

GINA ZUCKER

## A HARD WORKER

1.

IF MRS. ROBERTS LET ME, I might lie rolled up here until nothing existed but these sheets. The sheets we get in our rooms are plain white and have been washed a million times,





but the ones on Mrs. Roberts's guest bed are fresh, with a tiny pattern of leaves clustered around three red dots, like miniature Christmas holly. Soon we will have the real Christmas holly hanging around the house—not actual plant matter, of course, just plastic, but I love anything green. I love the outdoors, though we don't see it often. I've got my stuffed-cow doll under my arm. Mrs. Roberts let me have it for company.

There's a fuzzy blanket too on Mrs. Roberts's guest bed. It's pale yellow, not too bright, nothing that robs your eyes, as she would say. Lying here feels like resting in a meadow, bits of soft and rough together, all smelling of flowers. When I run my hand over my stomach I feel the scab where Annique stuck me. When I cup my hand between my legs I feel a new fuzz just growing in, not soft like the blanket but prickly. Mrs. Roberts says I should have thought before shaving; it's against the rules and it'll give me a rash besides. But it made me feel better. After I broke the first rule, anyway, I couldn't help but break more.

I figured out that I broke a total of five: 1) shaving without permission, 2) running away, 3) hitching a ride, 4) servicing a non-client, and 5) harming a client. That's what started it. The fifth one. Without that, none of the others would have happened. I don't count leaving Annique behind as a rule broken. She was breaking rules herself, so I think that cancels out my leaving her behind with the Janssen brothers. I just hope that my five broken rules don't cancel out the 936 top-notch client surveys I've earned.

Annique and I have always worked together. Ever since I've lived with Mrs. Roberts, which is ever since I can remember, I've slept in a room with Annique a few feet away in her own bed, where if we wanted to we could stretch out our fingers and touch. Often we would, when we were little and still in training. We liked to lie on our backs after lights-out, touching fingers while saying our word game. I'd say, "*Poupée*," a French word for "doll" that I'd heard Mrs. Roberts use, and Annique, who doesn't speak French but whose mother was supposedly French, would say, "Poopy!" and we'd laugh. I'd say, "*Brrrum, brrrum, brrruum!*" and Annique would say, "Baby ducks driving to the store." I'd say, "The whole wide world," and Annique would say, "Mrs. Roberts's bum." I'd go, "What?" and Annique would say, "No one can tell how long it takes to travel from one cheek to the other, because no one has ever made it across the crevasse."

It was an association game of sorts, which we learned in a class taught by Ms. Eck. Annique never spoke in class. But in our room she would make up new parts to the daily lessons, and cause us to say things that would

make me laugh to the point of near suffocation. You'd never know it from the way she moped around Mrs. Roberts and Ms. Eck and Mr. Andrew, mute and cowering as a rodent. They tended to ignore her, I think because they were afraid she would crumble if spoken to directly.

Once, after lights-out, she told me, "Mrs. Roberts and Ms. Eck's bums are as wide as their worldviews are narrow. Let's not let that happen to us." At the time, I didn't know what she meant. One day she passed me a note in Ms. Eck's class that said, "I am a fool, clearing my throat for naught, for naught." "No you're not," I wrote back. "You're smarter than Eck." Annique just blinked at me and smiled. She was already starting to change at that point, but I didn't realize it.

Ms. Eck teaches us: Basic Reading, Diction and Memorization, Art of Conversation, Body Language, Art of Pleasing, and Beauty. Mrs. Roberts teaches a bimonthly seminar that rotates subjects, such as Role-play, which I'm good at. One night after I'd been called up to the front of the class to demonstrate Nice-and-Naughty, Annique said in our room, "You be the client and I'm going to play Naughty-Too-Nice. But *too*, with two o's, see?" I stood up and puffed out my chest, trying to resemble a blustery male. Annique took one of her books and thwacked my behind, hard, then instantly flung the book across the room and dropped to her knees. She wrapped her arms around my legs and asked if she could bake me some lemon cookies to make me feel better, but I was already on the floor, laughing about the way she'd thrown the book after spanking me with it.

A few months after we started working full-time, Annique changed for the worse. She stopped passing me notes in class and she stopped being able to stay awake after lights-out. Mrs. Roberts would tell us good night and switch off the light, and Annique's eyes would shut and not open again until morning. At first I tried to whisper to her, and when she didn't move I threw my stuffed cow at her, and when that didn't work I jumped on her and bounced on top of her, but it was like someone had cast a spell on Annique. We haven't touched fingers or said our word game for weeks.

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Annique hasn't come to see me in the guest room. Mrs. Roberts says I should have known better than to let things get out of hand like that with the Janssen brothers; she depends on me to be responsible. I am sick, though, so she forgives me.

The Janssen brothers were our last clients (not counting the man in the car, who wasn't official). I didn't have the right complexion, or something. They said I was opaque. They wanted Annique, not me, even though they'd asked for two girls. "Janssen & Janssen Technologies" is what it said on their office door. They

had e-mailed Mrs. Roberts requesting "detail-oriented, compliant, under twenty. Psuedo-office attire." I saw it on the order form when Mrs. Roberts was explaining the assignment to us. I asked her what "pseudo-office attire" meant and she looked down at me with her round cheeks and her twinkling eyes and said, "It means something like a secretary, a very pretty secretary."

The van dropped us off at five o'clock. We ate dinner beforehand, no turkey sausage with rice and beans. At least, I ate. I'd like to know what real turkey tastes like one of these days, but we're not allowed real meat. Good meat unspoiled by toxins costs an arm and a leg, says Mrs. Roberts, and besides, avoiding meat is the right thing to do. I have seen pictures of farm animals in books, and it is hard to imagine eating them. Annique consumes only soy milk before assignments; anything else makes her nauseated. She stayed quiet on the way over, sitting in the back and picking at her split ends. I don't try to make conversation when she's not in a talking mood. I could hear Mr. Andrew humming in the driver's seat. He had told me I looked nice when we got in the van, and I hoped he would say the same for Annique but he didn't, even though we were wearing the same thing: pleated skirts, nude hose, and pumps.

The van doesn't have windows in the back; a filter lets air in. I thought I could smell rain mixed with the exhaust fumes. Rain is bad for you, with all of the acidity, but I like the smell. As we bumped along I tried to imagine where we were going: into the middle of the city, among the skyscrapers? Farther north, to the long, low buildings along the river? Or south, to the

old part of town with the historical houses, where tourists like to visit? I have not seen much of these places in person but I have seen pictures in Annique's books.

We drove straight for a long time and we turned and went down. Mr. Andrew said, "Be good," and let us off in an underground parking lot that smelled of gasoline and wet rubber. We took an elevator to the second floor, not speaking.

The office of the Janssen brothers had what Mrs. Roberts calls "a just-moved-in look," like a lot of our clients' places of business. It was a windowless room, with the usual ventilator in the ceiling pushing stale air, with a bit of stray paper flapping in a vent. A grid of square lights buzzed overhead. A glass desk had been built along one wall—you could still see the pencil marks where a worker had made his measurements—and a jumble of cameras and computer equipment sat in various poses all along the glass. Beneath the desk, wires coiled thickly on a gray carpet, which smelled new and dusty at once. One wall had a collage of color photographs thumbtacked to it—several depicted faceless female forms in bright colors, on contrasting backgrounds. Some pictures had fallen to the floor.

In the corner of the room, on top of a cardboard box, perched a large television set. We don't watch much TV at the house, as Mrs. Roberts says it robs your eyes. She lets us watch cartoons some mornings, but they have fake-looking people and animals in faded colors, running around to tinny music, and we never understand why, and it's hard to follow. The Janssen brothers' TV wasn't turned on. A few chairs with wheels attached to the legs were placed around the carpet. The Janssen brothers sat in two of them.

"I'm Dennis," said the light-haired one; he wore a brightly patterned sports coat. He gestured for Annique and me to sit on the other two wheelie chairs. "And this is Bill."

Bill was a big man. His skin looked like it had spent a lot of time in tanning booths and he wore a cowboy shirt clasped at the neck by a pin.

"Hello," I said, but Bill was watching Annique. He licked his lips. Already this was something different: I'm the one clients usually take an interest in. They're attracted to what Mrs. Roberts calls my *petite poupée* look. Little doll. I'm small, but I have a lot of energy and my face is round and open. Most men find these traits appealing, along with my glossy cap of hair and big, velvety eyes. Annique was slumping. I didn't whisper, "Pose," as I normally would have. She is tall but otherwise ordinary. Her



hair clung to her face in lank, ashy strips. It gets greasy if she doesn't wash it every day.

"Now, does either of you girls know how to achieve *chromatic saturation*?" Dennis's question meant nothing to me and I wondered if I should have been paying more attention. He'd been chatting about the things they did at Janssen & Janssen Technologies, graphics software and micro-pixels and other things to do with light waves. It's our job to listen even if we don't understand. "Spectral range is at the heart of visual pleasure," he said. "It's a gift to be able to access incandescence."

I let my finger trail over the arm of my chair. "Well, I don't know how to do that *yet*, Dennis, but I'd love to learn." His eyes flickered at me once and then away. To match his jacket, he had a bright pink scalp that gleamed through the strands of his hair.

"What about her?" Bill said.

Annique wasn't moving or looking up. I hoped she wasn't going to come down with the freezes. In the middle of a session not so long ago she got stuck. She lay on her back with her legs up and simply would not move. I had to stop what I was doing and push at her feet to get her going again. The client thought it was part of our act, so we were all right. But I didn't want to have to try it with the Janssen brothers—they seemed like the type to give you a bad survey.

"I'm talking to you, honey." Bill and Dennis both stared at Annique.

She opened her mouth. "I guess," she said, barely above a whisper. It didn't make sense and I wanted to give her a pinch. I glared at her instead.

"There are things one can't learn," said Dennis. He made a steeple with his fingers and pushed up his nose so that I could see into his nostrils. "States of luminosity that are innate."

I nodded, but the way he was looking at me, or not really looking at me, made me embarrassed. A phrase I'd seen in one of Annique's books came into my head. The phrase was: *a cow to be set out to pasture*. Annique sends away for books through a mail-order catalog and reads them on her bed before lights-out, the ends of her hair rustling on the pages. Sometimes she takes notes in the margins. I hardly ever read but I like to look at pictures, of animals and farms and big fields, all from the past of course. I love the black-and-white cows, Holsteins they were called. That's why I got a stuffed toy cow for Christmas last year, from Mrs. Roberts. I also like the look of the pigs, with their tubular, flat-ended noses and their giant teardrop-shaped ears that let the sun shine through. Pigs have very funny

faces. And chickens are great too, especially the male chicken, with its red rubber hat and beard. Sometimes I look over Annique's shoulder even if it's a book without pictures and I try to take in a sentence here and there. I remember *a cow to be set out to pasture* and some other random phrases, but I don't really know what the books are about.

"Annique reads a lot," I said.

"Ho ho!" Dennis's mood seemed to have shifted; he clapped his hands and bounced out of his chair. "Why don't we drink some soda pop. I have orange, cola, and cherry." As he opened a drawer and reached in, Bill heaved himself out of his own chair. He slapped a switch on the wall and the buzzing lights went out, leaving us in the dark except for the light from the computer screens. I gave Annique a kick with the toe of my pump.

"Wake up," I whispered. I didn't want her spoiling a potential top-notch survey.

She was born shy—that's what Mrs. Roberts says. Her mother dropped her off when she was a baby, and Annique never made a peep, unlike me, who screeched for seven days after I was dropped off. Mrs. Roberts never met my mother; she just found me squealing in a dirty diaper on the front steps. Annique's mother, she said, was very elegant and sensitive, but too poor and young to nurture a child. We were raised in the nursery together, with several other dropped-off babies, and then we got our room. If a client asks Annique to do something she hasn't done before or that makes her uncomfortable, I step in and do it for her. The clients don't mind. I have a natural touch; I put them at ease. Annique relies on me for that.

Dennis sprang open two cans of soda and handed them to us. "I love soda pop," he said. "So pretty in a glass of ice. Though we don't have any ice here! And it settles the stomach."

I took several gulps of cherry cola and kept my eye on Annique. She sipped a bit and stuck the can between her knees. Even though it was dark, I could see a blob of orange-tinted foam on her upper lip. This seemed like a good moment to suggest that we all get more comfortable. Mrs. Roberts likes us to start things rolling as soon as possible. Sometimes clients need to be helped. I put my soda can on the floor. "I'm a little warm," I said, but Dennis had his back to us and was fiddling with the television set. Bill was hovering somewhere behind us.

Dennis pressed a few buttons and gestured at the TV. "Do you girls like to watch? We have retouched clips of certain films. It's one of our hob-



bies." An image of what I recognized as the ocean appeared on the screen. I've seen it in the books. Even on the little screen, the water looked vast. It heaved and swelled in a rainbow of colors: blue, then green, then violet; orange, then gold, then silver. A woman plowed through the water with her naked arms. Behind her, a fin emerged, black; it slid toward her, cutting through the water and sending up dazzling sprays on either side. The image switched back and forth between the swimming woman and the black fin several times, and then the woman was sucked below the surface. She came back up, mouth open wide, and was yanked down again. A red pool flared in her place. The image froze. The lights went back on.

2.

When I could see again, I noticed that Annique was still staring at the screen, as if waiting for the movie to continue. She didn't blink. I was beginning to feel tilted, a sensation I sometimes get when I walk down the stairs not looking and then suddenly think I'm going to step into air, even though the step is there beneath my foot.

"A verbal response isn't necessary," Dennis said. The Janssens had returned to their chairs. "When you look at a work of art you mustn't try to define it. Let it wash over you, fill you. Let it permeate in, and radiate out."

"Have some more soda," Bill said. Although he sat perfectly still, his body seemed to strain against his clothing, like the contents of a sack about to burst out.

Annique obediently took a sip from her can and an orange line trickled down her chin. When she took the can away she wiped her lip, and I noticed a shade of fuzz glinting there—she hadn't waxed it. Ms. Eck taught us how in Beauty class, but Annique did not like to wax or shave or do any of the cosmetic regimens we must do to make ourselves look nice.

"Beautiful," Bill said.

She drank again, her throat working as she swallowed. I held my breath as she nursed the can, holding it over her mouth and shaking the last drops onto her tongue. We were all watching her, the Janssen brothers and I. Bill's face and neck looked inflated. If he dropped his chin suddenly, I thought, the pin at his collar could pop him. He moved forward in his chair, and a tangy citrus fragrance lifted off him, as if he were sweating fruit juice. He touched the dribbled soda on Annique's chin and brought it to his lips. The office was a bright box and I wanted to close my eyes. But I didn't want to miss anything.

"Good," Dennis said, as if he were the one tasting the orange soda. "Why don't you show us more."

Annique didn't have any particular expression on her face, although her lips were glistening and two spots glowed on both of her cheeks. I wondered if she was going to break out in hives. Last month she'd had an outbreak and the man who'd hired us kept wanting to send her away. I managed to distract him, giving her the chance to work on him out of his line of vision so he wouldn't notice her. In the end he gave us a good survey.

That's what we get instead of direct payment—client surveys. Mrs. Roberts has the client e-mail his survey to her after a session, and on the basis of how the questions are answered we get more or less privileges. A survey that answers "very satisfied" to all the questions could result in a whole free week, where we can goof off in the rec room and watch cartoons or play Ping-Pong, Clue, and Go Fish; or we can paint our toenails or practice Role-play or do aerobics. Only Annique likes to read, and Mrs. Roberts lets her. I think she thinks Annique is only looking at pictures. None of the other girls care. Most of the other girls are a little bit stupid, to tell the truth, but it's not their fault. They weren't born with Annique's intellect or my talent. Everyone knows we are Mrs. Roberts's top duo.

A whole week off can get boring for someone high-energy, though, so I prefer other privileges, like getting to pick a gift from the Cute-Overload Catalog for an upcoming holiday. My ideal privilege would be a field trip. A visit to a farm would be the best. There are still some kinds of farms, Annique tells me, although she thinks they are indoors and she doesn't know if there are any nearby. But Mrs. Roberts promised me a field trip for the future. If I accumulate one thousand top-notch surveys, meaning all questions answered "very satisfied," she says I will have my field trip. I have 936 top-notch surveys so far. We don't see the surveys ourselves—Mrs. Roberts informs us verbally of how we do. But I always ask our clients before we leave: "Will you give a top-notch survey?" I say, "Won't you please answer all questions *very satisfied*, mister? I will be so grateful if you do!" And they always say yes.

"Go on," Bill said. I should have felt relieved when Annique unbuttoned her blouse but instead I felt she had some kind of secret she wasn't sharing with me. She was breaking a rule, unspoken, between us. I would never do that to her.



Bill leaned over and said into her ear, "You have what I'm looking for, don't you." She blushed, but didn't shrink away.

"A perfect hue," Dennis said. "Lovely dermal vibrancy. Peachy."

It was true that Annique was glowing. In the office light she gleamed pink and gold all over, even orange in some places, such as her ears and nipples; her skin seemed lit from inside and I wondered if this was a trick the Janssen brothers were playing. That's why they liked her and not me, I think—their tricks worked on her.

You can never tell how your looks are going to affect a client. Mostly they enjoy the contrast between us: dark and fair, spicy and plain. Only now Annique was not plain. "Would anybody mind if I got undressed?" I said. "I'm awfully hot."

Dennis swiveled his chair and knocked over my can of soda. "Oops," he said. The liquid hissed over the surface of the carpet in a reddish-brown pool. I watched it darken the short fibers.

Dennis sighed and pinched the bottom part of his nose between his thumb and forefinger. "The thing is," he said.

"Yes," I said. "Tell me."

"The thing is, you're more of the *opaque* type, aren't you?" He smiled at me.

"What do you mean?"

"Well, I mean to say—*matte* is a better way of putting it. You know, little browns and beiges."

"Some people say I look like a doll," I said, trying to be helpful. My name, in fact, is Dolly. But I didn't want to share that with the Janssens.

"I'm thinking of a pet we once had," Dennis said. "It was very cute, made to blend in with the woodwork, so to speak. We had it when we were boys, in a cage in our room, with a water bottle and a feeder it could press to release pellets of food. It got away, though; we never found it. Very sad." Dennis sighed again.

I have a tough hide. What a client says or does is up to him, as long as it doesn't cause us physical harm. But I am not satisfied unless a client is satisfied. "I think you have the wrong idea about me," I said, getting to my feet. That was my mistake. If I'd calmed down I could have brought those Janssen brothers around. Mrs. Roberts and Ms. Eck taught us to be patient. Clients have their peculiarities, you can't take it personally.

Dennis laughed.

I wished that Annique would say something, but she wouldn't even

look at me. And she was smiling down at her lap, as if she thought Dennis was funny. Her hair looked so golden it seemed the sun was shining right on it. I'm not stupid—I know sun can't shine in offices.

"I'd like to see up in here," Bill said. He leaned over and drew up the hem of her skirt.

I felt a vein beating in my neck. I knew that I needed to get things back on track. That's when I tried to sit in Dennis's lap—another mistake. "No." He leaned back his head and shook it. He shook it so hard that his face blurred.

"It's fine," I said. "I promise." I forced myself into a crouch between his knees. The cuff of his bright sports coat brushed my cheek as he snatched his hand away from me.

"Don't do that," he said as I reached for his fly. "This isn't what I want." He pushed back as far as he could go in his chair. As I knelt in front of him my head began to spin. I felt the carpet rubbing my knees; drops of sweat prickled on my back and under my arms, and my panty hose started to itch. I wanted to claw my skin, jump in cold water. I wanted to shave my whole body. I closed my eyes and held on as hard as I could. Dennis cried out.

### 3.

At almost the same moment, I heard another cry. It seems strange to me even now to think about it, the sound Annique made. It was the strangest sound I had ever heard, strangled and guttural, as though a wild animal had her by the throat. Dennis quickly shut up.

In a way, I did not want to face Annique. I did not want to see whatever there was to see. But Dennis was staring at her greedily, over my head, and it felt wrong to let him gaze at her like that, without me. I turned my head. Annique was stiff in her chair, her legs sticking straight out as Bill's hand moved under the ugly pleated skirt; his other hand gestured in the air, as if conducting invisible musicians. Annique looked like she was holding her breath.

"What are you doing?" I said.

Bill whispered in Annique's ear—I couldn't hear the words—and she gasped and arched her back. The rosie spots on her cheeks had spread into

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big blotches across her neck and chest. Behind her thrown-back head I saw the frozen image of red water.

"All right now, all right," Dennis was saying, but I couldn't get my eyes off Annique and Bill. I knew what was happening, and I didn't want to know. Pleasure was something we gave to clients, not something they gave to us—another unspoken rule. We did not let ourselves lose control with a client—to do so was abnormal, disgusting, it messed up the entire transaction. Annique gave another guttural cry. She seemed almost to levitate on Bill's hand, a finger puppet in a navy blue skirt. Bill's other hand blurred through the air, making its mysterious signs.

"Stop it," I growled. "Both of you."

"Maybe you should wait outside." Dennis waved at the door.

Annique yelled once more, sharply, and then slumped, panting, in her chair. Bill withdrew his hand. I felt a soft pop in my ears. Annique would never break a rule on purpose. She might freeze up or get sloppy, or fall under someone's spell, but she is an obedient girl at heart. That is what Mrs. Roberts expects of us, first and foremost. The client's right to do or say whatever he wants without fear of bodily harm or any form of disrespect from us should never be abused. We are to do what they ask; we are not to touch until invited. We are never to resist.

All at once Bill's wheelie chair plunged across the room, heading right for the glass desk. My arms were flung out, though I don't remember actually pushing him. He hit the edge and emitted a sharp, sad whistle, then hunched over, not moving. Dennis rushed to his brother. I was about to apologize when I felt a pain in my side—something had pricked me. On the waist of my blouse was a small dot. It turned red.

Annique stood beside me, clenching something in her fist. The blotches had begun to drain from her skin but she was still panting. "What was that?" I said.

She dropped something on the floor and we both stared at it: a thumbtack. She must have plucked it from the wall holding the photographs. "Annique?"

She looked up at me, finally. She has watery eyes, a little bulging but sweet. When we were girls, before we started working, we took baths together. Ms. Eck was supposed to watch us but one time she didn't and I slipped onto my back underwater and the soapy sting filled my nostrils and throat. I screamed at the sight of the watery light above me, which made me choke. Annique pulled me up under the arms. She held me upright as

I coughed. When my coughs had subsided she held my hands and looked at me with her wet pink eyes and said, "You're okay, you're okay. I rescued you."

I stared back at her now. This went on, it couldn't have been more than a few seconds, though time seemed to curl over itself like a long wave that surged and rolled and threatened to break on my head. I have never seen the ocean and yet as we stared I couldn't help but think of the woman pulled down in the red water; I felt the salt force of it strike my eyes and the heavy churn hold me under, and a cramp in my side. It seemed I would have to remain in this position, waiting for Annique—to wake out of her trance, to come back to me, to pull me up—even if it meant I had to take what I had coming, and lose my top-notch surveys and my privileges and my field trip.

"Well?" I said.

Her eyes closed. "Go away, Dolly." She said it very softly, but there was no doubt that she'd said it.

I gazed at her moist, pale eyelids and willed them to move. I waited for her to say something else, to give me a sign. Dennis yelled; he was shaking his brother, he was calling me names—*stupid little cunt should be shot, look what you . . .* Annique's eyes did not open.

I ran. No one tried to stop me.

4.

Mr. Andrew wasn't in the underground parking lot, so I walked into the path of the first headlights I saw. The driver of the car was a nice man. He gave me the most exciting car ride ever. I could see out the windows! We drove somewhere on the outskirts of the city, passing abandoned factories and warehouses set against a dirt brown sky. We disturbed puddles on the side of the road, making a hushing noise under the tires. It had rained. The driver let me put my feet up and hang my arm out the window to touch the damp air. We were drifting in a delicious soup of air and mud and glittery pavement and crumbled brick and smells of old food and oily water—the river, I couldn't see it, but the man said it ran close and we'd drive right through it. We entered a tunnel and soared out the other side and I saw a thin tree growing out of a container. I saw a dog running with a rope hanging from its neck. I wanted to stop for the dog but the man said it was best to keep on.

"I want to work with animals," I said, "on a farm."



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“Really?” the man said. “That sounds good.”

“Do I look opaque to you?” I said. “Little browns and beiges?”

Giant streetlamps bent over us, forming a canopy of graceful necks. The man laughed and shook his head. I liked the sound of his laugh. I said that I wanted to run outside the car, and find the dog and bring it to a farm, and he patted me on the knee. He said I wasn’t opaque, I was pretty.

It had grown late when the man dropped me at the house. I don’t know how he

found it, but when I told him I lived at Mrs. Roberts’s Home for Girls, he knew where to go. He wouldn’t just leave me on the street, he said, and he couldn’t bring me home with him, he lived in a place unsuitable for young girls. It didn’t matter—we had a wonderful time. And by now I was bone-tired. Mrs. Roberts buzzed me in. She didn’t say a thing, just opened the door and stepped aside. My throat felt raw. I knew I looked a mess. I said only, “May I go to the bathroom?” and she nodded. I spent a long time in there, examining myself. The spot where Annique had pricked me had already scabbed over. The skin of my belly felt dull under my palms, almost coarse. My body looked hairy. My limbs seemed too short. My face had too broad a shape. I kept hearing what Dennis had said, and thinking of the way he hadn’t wanted to look at me or have me touch him. I heard the whistling sound that had come out of his brother after I pushed. But most of all, over and over, I heard Annique groan, and saw her stiffen on the chair, her face glowing blotchily. It made me nauseated. She wanted me to go away—fine, I went. Who’d want to stay with people like the Janssen brothers? You’d have to be sick in the head to enjoy yourself with men like that.

Then I shaved myself. I did a careful job, clean and close.

When Mrs. Roberts found me sitting in the bath she put me right to bed in the guest room. It’s really the sickroom, but she calls it the guest room to make it sound fun. I had never been there before. “Rest,” she said, tucking me in. She brought my stuffed cow. She made me drink a glass of water and take a pill. A cold cloth was laid on my forehead. The powdery-

rose smell of her perfume made me feel cozy, even though I knew I was in trouble. Mrs. Roberts has been like a mother, *our* mother, Annique’s and mine, for as long as we can remember. The smell of her perfume made me sleep.

5.

Annique has not come to see me. I don’t ask why. I had a fever but Mrs. Roberts fixed me up. She has brought me snacks to get my strength back: crackers, cubes of soy cheese, sliced cucumber with salt, and, most spectacular of all, real hot cocoa. I’ve never had real cocoa before—made of cow’s milk. Wallpaper flowers climb the walls and long curtains match the bed-sheets. My stuffed cow smells clean—Mrs. Roberts must have washed it.

I guess I hurt Mr. Janssen pretty badly. Mrs. Roberts says he had something called a “preexisting vascular problem” and something got ruptured when he went into the edge of the desk. She had to pay the medical bill. She says she knows I didn’t mean to do it.

But I broke those rules on purpose. It was my choice. No one made me.

Annique is probably better off without me. She’s having fun for the first time in her life. I imagine her in our room, on her bed, hunched over a book, scribbling a note to herself, her hair whispering on the paper. I wonder what she did after I ran away. But I can’t bring myself to think about that for more than a minute.

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Today, when Mrs. Roberts brings me my tray, I make a demand. “I want to see Annique.”

Mrs. Roberts puts my tray down on the fuzzy yellow blanket. She is quiet for a moment, arranging the spoon next to a bowl of soup, and laying a napkin on my chest. Finally she says, “Annique is not here.”

I sit up quickly, jostling the soup.

“She has decided to remain in the care of the Janssen brothers.”

I know this is a lie. A cold oil lathers itself in my gut. “What do you mean, ‘in the care of’?”

“They liked her very much.” Mrs. Roberts stares up at the ceiling. “Who knows why? At any rate, they wanted to keep her, and we accepted the offer.”

“I don’t believe you,” I say.

“Oh, Dolly.” Mrs. Roberts draws herself up. She is not tall, Mrs. Rob-



erts, but her hair is tall so it makes her seem taller. Her robe is cinched hard at the waist, which makes her hips and bottom stick out farther and wider than ever. When she smiles her cheeks bunch up like red balls. But her eyes don't twinkle as they normally do. "I debated whether or not to tell you this, but you are a big girl and should face facts. I know you feel great affection for Annique, but she is not suited to the business life. She does not have your talent, or your drive. She cannot represent our name satisfactorily. I have had complaints about her for months. The Janssen brothers can give her"—she looks at the ceiling again—"the *special care* she needs. Meanwhile," she says, leaning over to stroke my hair, "you remind me of me. I have decided to give you a promotion."

"I don't want a promotion," I say, but I cannot help it—I'm flattered. I shake my head. "I'd like to—I want my field trip."

Mrs. Roberts laughs. "Oh, I think you've already had your field trip, don't you?" She rests her hand firmly on my forehead, pinning me against the headboard. I know, suddenly, that there never was any field trip to be had. The field trip was a trick. The top-notch surveys were a trick. The old cartoons and board games and other privileges and never letting us outside except to go from van to client or from client to van: Mrs. Roberts was tricking us all the time.

"You are very lucky, you know, not to be punished for your transgressions," she continues. "But I have decided to put you to better use. I am promoting you to assistant teacher. You will assist Ms. Eck in the Art of Pleasing and you will assist me in my bimonthly seminars, and if you do well, perhaps you will one day teach your own classes."

It is all a huge trick. "How much did they pay you for her?" I say. I am afraid of Mrs. Roberts, but I say it anyway.

Mrs. Roberts still has her hand on my head. She presses down harder and my neck begins to ache. I feel paralyzed. "Silly girl. We won't talk about it anymore. Now eat."

Once she has locked the door behind her I get out of bed. I run to the curtains—they have the tiny Christmas-holly pattern, with a ruffle along the top. But there is no window behind them. They are curtains covering a wall. I hit the wall with the flat of my hand. I hit it with both hands. Why did I leave Annique? I think of Bill's hands, one under her skirt and the other twirling in the air, and her face going purple. What will happen when she wakes out of her trance and finds herself alone? I will find the office,

I will get her out. I hit the wall with my own stupid, wide face. There is nothing Mrs. Roberts can do that hasn't already been done to us.

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When I have rescued Annique, I will get us a position on a farm. I think we would do well in that environment. Neither of us has trouble waking up early, and we are not afraid to break a sweat. We'll heave bales of hay into silos, and muck stalls while the animals graze. I hope there is water nearby to dip into, to cup my hand in and drink from. A pond, or a brook. An underground spring that bubbles over rocks. A river, a lake, but I'm not sure I'd want the open sea. Regardless, I will watch and listen and learn the new skills easily, and then I will teach Annique what she needs to know. Give me a week and I'll have us milking cows, spraying down pigpens, feeding chickens, collecting eggs. We'll work harder than anyone the farmer has ever met.

The bruises swell on my face—I watch their progress in the compact mirror that Mrs. Roberts gave me (to help freshen myself up, she said). When it's time to eat, I eat all of the soup and the crackers from the tray. I drink the water. I do exercises under the sheets and the fuzzy blanket, in the dark. I sleep with my stuffed cow, smelling of powdery roses. The scab on my side fell off long ago—I wanted to save it, but it's lost. I do more exercises. The bruises fade from blue to green to yellow, like the changing colors of the Janssens' ocean. It's pleasing to see my body heal itself; I will need all my strength to do what I must do, and even that might not be enough. My nightgown hides new muscles. My private hair has grown back, thick and curling; I tug on it for courage. Tomorrow, Mrs. Roberts says, I will return to a regular room and begin my training for assistant teacher. She says I am ready. I smile at her. I am ready. 