata* into the cloven streets, in sundress and sandals, no map, no guide, only her used, heavily annotated paperback Rilke to steer her across Ponte Vecchio in search of some crumbling out-of-the-way chapel the poet had cited for its gilded cherubim and frescoed ceiling, while around her the flies, the spotted pigeons, and the lean young men on scooters wove their noisy and somnolent arabesques. In truth, it had not been a particularly sublime experience, but it had remained with her over the years. She'd known it would, even at the time. A fossilized memory of traveling light, of the wide, ungainly wing-span that once propelled her. Something messy and ambitious and forever incomplete.

She had never found that damned chapel, either.

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At the elevator, she pushed the UP button and stepped back to wait. Her heart was pounding. Why? It was not as if she didn't know what lay before her.

Outside it had begun to snow. The flakes were merry and fat, like some white, confectionery cereal. Restless, she pulled her hair back into a bun and secured it with a scrunchie. She looked over the bulletin board, which, she had ample time to observe, was intricately tiered with announcements. There were an astonishing variety of workshops, classes, and support groups on offer. Job Safety. Sexual Dysfunction. Stress Management. Adult Children of Alcoholics. Living With AIDS. Living With Schizophrenia. Living With Addiction. Living With Cancer. So much to be learned in so short an interval. And then what? The thing itself would not be mastered. There was always another class going on in the next room.

Living With Bonnie Saks. Now there was a class, she thought. There was a fucking challenge.

A tall, thin-lipped, rather proud-looking young man drew up beside her, carrying a yellow shopping bag.

"I pressed the button," she muttered defensively, as if to herself. "It's very slow."

He nodded vaguely. "They all are."

There was something wise and smooth and overarching in the man's tone that both dismayed her and drew her attention from his face to what lay around his neck—a priest's ringed collar. Visible just above it were the dark pocks and crevices teenage acne had left like a glacial deposit on the pink slope of his neck. Oh, she thought, the ravages of the flesh. Their eyes met. Behind the pale membrane that coated his pupils was a quizzical forbearance, like that of a dog responding to the call of an inattentive master. But perhaps he was only nearsighted, she thought.

"Visiting someone?" he asked.

"A doctor. And you?"

"A patient." He sighed. "I suppose that's easier. Though it's not my favorite part of the job, by any stretch."

"I know what you mean," she said. She meant it kindly; it was not until later that she realized how presumptuous she must have sounded.

Perhaps for this reason, or some other of his own, the priest fell abruptly silent. For a moment she saw, or imagined she saw, the boy he had been, bright, shy, ambitious, self-conscious, fenced off from girls by his skin's bloody wire, all those spikey hormones twisting and braiding like a cord. Curiously, the image did not evoke pity, but an odd kind of envy or covetousness. Could you be a normal person, she wondered, whatever that was, without a normal sex life, whatever *that* was? Could you stop wanting the usual things? Could you drive that desire away? Could you train yourself to want something else?

Nietzsche, she recalled, thought that sexual abstinence was good for a man. Something about the reabsorbed spermatozoa heading straight to the brain cells, steeping them in a mineral bath, an enriched high-protein diet. Absolutists, she thought bitterly. These stupid, brilliant men with their stupid, brilliant theories! Transcendence was easy for the likes of them. It was easy to be pure when you were aloof and abstract. It was easy to be sublime when you turned your back on the clotted domestications of the city, where things were not simple but relative, multiply determined; when you denied yourself the common longings, bought a ticket for the high, unoxxygenated spheres, took a cosmic shortcut right out of the gray zone . . .

She was beginning to feel a little gray and zoned-out, at this point, herself. A sickly-sweet odor of aftershave, deodorant, toothpaste, and Woolite—the many applied chemicals of the public self—came rising off the priest like a cloud. Woozy, she moved back a step, hoping he would not take offense. But he did, of course. He proceeded to glare at her as if *she* were the one who smelled, *she* were the one in the spooky, antiquated get-up, *she* were the one who'd sworn off sex forever, *she* were the one who believed despite all earthly evidence in some ludicrous medieval notion of a divine being. But then all at once the young priest smiled—a brief but luminous flash—and a cold drizzle of doubt descended over Bonnie. Oh, maybe it was all true, she thought. Certainly she was guilty on the second and third counts, and, given the socks she was wearing, perhaps the first as well. As for the fourth, perhaps he saw something about her she could not see for herself. He cleared his throat and said, “It’s on the way.”

“What?”

“The elevator, see? It’s heading down.”

It was true; the numbers were running backward at last.

By the time it arrived—the *whisk* of the doors like the sigh of some weary, beneficent god—she had begun to tremble.

ANXIOUS? asked a notice taped unevenly to one wall.

ARE YOU SLEEPING TOO MUCH? TOO LITTLE? IS YOUR APPETITE UNEVEN? DO YOU FEEL LIKE THINGS ARE OUT OF YOUR CONTROL? PERSISTENT ANXIETY AND INSOMNIA ARE MEDICALLY TREATABLE CONDITIONS. TEN MILLION AMERICANS SUFFER FROM THEM . . . AND YOU CAN HELP . . .

Right, Bonnie thought. I’m the one.

The priest got off on the third floor without so much as a goodbye. She rode up to the fifth, where she proceeded down the hallway to the east wing, holding her insurance card before her like a talisman. Above the gridded ceiling she heard the thudding booms and clangs of renovation, the high abrasive warble of metallic saws. A pale skin of dust lay over the drooping plant leaves. The heat was on full blast. Bonnie was glad for it, but the receptionist, a voluptuous, olive-complected woman named Christina, looked sweat-soaked and laconic behind her desk. She sat slouched forward in her swivel chair, rouged cheeks plump as eggplants, her mouth forming a small languid pucker of unwelcome. Because Bonnie knew that mood quite well, and because Christina appeared to be new to the rigors of the natology unit—or had not at any rate been working three years back, when Bonnie was pregnant with Petey—she tried not to get too pissed off at the rude, improvident way Christina went about her business, frowning ostentatiously and popping her chewing gum as she scanned the humming screen. “Twenty dollars,” she announced like a verdict.

“What for?”

“Office visits are always twenty dollars.”

“Since when? It used to be ten.” For that matter, it used to be five. It used to be *free*.

“First of the year. Don’t you read your policy updates?”

“Never.”

“You should read your policy updates. It’s important you be informed. That’s how they announce these things.”

“All that paper and postage,” Bonnie said. “That’s why costs are so high. If they’d just stop sending out so many updates, everything would be fine.”

This improvisory stab at micro-economic theory sounded somewhat lame and dubious even to her. In any case, it failed to elicit much of a reaction from Christina. “All the plans are charging this much for visits now,” she said. “Not just yours. It’s a way of containing costs.”

“Well, they’re not containing *my* costs.”

“I’m sorry,” Christina said, popping her gum, but in a muted, officious, barely audible way. Her eyes softened. It might have been all that incongruous heat, or perhaps she’d only just then noticed the black hole that had opened at the elbow of Bonnie’s wool sweater; for a moment she really did look sorry. “You can use a credit card if that helps.”

And so Bonnie gave over her Visa again. Even before the morning’s profligate spending she owed several thousand dollars on it, not to mention a considerable amount of interest; but she had already burned her American Express and had no choice. At least, after all the impulsive spending, the chocolates and art history and other wasteful frou-frou, this was an investment in something serious and substantial, something *real*. Or so she told herself, looking over the baby picture-Christmas cards on the bulletin board, happy beneficiaries all, while she waited for her crinkly yellow receipt.

She followed the nurse—another new one—down the hallway, through the labyrinth of offices and into an examination room in back. “He’ll be with you shortly,” the nurse said. A thin, long-faced woman with an irresolute perm, she paused at the door and examined Bonnie with interest. “There’s a box of tissues on the desk.”

Bonnie nodded absently. Why on earth, she wondered, should she require tissues? They never used to offer her tissues in the old days, when she’d come here with Leon. With Leon, the nurses had fluttered like white moths around the bright bulb of his head, laughing at his jokes, patiently answering his questions, nodding in bemused sympathy when his phobia about needles sent him stumbling out of the room. How refreshing to see a man so sensitive, so in touch with his female side. Meanwhile she was the one splayed out on the table, giving blood. She was the one still here opening her veins, while Leon and his female side had run off together to South America.

When the nurse was gone, she tossed her coat and bag over a chair and examined her face vindictively in the mirror. Her eyes of course were sunken and red. Her nose was red too—a hot, neon, Times Square rendition of what increasingly seemed her own personal primary color—which given the drawn, winter-pallid condition of her cheeks, nicely spotlighted her least attractive feature. As for her hair, it looked flighty and asprayed, as if it had been shot out of a can. On the other hand, she could console herself with the fact that all those free health club membership offers she’d tossed in the trash and all those restless nocturnal hours in the kitchen were really paying off: she now had not one chin, but two.

Then, wriggling out of her sweater, she felt something give way along the seam, and found she had managed to drastically elongate the hole at the elbow, which now stretched like a dark, garish scar halfway up her shoulder. A throb of panic announced itself in the veins of her wrists. The exam bed was cold. She could not get comfortable. Wrapping her arms around her own torso, she tried to rub herself warm, a gesture that was returned to her in the mirror as an odd hopeful parody of embrace. Whose hands were those, caressing her shoulders, tugging at her blouse? Meekly she kicked off her shoes, undid the belt of her jeans, and was sitting there in a state of disheveled apprehension when Dr. Siraj rolled in with the blonde nurse, who closed the door quietly behind them.

"My dear girl," Siraj trilled in his thin, mellifluous tenor, and she relaxed at once. She did love doctors so. "Where have you been, hmm? You must tell me everything."

"Well," she said. "I always do."

"Those darling boys. Have they grown very tall?"

"Oh yeah. Larger than life."

"Excellent," he said.

"How about you?" she asked. "How're things at home?"

"Only so-so." His smile was creamy and white, like soft ice cream after a lick. "I lost my father you see. Last October. An attack of the heart."

"I'm so sorry. I had no idea."

"A very proud man, my father. I brought him over from Kanpur you know. At the end. Every night he sat in front of the television set complaining to my wife. The food, the cold, the pills, the pain, and so forth. My sister, who has many problems of her own, left her three children in Houston and flew up to help. This was no good either. Right away my father began to complain to me about her. She in turn complained to me about my father. My wife complained to me about them both. There is no stoicism in my family, you see. This is why we're so close. We have no private pains. We share them freely among ourselves."

"You never told me you were Jewish," she said.

"Jewish? Ah." He narrowed his dark moist eyes, not so much in mirth as recognition. "Marvelous. I shall remember that one."

He looked at his watch.

"So I gather you have something to share with me, hmm?"

"Oh, you know," she said. "The usual."

"How delightful. You've done a test of course?"

She nodded. "I never did test well."

"Of course you do, you darling. You always pass with flying colors, it is part of your charm. But shall we just take a look to confirm?"

"Might as well," she said. "I paid twenty bucks out there."

For a moment he looked blank.

"The plan," she reminded him.

"Ah yes. The plan."

"Who *makes* these plans, anyway? I'd like to meet them. I don't think I understand the whole plan concept."

"No one does, my dear girl. That's why there are managers. One can't have managed care without the managers. Now," he said, "just relax, hmm?"

"I'm trying."

"Very good. Just lie back. We will forget everything, all our worries and cares, our little burdens. We will simply see what there is to see . . ."

She did love doctors so. And Siraj she prized especially. Tall and sharp-featured, he had long cunning hands and a yeasty, extravagant style. He wore a good deal more personal jewelry, for instance, than she did. Gold bracelets, fine rings. Italian shoes and suits of the latest fashion. A rich pomade clung to his hair, elevating the crown like a seawall. Below it his dark eyes glittered and schemed. For all his affability, he had something of a foxy mind. In his garage out in Lincoln were two metallic-gray Jaguars, identical in every detail, which he alternated driving to work. It was, he'd once explained, his way of holding down the mileage. What with several teenage daughters, an agoraphobic wife, a Russian chess tutor in Needham, and a winterized cottage near Tanglewood, she imagined it made for a lot of driving.

"Oh yes," Siraj said, feeling around inside her. "Let us think . . . seven, eight weeks? Does that sound right?"

Bonnie closed her eyes a moment, tracing a backward path, through the clumpy terrain in her head, to Stanley's last visit. It had been, even by Gottfriedian standards, a rather perfunctory event. He'd arrived already exhausted, or so he announced, from his conference. Then, paying zero attention to *her* exhaustion, which was considerably more profound and New Historical than his, he'd kept on his down coat and wool scarf for the twenty or so minutes it took her to finish reading *Curious George* to Petey and getting both boys tucked in bed. The whole time she could hear Stanley pacing out in the hallway in his black snakeskin cowboy boots—to which were attached more layers of irony than she could keep track of—crunching his cherry cough drops and mumbling his way down a long, crabbed registry of vendettas and complaints. It was, she knew, only a rehearsal. The real performance would come later. First he'd deconstruct his three shallow and moronic co-panelists that afternoon, then the insipid dullard of a moderator, who had failed to recognize him often enough, then, as his internal generator gathered steam, he'd begin to improvise, to expound upon such worthy if familiar topics as his department chair in Toronto, his publisher in Princeton, his parents in Miami, his twin brother in Chicago, and finally, to complete the sullen geography of his world-view, the entire editorial board of the *New York Journal of Advanced Semiotics*, all of whom were guilty of holding him back in one or another petty, jealous, hermeneutically transparent way. At no point in the evening was Bonnie even tempted to raise what Cambridge people liked to call *her issues*, like Alex getting a D on his math test, or Petey being on the verge of another in his continuing series of ear infections, or a certain steely irascibility she had detected that morning from her own department chair when the subject of her dissertation deadline came up. Why bother? She might as well have asked Stanley for the lowdown on his current live-in girlfriend, or for his intentions, such as they were, for the night ahead. Talk about hermeneutics! She might as well have insisted he take her out to dinner; he could have easily expensed it. But no. Tired, half-numb, she had let the evening unfold in its

usual unsatisfying, multiply determined way, falling into the sloppy casualness of old, semi-former lovers as they always had—even, it occurred to her, *before* they were old and semi-former—the radiator clanging its expensive tune, the domestic beer salvaged from the back of the fridge, the take-out ribs from Jake & Earl's with their gluey bloody glaze, the take-home video which she was, as usual, too tired to watch, and then, somewhere in there between the somnolent scroll of the credits and morning's clamorous alarm, some rather sloppy and languorous sex.

Had she even come? There had been so little in the way of preparation that night—so little foreplay, so little forethought—it hardly seemed possible. But then that was how it worked sometimes. Release was granted when you weren't ready, when you'd done nothing to earn it, when you were operating under the messiest, most inadequate, least promising conditions imaginable. It was the body's own sick joke. Look ma, no hands . . .

"I knew it," she announced. "I fucking knew it."

"A woman always knows. Except, of course, when she doesn't." Siraj snapped off his gloves. "Well then."

"Well then what?"

"We must get you started, dear girl. Blood tests. Vitamins. Ultrasounds. We shall have a lovely spring, full of appointments. We must get to know each other all over again. Share our most intimate secrets."

"I'm not sure I can," Bonnie confessed.

"Then I will share *my* most intimate secrets."

The blonde nurse, who had yet to say a word, cleared her throat expressively.

"That's not what I meant," Bonnie said.

Siraj smiled. "I know what you meant, dear girl."

"Oh."

Exactly what *had* she meant, though? Earlier that morning she'd thought she knew what she was doing; she had, she presumed, already plotted out a course. But at the moment she found this course of hers difficult to retrace. What was happening to her? The touch of Siraj's fingers had undone all the pale ivory buttons of her resolve.

The doctor was regarding her steadily. "It seems you have some thinking to do, hmmm?"

"I've already done that," she said. "It hasn't helped. It never does."

"You were not planning for such a development, I take it?"

She shook her head. "I'm lucky these days if I can plan a meal."

"Sometimes, of course, we plan without knowing."

"Thank you, Charlie Chan."

He smiled at her indulgently.

"Oh god." Her hands flew to her mouth. "What an awful, horrible, racist thing to say. I'm so sorry."

"Please, my dear girl, there's no offense. When one is under strain—"

"But it offends *me*, don't you see? And believe me, it's only the tip of the iceberg where bitchy remarks are concerned. What's the matter with me, Dr. Siraj? I can't sleep. When I do sleep I can't wake up. It's like a bad dream. I'm trying and trying

to climb out of this hole, and every time I get near the top, which is where everyone else I know seems to have *started*, I fall right back in. Does any of this make sense?"

"Of course it does," Siraj agreed readily. "A great deal of sense."

"Please, talk to me straight, OK? Don't get all fatherly on me, I hate that."

"My dear girl, why so theatrical? A large undertaking lies before you. You are merely being sensible, asking yourself if it is something you are able, under present circumstances, to do."

"But why does it have to be *able* to do? Why can't it be something I *want* to do? Why can't the things I *want* to do and the things I'm *able* to do be the same for a change? Is that so unreasonable?"

"Perfectly reasonable."

"All right then."

"So," Siraj said, a bit coolly, she thought, "what do you want to do?"

"I want to have it."

The words had blown out of her like a jet of smoke. It was odd, she had been equally prepared, she thought, to say the other.

"Forgive me, my dear. I seem to be a little confused."

"I want to have it, OK? But I don't think I'm able. In fact I *know* I'm not able. So really, I don't. I mean it isn't even a close call, in that sense. But the thing is . . . the thing is, doctor . . ."

She looked at the nurse for help, but her expression was as dry and colorless, as impossible to authenticate, as her hair. As for Siraj, he continued to regard her thoughtfully, stroking his skinny chin with its tender hairless cleft. His solemnity at this moment perplexed her, if that were possible, even more. Meanwhile the second hand on his Rolex twitched and twitched.

"Oh come on. Why don't you *say* something? You're supposed to be my o.b., to say nothing of being my goddamn friend. Plus the twenty bucks to Christina out there. Can't you at least come across with a little advice? I promise not to sue you if it turns out disastrous."

"You want advice, my dear girl?"

She nodded gratefully. At last, someone to tell her what to do. Why hadn't she called Siraj a long time ago? He knew her better, from the inside out, than anyone else. Why did she always have to be so—

"Then I would recommend you visit our very excellent psychological clinic on the sixteenth floor."

Her heart flopped and sank.

"I will call up to them right now for an appointment. Perhaps they can get you in today. Of course they're terribly busy. But in cases such as this—"

"I'm *not* a case!" she all but shrieked. "I'm a thirty-nine-year-old woman, Dr. Siraj! I've got one kid on Prozac and another who wets the bed. I've got two jobs, no husband, and the one time I go ahead and have sex with something that isn't manufactured by GE, I get knocked up. You want to talk shrinks? I've had more shrinks in my life than I've had boyfriends. Don't you see? Isn't it obvious? What I need isn't a new shrink. What I need is a new *life*!"

"My dear girl," Siraj sighed, having reached at last the end of his patience. "You have one."

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On the way out she was forced to go through her datebook and discuss her plans for the future with Christina. Finally, after several false starts, they settled on a time for the next appointment. "He gave you a prescription?" Christina asked.

"Yeah. Two actually. For my advanced years." She tried on a game, stoical smile with only limited success. There would be time to perfect it. The prenatal vitamins, she knew from prior experience, would be both pricey and hard to swallow. Perhaps that accounted for her reluctance to push away from the reception desk just yet, to get back in the elevator and head home.

"What about you," she asked idly of Christina. "Any kids?"

"Me? Nah. Someday maybe, like with the right guy."

"You have a guy now?"

"Yeah. Hector. I don't think he's the one."

"What's he do?"

"He goes to school. Engineering. Three nights a week he drives his brother's cab. Airport runs."

"He sounds wonderful."

"Hector? He's still kinda young. But he treats me good."

"What's good?"

"Hah?"

"I'm just curious. Is it identifiable? Does it bear any resemblance to, say, a hard, gem-like flame?"

Christina scrutinized her carefully. "You look kinda down," she said. "Can you get home OK?"

"I've got my car," Bonnie said. Suddenly she had what seemed an inspiration; she dug in her bag for the postcards she had bought at the gift shop. "Here. I want you to have this."

Christina examined the card with a measure of suspicion, front and back.

"It's a Tintoretto," Bonnie explained.

"Yeah?" Christina frowned. "It's pretty," she declared. Her voice, tinged vaguely with feeling, nonetheless lacked something in the way of conviction. "Thanks a lot."

"I like to put them on my refrigerator," Bonnie said hopelessly. "Or in the bathroom, beside the mirror. Sometimes right *on* the mirror. Oh hell, look, just throw it away when you get home, I don't care."

"I'll keep it right here," Christina announced. "Right here on the desk, next to my—"

But Bonnie, her lower lip quavering, had already turned to go.

Upon entering the elevator she pressed the L button and stepped back deferentially

to allow other people in. As it happened, there were no other people. The doors shuddered closed and there she was again: herself. She read over the Anxiety flyer again, or else a different copy of the same one, or else another flyer altogether.

When the elevator started to move, it did not escape her notice that despite her best efforts to go down she was in fact going up. She watched the light pulsing its way up the chart of numbers, one by one, making its maddening climb.