

PRAISE FOR
Absolute Brightness
A WILLIAM C. MORRIS DEBUT AWARD FINALIST

"This book will encourage you to be exactly who you are."

—Eve Ensler, author of *The Vagina Monologues*

"A captivating story in which youthful prejudices are transformed into deep compassion and understanding. Beautifully pure."

—Duncan Sheik, songwriter and composer of *Spring Awakening*

"James Lecesne has crafted an utterly engrossing tale that, like life itself, confounds expectations at every turn. His heroine is a sort of Scout Finch for the new millennium." —Armistead Maupin, author of *Tales of the City*

"*Absolute Brightness* is revelatory—funny, suspenseful, surprising, and full of the insight into human life that only the best books offer us. James Lecesne is a treasure." —Michael Cunningham, author of *The Hours*

"Lecesne is an artist with small details, using them liberally both to heighten his characters' world and to plant material whose significance emerges only much later." —*Publishers Weekly*

"The marvelous details are engaging, adorable, and also gravely tragic. . . . The teens created by Jean Ferris and Sarah Dessen come to mind as readers applaud Phoebe and big-sister Deidre's growth. . . . An outstanding read for boys and girls alike." —VOYA

"The frank tone of Phoebe's narration and the tragedy of Leonard's abbreviated life will give readers plenty to ponder." —*School Library Journal*

"Not only is *Absolute Brightness* a compelling story filled with drama and mystery, it is also a tenderhearted telling of good vs. evil and of right and wrong, a celebration of the amazing differences in our world and a reminder to be true to oneself." —TeenReads.com

PRAISE FOR THE OFF-BROADWAY SHOW,

The Absolute Brightness of Leonard Pelkey

“A show about the brutal murder of a 14-year-old boy should not, logically speaking, leave you beaming with joy. And yet that’s the paradoxical effect of *The Absolute Brightness of Leonard Pelkey*, a superlative solo show at Dixon Place written and performed by James Lecesne, himself a pretty darn dazzling beacon of theatrical talent.” —*The New York Times*

“The story has the potency to break your heart and make you laugh at the same time. . . . He has a knack for taking ordinary people and revealing their intricacies.” —*The Huffington Post*

“Although we never actually meet Leonard but come to know him from the fond memories of his neighbors, he seems very much alive.” —*Variety*

“Makes a strong case for the life-changing power of entertainment.” —*Forbes*

“Lecesne crafts an airtight 75-minute story about tolerance, evil and legacy. . . . *Leonard Pelkey* is streaked with darkness, but Lecesne shines bright.”

—*New York Daily News*

“*Absolute Brightness* is a must-see story of love and faith that will challenge you to embrace those around you for their differences. Go see it—and bring a box of tissues.” —NBC New York

Absolute Brightness



JAMES LECESNE



FEIWEL AND FRIENDS
NEW YORK

A FEIWEI AND FRIENDS BOOK
An Imprint of Macmillan

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Though the town of Neptune, New Jersey, is a place both real and true, I have taken some liberties in terms of its geography and its character in order to accommodate my story. All the characters, however, are fictional, and any similarity to the actual people of Neptune is purely coincidental.

THE ABSOLUTE BRIGHTNESS OF LEONDARD PELKEY

by James Lecesne

Original Off-Broadway Production produced by Darren Bagert and Daryl Roth.

Originally developed and presented at Dixon Place in New York City; THE ABSOLUTE BRIGHTNESS OF LEONDARD PELKEY opened Off-Broadway at the Westside Theatre in New York City on July 27, 2015. It was directed by Tony Speciale and produced by Darren Bagert, Daryl Roth, Jane Dubin, Curtis Forsythe, Michael Mayer, Diane Procter, Seaview Productions, Minerva Productions/Joshua Goodman; general management by DR Theatrical Management; the set design was by Jo Winiarski; the lighting design was by Matt Richards; the sound design was by Christian Frederickson; the projection design was by Aaron Rhyne; original music was by Duncan Sheik; the original animation and photography by Matthew Sandager; the clothing was by Paul Marlow; and the stage manager was Hannah Woodward. The cast was as follows:

PERFORMER James Lescene

FOR CHRISTOPHER POTTER

This book would not have happened without the encouragement and support of Christopher Potter; he saw it before it existed and he believed in it. I'm also indebted to my early readers, who took the time to read this book as soon as it was there and gave me the guidance I needed to complete it: Michael Cunningham, Eve Ensler, Katherine Deickmann, Michael Downing, Daniel Kaizer, Daniel Minahan, Adam Moss, Cy O'Neal, and Duncan Sheik. My special thanks to my friend and agent Bill Clegg for believing in me again and again and making the everything happen. And to my dear friends Gary Janetti, Armistead Maupin, and Ken Corbett, who are the best at being there for me. I'm so grateful to Laura Geringer Books, and to Laura herself, for seeing the goodness in *Absolute Brightness* and bringing it so perfectly into the world. Extra special thanks to Jean Feiwel and everyone at Feiwel & Friends for giving this book a second chance and for bringing Leonard Pelkey to life for a whole new generation.

I flam'd amazement.

—Ariel in *The Tempest*

William Shakespeare

One

I WAS STALLED in aisle 7 of our local supermarket, musing over the selection of potato chips and saying something like, “But really, don’t you think thirty-seven different types of chips is a ridiculous number to choose from? I mean, how did we end up living in a country that makes a big deal over everything being squeaky-clean and then at the same time makes you pay extra for chips called ‘dirty’?”

As usual, Mom hadn’t heard a word I’d said. Instead, she was standing in the middle of the aisle, smiling at nothing in particular and referring to her shopping list as if it were about to tell her something about her life that she didn’t already know. My sister, Deirdre, was hanging the top half of her body over the shopping cart, letting her long, luxurious chestnut-colored hair touch the unpaid-for produce. She couldn’t hear me even if she’d been so inclined; she was plugged into her

iPod and humming along. If you happened to be passing by, you might have assumed that Deirdre was just some girl about to be sick into the cart, or you might have mistaken her humming for the kind of low moaning that is popular with television actors starring in telenovelas when they've just been fatally shot.

Deirdre has always been considered the great beauty in our family, so I made a point of keeping a certain distance from her. Someone might be forced to compare us, and I would only come up short. Literally. Deirdre is a full four inches taller than I am. Deirdre has always been the tall, beautiful one. I was . . . well, I was Phoebe. I've also avoided lingering too long over her physical features, like her delicate bone structure, her glittery green eyes, or the aforementioned full-bodied head of gorgeous, chestnut-colored hair. Compare and despair. It's true that I've never tried that hard in the beauty department. What's the point? That's Deirdre's territory. It was as if Deirdre had used up all the genetic coding in our family for beauty, and I got whatever was left over, the dregs. Everyone was always looking at her, admiring her, telling her how beautiful she looked, how perfect her outfit was, and asking where she got her shoes. From top to bottom she was Neptune's "it" girl. I was the also-ran. It's lucky I loved Deirdre as much as I did; otherwise I would have hated her guts.

It's not that I'm bad looking. But my arms and legs have always been a bit too square, my hips are wide and I have a butt. I like my breasts. Once I got over the embarrassment of actually having breasts, I discovered that they gave me power

over the boys at school when I wore a certain kind of top. My face is fine, but maybe it's a bit too flat and round to be considered anything other than just cute. Personally, I think my brown eyes are a little too far apart and they don't sparkle nearly as much as I would like, but I can see the world well enough with them, so I guess I shouldn't complain. I dye my hair; I always have. It's my signature thing, my way to keep from being overlooked or forgotten altogether. As my mother has always reminded us girls, "Beauty may be in the eye of the beholder, but for God's sakes, give 'em something worth beholding."

Mom poked Deirdre in the ribs and told her to stand up straight and take her earbuds out. Mom had an announcement to make. And then without any fanfare whatsoever, in the middle of aisle 7, she told us that our cousin Leonard would be coming to live with us.

"And soon," she added. "I mean, this Saturday."

"I didn't know we had a cousin," was the first thing out of my mouth.

Now normally, I don't like to hang out near the frozen foods. You can freeze your legs off if you linger too long in shorts by the Tater Tots and TV dinners. But we were stuck. Mom had decided that this was the time and place to tell us exactly who Leonard Pelkey was and why he would soon be living under our roof. By the time she had finished, my teeth were chattering and my fingertips had gone numb.

Apparently, Leonard was the son of Janet Somebody from Phoenix who had been getting beaten up pretty regularly by her husband. Finally, she ran off with baby Leonard and tried

to piece together a life. Years later, when Leonard was about eleven, Janet met my mother's brother, Mike, in a bar. After noticing that he had a job, she started living with Mike in a low-rise apartment complex with a Spanish-inspired motif until she died of breast cancer the following year, which forced my uncle Mike to become Leonard's legal guardian. But Mike wasn't much of a father figure. He finally broke down, called my mother, and cried long distance. He admitted that he couldn't handle the responsibility of raising a kid on his own. Mom asked him why this was the first she'd heard from him in two years. Uncle Mike explained that he had been traveling back and forth to Mexico and working on a scheme to raise some kind of cattle, which would later be sold for a ton of money. He wanted to know if Leonard could live with us—just until his cattle began to pay off.

After Mom finished telling us the story of Leonard, we made our way to the checkout, where Mrs. Toucci rang us up. Mrs. T took the opportunity to badger Mom; she wanted one of Mom's prime Saturday-morning appointment slots because, she said, she was going to a wedding in Atlantic City. Mom stood firm and explained to Mrs. T that her beauty salon was not a fly-by-night joint, and her Saturday slots were sacrosanct.

"Oh," Mrs. T. said, squinting through the tops of her bifocals. "What the hell's sacro-sacked mean?"

"It means forgetaboutit," Mom said as she handed over her credit card along with one of her signature smiles.

Deirdre and I stood on the sidelines, still reeling from the unexpected announcement. We tried to imagine what this

unknown boy's arrival would mean to us personally. I looked at Deirdre and mouthed the words, "No way am I giving up my room." She mouthed back, "Don't look at me."

"Excuse me," I said aloud, interrupting Mrs. T as she handed my mother back her credit card. Both women turned and stared at me. To tell you the truth, Mrs. T looked like she could've used some serious improvement. Her hair was the color of a paper bag and seemed as though someone had ironed it flat against her scalp. I briefly considered offering her *my* services, which was something I sometimes did for Mom's customers when they were desperate enough to pay double to have someone come to their house and fix them up. But I decided I couldn't be bothered. We had much more pressing issues to attend to in our own backyard.

"How old is the boy? This cousin of ours?" I asked.

"Thirteen. But he's about to be fourteen."

I was fifteen at the time and Deirdre was seventeen, so we didn't have much use for a boy that age living under our roof. It wasn't as if Deirdre and I would be able to pick and choose PBFs (Potential Boyfriends) from the gang of boys that our "cousin" dragged home from school with him. They'd all be way too young—and annoying.

"I have a very bad feeling about this Leonard situation," I said.

"Phoebe, don't start. I'm in no mood," she said to me as she shoved her credit card back into her leatherette purse. "Grab those bags and put them in the cart. We have a lot to do."

I knew what was going on. I knew what Mom was up to.

She was doing that thing she does when she forces life to go on as usual. She doesn't say anything, but her actions speak louder than words, and they all seem to be saying: *This is it. This is the way it's going to be from now on. Get used to it.* And that's how I knew we were going to be stuck with Leonard and there was nothing anyone could say or do from that moment forward to change the situation.

There are those moments in your life when you just know for sure that a major shift is happening right beneath your running shoes and you can feel that your world will never be the same again. That day I swear I felt as if the floor buckled and split and we were all suddenly standing at the edge of a giant abyss looking into God-knows-what. The weird thing is that on the surface everything seemed the same. It was just another Monday at the local supermarket; the PA system was pumping out a watered-down version of "Every Breath You Take," shoppers were loading up supplies for the week, and Mrs. T was badgering Mom for an appointment. Same ol', same ol'. But I wasn't fooled. Not for a minute. And neither was Deirdre.

"Where's he going to sleep?" Deirdre wanted to know once we were outside in the parking lot standing beside Mom's globally warmed Honda.

Mom was packing the groceries into the trunk. I noticed that her eyebrows were arched very high and her lips had been drawn tightly together in a little O of *No comment*. She slammed the trunk shut with a mighty *thunk*.

"Look," she said in the voice she only used with her

customers who had complaints about the end result, “arrangements will be made.”

Arrangements?

We lived in a two-story, three-bedroom, split-level house that was smack in the middle of nowhere along the Jersey shore. Ours was not a house where *arrangements* got made. We were more the type of family to whom things just happened. Fathers ran off. Parents got divorced. Grandmothers died. Cousins moved in. Everything from the future just seemed to tumble into the present and take us by surprise. There was never any planning involved, and certainly no *arranging*. It was true that *appointments* got made at my mother’s hair salon every day of the week (except Sundays and Mondays), and since the salon itself was attached to our house by a narrow breezeway, it was technically still a part of our home; but those appointments weren’t *arranged*; they were *booked*.

Arrangements? Who was she kidding?

Because we didn’t have a spare bedroom in our house and because both Deirdre and I had adamantly refused to give up our rooms to a total stranger, we were forced by my mother to spend the afternoon creating a suitable living space for Leonard down in the basement. We broke our backs clearing an area against one of the cinder-block walls and then stacking boxes five high to create a cozy cardboard corral just large enough to fit a twin bed, a small dresser, and a milk crate that was transformed into a bedside table. We found an old floor lamp down there, the kind that has several conical shades sticking out of it, and we hooked it up in case Leonard was the

type of kid who read books. Mom bought a wastebasket with pictures of trains embossed into it. She placed the thing on the floor, stood back to appraise it, and then dismissed our objections by saying that we didn't know bubkes about what a boy likes. Judging from the look of the wastebasket, she didn't either, but we gave up arguing. To give the illusion of a doorway, we left an opening between two stacks of boxes; and then in a tragic attempt to provide the suggestion of privacy, Mom tacked up a piece of blue billowy fabric over the opening.

The fact that I ended up straining my back and having a bad attitude about our guest before he set foot on our property made no difference to my mother. When I complained about having to do all the heavy lifting, she said, "Well, having a boy around the house will change all that." She turned her back on me and continued to tape up a few tattered Sierra Club posters that had been rolled up and lying around forever. This was another one of her brilliant ideas. She said the posters would be like windows that looked out onto vistas more breathtaking and awe-inspiring than anything Leonard would be likely to find in Neptune, New Jersey. Her choice of views included the wide-open wilderness of Yosemite National Park, the moon rising over Massanutten Mountain in Shenandoah National Park, and an uninviting stretch of Arctic tundra that looked a little too frozen to be anything other than deadly. I refused to be impressed by any of it, mostly because the whole *arrangement* was the most obvious desecration of the memory of my dead grandmother.

Allow me to explain.

After my nana Hertle died, no one knew what to do with her stuff. The furniture was too good to put out on the street but not fine or fancy enough to sell for a profit on eBay. Her clothes were exceptional only because they had belonged to her; her knickknacks, potholders, inspirational books, crocheted vests, tam-o'-shanters, collection of cocktail swizzle sticks, Ouija board, yoga mat, and electric juicer continued to sit there in her apartment gathering dust from one month to the next. My father still lived with us back then, and all the signs were that he was depressed. Who could blame him? His only mother had just died, and whenever someone (i.e., Mom) suggested that he drive over to Nana Hertle's place and box up her belongings, he claimed that it was too much for him. His short-term solution was to go to work, come home, watch TV game shows, and pay the rent on Nana's apartment.

But paying rent on a dead person's apartment was, in my mother's estimation, the same as throwing money out the window. So one day, without any warning, she drove over to Nana's apartment, dragged all the furniture out onto the curb, priced everything, sold most of it, and what she couldn't sell she boxed up and moved into our basement. The empty apartment was then sublet to a Polish couple with a newborn baby, and that was that.

I was only eleven when Nana died, so I wasn't expected to figure out stuff like this; but then no one else in my family did anything about it either. As a result, the boxes just sat there, sagging, molding at the edges, and smelling slightly of mildew. I think Mom was proud of herself for finally putting those

boxes to good use while at the same time solving the problem of where Leonard was going to sleep. She kept repeating over and over that Leonard was going to love it, really love it.

For the next few days Deirdre and I lived in a state of suspended disbelief. Everything went on as it always had, and we tried not to think about the fact that life as we had known it was about to end. No one mentioned that a stranger, a boy, an uninvited guest was about to take up residence in our home, and no one uttered his name. We just went about our business. Looking back on it now, however, I realize that even if we had been ready to receive the imagined Leonard Pelkey into our midst with open arms, we still wouldn't have been prepared for the shock of that almost-fourteen-year-old boy who stood in our living room that first day.

Leonard was wearing capri pants (pink and lime-green plaid) and a too-small T-shirt, which exposed his midriff. He wore a pair of shoes that were more like sandals set atop a pair of two-inch wooden platforms. Both ears were pierced, though only one chip of pale blue glinted from his left lobe. He carried what looked like a flight attendant's overnight flight bag from the 1960s: The strap was hitched over his shoulder, lady style.

"Ciao," he said to me as he smiled and held out his hand.

I took hold of his delicate fingers and gave them a quick shake, while internally rolling my eyes. He was way too different. Don't get me wrong. I like different. I am different. But when different goes too far, it stops being a statement and just becomes weird. I made up my mind right then and there that he and I would not be getting that close, and as a way of making

my point, I turned on my heel and got out of there as fast as I could without knocking anything over.

From the dining room I could watch Leonard's reflection in the large gilt mirror that hung over the sofa on the far wall. He didn't see me, not at first; he was too busy entertaining my mother, telling her stories about his journey, talking about what he had eaten on the plane, who he'd spoken to, pulling out the contents of his flight bag and then explaining where he got everything, including the bag itself. I thought he'd never shut up.

"They gave me the bag on the plane because the air hostess said I was the most entertaining young person she'd met in a long while. It's vintage. I told her if she was any nicer, I'd have to do my Julie Andrews impression for her. She was, like, Who's Julie Andrews? I was, like, Are you kidding me?"

I was not in the least interested in what he was packing or what impressions he could pull off, but I was certainly intrigued by his appearance. He was like a visual code that was at once both a no-brainer to figure out and impossible to decipher. I mean, it wasn't just the fact that he was obviously gay. Please, I've watched enough TV to not be shocked by swish behavior. But there was something about Leonard that seemed to invite ridicule. Like he was saying, Go on, I dare you, say something, mention the obvious. The incredible thing was that no one said a word. Not Deirdre. Not Mom. And since I was out of the room, not me.

Leonard had a narrow face with plain Midwestern features. His mouth was tiny and unremarkable except for the

fact that it was always in motion. A few freckles dotted the bridge of his nose and looked like they had been painted on for a musical performance in which he was to play a hillbilly. If it hadn't been for his eyes, two green pinpoints of flickering intensity, you might have missed him entirely. They were so bright, they made his whole head seem bright and biggish, sitting atop a narrow set of shoulders. His eyes were what held him in place, as if the sharpness of his gaze made him appear more visible to others, more present. The way those eyes could dart about the room and flit from surface to surface made it seem as though his life had depended upon his ability to take in every single detail, assess every stitch of your outfit, calculate the distance to each exit and the time it would take to get there. He did have the most adorable eyelashes I'd ever seen on a boy, long and silky and dark, but then he may have been wearing some product.

"I see you," he said to my reflection in the mirror, which naturally made me crouch to the floor and then drag myself into the kitchen.

I had to warn my mother. I felt it was my duty to tell her that I had a very bad feeling, the same feeling I'd had a few years ago when Dad took up with Chrissie Bettinger, an event that of course led to my parents' divorce and to the subsequent destruction of our entire family. Nana Hertle always tried to convince me that I possessed psychic abilities. I told her I didn't believe in such things. But when I realized that I might have prevented my father from running off if only I had

heeded my nagging premonitions, I began to wonder whether perhaps I did have a special power to foretell the future after all. If only I had said something at the time. So just to be on the safe side, after Leonard was settled into his makeshift basement bedroom and out of earshot, and Mom was back upstairs in the kitchen, I grabbed her arm and said, "Can't you see it? He's like a freak of nature. He's from another planet. I mean, what's he wearing on his feet?"

"Phoebe, let go of my arm," she said, narrowing her eyes and putting on a very cool voice. "They're a kind of sandal. I think they call them huaraches. And you don't know. Maybe they're popular with the boys where he comes from."

"Where? On Mars?"

My mother said I was pure evil and she refused to listen to another word. To get me out of her sight, she instructed me to deliver a handful of fresh towels to Leonard.

He was lying on his new bed in his basement lair. The aforementioned huaraches were kicked off, and he was gazing up at the system of pipes and wires suspended from the rafters as though he were looking at a field of shimmering stars on a summer night.

"So cool. Right? I'm going to call it 'my boxed set.' Get it? Boxed. Set."

"Yeah," I said without the slightest inflection. "I get it."

"It's neat."

I felt I ought to explain to Leonard why "neato" was a word he needed to drop from his vocabulary. If he expected to make

friends during his stay in Neptune, I told him, he couldn't talk like that. He just stared at me like I had something stuck to my face.

Finally I said, "What?"

"Nothing. I was just wondering if you've considered a career in television news broadcasting. You have the 'on-air' face for it. Not exactly the hair, but definitely the face."

I couldn't believe my ears. He had puffed up his pathetic chest while making his brilliant diagnosis, as if to make himself appear larger or more important. But he had the puny rib cage of a kid who had survived early illness. If I had had the presence of mind, I would have responded right away by saying something brutally frank. I might have explained to him why I would never in a million years consider handing out bad news on a daily basis to an unsuspecting nation while wearing a cheerful face, a plunging neckline, and a dated hairstyle. It was a hideous idea. The fact that my hair color at the time was magenta and my left nostril was pierced with a garnet should have convinced anyone with eyesight and half a brain that I had plans, and those plans did not include an "on-air" face.

But Leonard had just arrived from Mars, so perhaps he didn't understand the signals, customs, and facial expressions of the inhabitants of planet Earth. I decided to let it go. I opted instead to stomp up the stairs and in so doing express my impatience with the whole conversation. At the same time, I could get as far away from him as I could manage in a house so small and cramped. I slammed the door and retired to my

room to read *Madame Bovary*. As Emma Bovary went careening around the streets of Rouen in the back of a closed carriage, making mad and passionate love to Monsieur Léon, I silently made a vow to myself never to speak to Leonard again, because as anyone could see, he was a loser.

two

OUR FIRST MEAL together was a form of early-twenty-first-century torture. Over spaghetti and meatballs, Leonard tried to figure out the situation between my parents. Why were they no longer together? Where was Dad living now that they had separated? What happened to make him leave? Was it actually a divorce? Were they planning to get back together? Mom tried to deflect each one of Leonard's questions.

"He's a missing person."

"Don't ask."

"Could we change the subject?"

"More meatballs?"

"Enough."

When Leonard persisted, she decided to take another tack.

"You know the way a snail abandons its shell?" she said, spooning a second helping onto Leonard's plate whether he

liked it or not. “Well, that’s your uncle. Only he moved way faster than a snail. And he wasn’t alone.”

Whenever Mom talked about my father, she never mentioned the word “divorce”; it was against her Catholic religion. But then, it wasn’t her style to say much about anything—for example, she didn’t go around explaining to people why Chrissie Bettinger, a girl whom she had given every opportunity and had housed under her own roof, ran off with her husband. Not that she had to explain a thing to the folks in Neptune; everyone knew the whole story.

For a while, Mom was big news and the regular customers of Hair Today salon were privy to a ready supply of fresh details about the breakup. But even after all the screaming and the fighting, after that morning when we woke to find all of Dad’s belongings sitting in a pile out on the front lawn, after all the lawyers had served the legal papers and the whole thing was officially over, Mom fought against the idea that she was the type of person who could get a divorce. If asked, she said she was “separated.” She once told Deirdre and me that if word got out about the divorce, it would ruin her as a hair stylist. But really, word was out, and she was in denial.

There are photographs of my mother from when she was a younger version of herself, and no matter what was going on, she always managed to smile for the camera. She smiled as she entered the room with the knotty-pine paneling; she smiled as she looked adoringly at her father, who was holding up a raw steak and wearing a KISS THE COOK apron; she smiled when she was caught with pink curlers in her blue-black hair

and not a hint of makeup; she smiled in her wedding dress standing against an obviously fake autumnal backdrop; she smiled as she pointed to the Motel 6 outside Phoenix where she and Dad stayed on a cross-country road trip; and she smiled as she sat by the ocean with pint-size versions of me and Deirdre playing in the background.

In each one of those pictures, it was plain to see she had no idea that her life would later become such a sad and sorry soap opera. Back in those days, when she was still drop-dead gorgeous and full of potential, she probably woke up each morning, put on her makeup, fixed her hair, got dressed, had places to go, stuff to look forward to, and plenty of things to smile about. But by the time I came along, smiling was how she'd trained herself to meet every situation, no matter what. Smiling had become a habit. No, smiling was more than a habit for my mother; it was who she was.

I knew other mothers, mothers of girls my age, who had fabulous lives, working husbands, nice houses, clothes, cars, Cuisinarts and microwaves, the whole split-level deal, and quite honestly they didn't smile half as much as my mother did. Even after my father announced that he was leaving us and taking up with Chrissie Bettinger, Mom kept smiling. And she smiled long after he was gone.

"It's okay, Aunt Ellen," Leonard said, leaning over and fingering the diamond center of her wedding ring. "I guess it kinda turned out different for all of us. How many carats is this, anyway?"

I can't remember the last time my mother cried, but right

there at the kitchen table over a plate of spaghetti and meatballs, tears came streaming down her face. She was quiet about it. No sobs or choking back. It was as if Leonard had found the on/off switch to her tears. And no one was more surprised than Deirdre and me. We both sat there with our mouths hanging open. I think if I hadn't been chewing and trying to swallow a meatball, I would have burst out crying myself. But as it happened, I didn't want to add the Heimlich maneuver to our dinnertime activities, so I just closed my mouth and kept chewing as if nothing were wrong. Deirdre, on the other hand, excused herself from the table, went upstairs, and didn't come back.

"I'm sorry," Mom said into her paper napkin. "I'm so sorry. I didn't mean to . . . It's just . . . I don't know. I'm exhausted. This week and all. There's been so much. I don't usually . . . Why am I explaining?"

"My mother used to cry at holidays," Leonard offered as a way of comforting Mom and making her feel like it wasn't anything to apologize about. "Also anniversaries." And then as an afterthought, he added, "I miss her. A lot."

We all just sat there missing people who weren't there. Then Leonard sat straight up in his chair and let his eyes pop open wide. He had an idea.

"Hey, wait a minute. Is it like the anniversary of something between you and my uncle What's-his-name?"

Mom looked up, squinted, and then blinked a few times like she was trying to see something very far off without her glasses. And then there it was, clear as if it had unexpectedly appeared on the horizon. We could see her seeing it—the date.

Twenty years ago, almost to the moment, my mother had met my father.

Mom's eyes filled up with tears again, and she was unable to go on.

Leonard turned to me and in a voice that mixed urgency with unctuousness asked if we had any vodka in the house. Vodka? Why would we need vodka? I didn't get it. But then the next moment, I found myself standing on a chair in the dining room, turning the key of the liquor cabinet and pulling down a bottle of Smirnoff. *This better be good*, I thought.

When I came back into the kitchen, Leonard was standing at the kitchen sink with a head of iceberg lettuce in his hands. He was tearing away three of the large, crisp outer leaves and rinsing them under running water. He then laid these pale-green half-moons on the drain board and tamped each one dry with a paper towel. He grabbed a few ice cubes from the freezer and plunked them one by one into the lettuce cups.

"Thanks," he said, grabbing the Smirnoff from my hand. He poured a couple of shots of vodka over the ice in one of the leaf cups and then handed it over to Mom. "I call it a Titanic, because of the iceberg lettuce. You drink the vodka, suck on the ice, and then eat the lettuce. It's fabulous. *And* refreshing. Try it."

Mom looked incredulous as she pursed her lips to take the first sip. I thought the whole thing was insane, but I had to admit that the cocktail had already worked its first miracle—Mom had stopped crying. She was sitting there rolling around the taste of vodka and staring down at the little lake of spirits

cupped in the lettuce while the ice cubes bobbed and clicked in the palm of her hand. Leonard turned back to the counter and began to fill the other two lettuce cups with water from the tap. When he was done, he handed me one of them and took the other for himself.

“Cheers,” he said. “Yours and mine are nonalcoholic. For obvious reasons. Think Deirdre would want one?”

“Definitely not,” I said.

All three of us sat there sipping our iceberg cocktail. I felt like something out of *Alice in Wonderland*.

But, of course, that was just the beginning.

Before the end of Leonard’s first month with us, he started working at the salon. He said it had always been his dream to work in the beauty business, and he couldn’t believe his luck when Mom asked him to sit at the front desk, answer the phones, and make appointments. Since school hadn’t started yet and Leonard hadn’t made any friends in the neighborhood (and it was doubtful that he would), there was nothing to keep him from spending his free time at the salon, learning the customers’ names, and expanding his duties to include tasks that were, as he described them, “up-front and hands-on.”

Right from the get-go, he acted as if he owned the place. He whistled show tunes as he cheerfully swept up the fuzzy, mouse-colored clumps of old-lady hair that littered the salon floor. He reached his fingers under the antiquated drying helmets and said with trumped-up authority: “Feels like you

could stand a few more minutes, Mrs. Mixner.” He took the money at the till and made change, coffee, and small talk. He downloaded easy-listening versions of pop songs, burned CDs, and piped them through a brand-new sound system that he himself installed. He even took it upon himself to listen to the long list of ailments, infirmities, and family complaints from women five times his age.

I knew all of Mom’s customers far more intimately than I cared to admit. If she was over sixty, lived within a fifty-mile radius, and could still pick up a phone to make an appointment, I knew all about her—and not just the pitch and tint of her hairdo or the cut of her fancy housecoat. No. I could also tell you the cast of her ongoing personal drama, the make and model of her car, her date of birth, the last time she had sex, the name of the guy she last had sex with, her favorite TV program, her least-favorite TV program, her movie star of choice, as well as the nicknames and habits of each and every one of her grandchildren. Despite the fact that I preferred to spend my spare time reading books and losing myself in the works of writers like Jane Austen and Charles Dickens, these old gals with their high hair and caked-on makeup were, for better or worse, the universe into which I had been born. They were my people.

Leonard was now ensconced in that world and had taken over the very job that I used to have at the salon, going so far as to wear my old smock and use my old telephone headset. Whereas I generally hated anything to do with the salon and couldn’t care less about the women who came and went like

clockwork, Leonard loved the whole scary scene and took to the customers like hair on fire. This was as close to his idea of dying and going straight to heaven as he was likely to find on this earth.

To the average person I suppose the Hair Today salon would not seem that bad. It was just a run-of-the-mill beauty parlor outfitted in shades of dusty pink and slate gray and operating out of what used to be our garage. Nothing fancy, but not that shabby either. Back in the mid-nineties, after Mom had the place gutted, expanded, insulated, and decorated within an inch of its life, it seemed the most natural thing in the world to connect the whole shebang to the house by a snazzy breezeway. To be able to dart back and forth between the main house and the salon on a rainy day without getting her hairdo mussed justified the added expense of jalousie windows and a shingled roof; and since we weren't exactly the outdoorsy types, not one of us missed having a backyard.

As you walk in the front door of the salon, right behind the reception desk there are three drying helmets. Elderly women, rolled tight and netted, get parked there so their hairdos can cook to a crisp along with their brains. Two beauty chairs sit smack in the middle of the salon—one operated by my mother, the other one reserved for the memory of Leslie Shilts, a woman with big hair and overdecorated fingernails who used to show up twice a week until she broke with Mom and opened her own place in Avon.

The décor of the salon is modern with a nod to the good old days. The atmosphere is businesslike but friendly. The

overall effect, despite the ozone-destroying hair spray and the exposure to certain chemicals that could blind a lab rat, is always to the customer's liking. Our job is, after all, to make the customer's idea of beauty come to life right before her very eyes—no matter what. If she comes in with a picture of, say, Nicole Kidman and begs us to make her look like that, Mom nods and directs her to the shampoo station. Mom never mentions the fact that Nicole is thirty years younger and still has hair to work with. She never says, "Lady, have you looked in the mirror lately?" She just smiles and gives it her best shot. That's what she's paid to do. Usually the customer leaves there satisfied even if she doesn't end up looking anything like Ms. Kidman. Everybody loves to be fussed over.

Originally the place was a beauty parlor known as The Beauty Spot. Then in the late nineties Mom came back from a big convention in Las Vegas with the bright idea to refer to the place as a "salon" and call it Hair Today. For a few weeks, everyone oohed and aahed over the neon signage out front and Mom's new leatherette smock. But soon enough life went back to the way it had always been. The only change seemed to be the way we answered the phone, which went something like this:

"Hair Today. How can I help you?"

"What?"

"I said, Hair Today. How can I help you?"

"I musta dialed the wrong number. Wait. This The Beauty Spot?"

"We used to be The Beauty Spot. We're Hair Today now."

"Why? What's wrong with The Beauty Spot?"

“Nothing. We just changed names . . . Mrs. Bustamante? That you?”

“Yeah. Who’s this?”

“It’s me. Phoebe.”

“Well, honey, why didn’t you say so up front? I’m just calling to say that I’m gonna be late for my three o’clock.”

After a two-year stint as Hair Today’s receptionist and part-time shampooer, I decided that the time had come for me to move on. I was sick to death of being an accomplice in destroying the ozone layer with a can of hair spray just so Mrs. Weinstein could feel secure beneath a hardened helmet of hair for her granddaughter’s bat mitzvah.

I also had to admit that my idea of beauty had evolved to the point where I could no longer stand being exposed to frosted tips, perms, bouffants, or hair dyes with names like Autumn Mist and Champagne Moments. I wanted to live a different type of life and mix with a different sort of person. It wasn’t that I disapproved of people who teased their hair and wore a plastic rain bonnet even when the sun was shining; I just wanted to expand my horizons. After too many hot tears, big fights, shouted ultimatums, and slammed doors—behavior that is, in my opinion, as far from personal beauty as you can get—I came to the conclusion that Mom and I were no longer compatible and Hair Today wasn’t worth the trouble. So I quit.

After that, if my hair was in need of some kind of attention, I ended up at Supercuts in Asbury Park, a plate-glass palace where they played loud music and someone closer to my own

age, who didn't bother with the blow-dryer because I was only going to wash my hair when I got home anyway, presided over me with a who-cares attitude. If I wanted to dye my hair (something I've done regularly since I was about twelve), I just took care of it myself in the upstairs bathroom.

Deirdre's relationship to the salon was more complicated than mine. She never actually worked at the place, and I think she always held a little contempt for the business because she had come by her hair beauty so naturally. Her long, shiny, chestnut-colored hair hung down past her shoulder blades and gently flipped under in a V. Like a prize-winning dog that needed constant grooming and a special diet, but at the same time delighted the judges and brought home all the blue ribbons, her hair was everybody's favorite. As a result, her duties on behalf of Hair Today were more in the line of advertising. If, for example, Deirdre happened to be walking down the street minding her own business, it wasn't all that unusual for her to be stopped by a woman who felt the need to compliment her hair. Naturally, the woman would ask Deirdre how she got her hair that way. Deirdre would simply smile and say, "Oh, my mom owns a salon, so y'know, it's just in the family, I guess." Next question: "What's the name of your mom's place?" That was Deirdre's cue to flip her hair back over her shoulder and casually say, "Hair Today," before being distracted and moving on. The woman, hoping to somehow look just like Deirdre, would make a mental note, and sure enough, the following week she would show up.

Of course, no one ever talked about this. I once mentioned

that I found it inconceivable that a mother could use one of her own children as a shill.

“Whaddaya, crazy?” Mom asked me with hands on hips and her jaw set hard. “You think with my schedule I got time to think up stuff like that? Who do you think I am? Proctor and Gamble?”

The first thing I noticed when Leonard started working in the salon was that Mom began walking around the place wearing a thoughtful expression. This was unusual, because it was more her style to appear harried and overworked and, on occasion, hysterical. Her day generally started at nine a.m. and then snowballed into avalanche proportions by noon. By three p.m., she was so busy problem solving and disaster averting, she rarely had a minute to herself. If an actual thought occurred to her, it was likely to get crowded out by the demands of her customers.

Once Leonard was on the scene, however, Mom somehow found the time to pause before a mirror and quietly appraise her looks. She seemed no longer satisfied with the person staring back at her. She began to consider changes, like flattering shades of lipstick, new outfits, fad diets, and even face-lifts. Was it just a coincidence that she started entertaining these ideas and following through with a few of them shortly after Leonard arrived? I don't think so. As everybody within a twenty-mile radius soon discovered, Leonard was a major fan of the personal makeover.

On the blank pages of his spiral notebook, Leonard drew the faces of generic girls and boys and ladies and gentlemen; and then, using nothing but a ballpoint pen and his overactive imagination, he transformed their faces into something fantastical. This was more than just a hobby, more than merely doodling; it was, like, his full-time job, his obsession. He could spend hours lengthening eyelashes, smoothing brows, shaping hair, making lips more fulsome, sculpting cheekbones, making a nose less pronounced, an expression more vivid and alive. I think he was trying to convince some unsuspecting idiot to be his guinea pig; but no one ever took the bait.

Once, he tried to sign Mom up to be a contestant on a TV show where they gave total strangers a new look and then re-decorated the stranger's home to match. Mom kept saying that she was way too busy and couldn't even dream of doing such a thing. But Leonard kept after her. He reminded her that we all had a responsibility to improve ourselves or else we could become hopelessly outdated or, worse, extinct. He didn't care whether the makeover involved a person or a footstool, he believed in upgrade and overhaul. He had plans for everything and everyone—including himself. I once overheard him saying to Mom, "There's nothing wrong with you that a new do and a fresh Amex card couldn't fix."

Of course it's possible that Mom might have found her way to changing her look on her own. Being the same old disappointed person day after day for the rest of her life might eventually have worn thin. But there is no denying the fact that Leonard's presence and his mania for the makeover goosed

her along the path. In any case, within a month, my mother was a new woman. She had tossed aside the pair of powder-blue Reeboks that she'd been wearing to work for the past 150 years, and she was suddenly zipping around the salon in a pair of cute candy-colored mules. She also stopped putting on just any old pair of slacks before going to work. Instead, she wore a short skirt, so short that her legs seemed like they had a mind of their own and could go walking off at any moment without her. She began applying lipstick, eye shadow, and blush. She looked like a shelf item that had been reissued and priced to move. And the worst part? No one was supposed to notice.

"What's with you?" I asked her.

"Whaddaya talking about?" was how she sidestepped the issue.

When I found her collection of dowdy, loose-fitting leatherette smocks stuffed into a garbage bag out by the curb on trash night, I wanted to know what it all meant. She told me to mind my own business, but if I must know, she said, she had ordered a whole new supply of pink jersey smocks with an entirely different cut, a style of smock that she considered "more slimming." She had a prototype, which she had been wearing for a week. "I like it," she declared. "It's just so much better." And to prove that this was true, she modeled it for me, twirling in the middle of the kitchen with the words *HAIR TODAY* dramatically embroidered across her breasts.

Customers began to stare at Mom, and it was clear by the way their eyes followed her around the salon that they wanted whatever she was having. I don't mean they wanted her smock

or her new mules. No. They wanted their old lives back, their legs, their breasts, hair, skin—the works. If someone like my mother, a woman who was not so crazy about change to begin with, could effect a transformation so dramatic over a few weeks' time, then it must be available to anyone. And it wasn't that hard to see that Leonard was the mini-mastermind behind it all.

"Whose idea was the smock?" they asked my mother nonchalantly.

"Leonard's. He had a catalog," she told them, pretending it was no big deal.

"What'd you do to your hair?" they wanted to know.

"Leonard's idea. Pretty wild, huh?"

Soon our phone started ringing off the hook.

"Is Leonard around?"

"Mrs. Ladinsky?" I said, my voice rising with surprise. I wanted her to understand that I considered it highly unusual for a sixty-seven-year-old woman, who had hair the texture of cotton candy and an estranged husband living in Tampa, to be calling my fourteen-year-old girly-boy cousin at ten p.m. on a school night.

"Yeah, it's me. Honey, lemme talk to Leonard, will ya?"

"Hold on," I said, and then I pressed the receiver against the front of my nightgown, took a few deep breaths, and waited for a decent amount of time to pass. When I was finally good and ready, I said into the phone: "Sorry, Mrs. L, but Leonard's in the bathroom right now. I'm not sure, but I think he's masturbating and I don't want to disturb him."

"I'll call back."

Click.

I never told Leonard. Really, they shouldn't have been telephoning our house at all hours of the day and night and treating me like his personal assistant. It wasn't right.

Of course, the question we *should* have been asking was, Why did Leonard have so much influence? I'd been trying to get Mrs. Cafiero to stop coloring her hair Sunset Mist since I knew what hair dye was all about. Why hadn't she ever listened to me? Suddenly there was an orphan in our midst who had a power over Mrs. C that no one could dispute. At his suggestion, Mrs. C walked into the salon one sunny Tuesday and ordered Mom to "Chop it all off. I'm goin' au naturel!"

In fact, Leonard was so busy making everybody over, encouraging everybody to be herself, or rather to become his idea of who he thought she ought to be, that before long all the women were checking out their hair, their hemlines, their crow's-feet, and their bustlines in front of the full-length mirror at the salon. They spent hours trying to figure out if they should indeed go blond, jog, shop, tweeze, exfoliate, go online, learn to drive, or do any one of the 1,001 things Leonard suggested they do in order to improve their lives. Leonard was the go-to guy all our clients had been dreaming about, the guy who noticed them, the guy who wanted what was best for them.

I, however, wasn't fooled for a second. I suspected that Leonard was just trying to get on everybody's good side so that Mom would find him indispensable and then eventually ask him to stay forever. Because let's face it, he had nowhere else to go. We were the end of the line for him, and he was desperate.

I just didn't see why *we* should have to be the ones responsible for him, why he had come to live at *our* house, or why people kept telling us it was such a perfect match. The mere thought of living with Leonard for the rest of my life, or even for another year, was more than I could stand. So for the next several months I devoted myself to the task of exposing Leonard's character defects and revealing his true manipulative nature to my mother. Once he had done something inexcusable, Mom would certainly make other "arrangements" and send him packing. Of course, I had to be crafty. I was so busy devising a plan, I never considered the possibility that Leonard might do it himself. And that was exactly what happened. I didn't even have to lift a finger. It was almost too easy.

three

"DON'T YOU LIKE it here?" Mom asked as she freshened her lipstick and looked into her little illuminated compact mirror. It was Thanksgiving Day and Mom had decided that she couldn't possibly wrestle a turkey into the oven on her day off, and so we had ended up at the Fin & Claw restaurant.

"Well, I thought you girls liked it here," Mom said. "Look. They have that nice cranberry sauce from a can like you like. We don't have to stay here if you don't want to. I thought it was your idea."

Mom then pressed her lips into a tissue and took one last look at her corrected face before snapping the mirror shut.

"Wasn't it *your* idea, Deirdre?" she asked.

That's when Deirdre lost it.

"No! It was *not* my idea. It was Leonard's idea, okay? You

know that. And really, Mother, you shouldn't do that at the table! It's very—"

"Do what?"

"That!" Deirdre snapped back and took a quick look at the compact.

"Oh, stop it, Deirdre," my mother said as she tucked the compact back into her purse and out of sight. "There's no one here."

I looked around the room. It was a sea of old folks, the kind of people who eat dinner before the sun goes down, the kind who don't count.

"Thanks a lot," said Deirdre, making it seem as though Mom were saying that *we* didn't count either. She stared off into an imagined distance as if the whole world had meant nothing to her and there wasn't a single thing worth discussing.

"I wish I'd never been born," Deirdre said in a very tired voice.

"You know," Leonard began with an overly bright gleam in his eyes, "I read somewhere that to be born into this life is as rare as a one-eyed turtle rising to the surface of the ocean once every hundred years and he just happens to come up with his head poked through a hole in the center of a piece of wood that just happens to be floating right there where the turtle comes up."

All three of us looked at him like he was one of those people at the bus terminal who try to hand you leaflets about the afterlife—which is to say we tried *not* to look at him at all.

“Anyway, that’s what they say. It’s pretty rare.”

Deirdre groaned, grabbed her purse, and got up from the table.

There was a time when behavior of this sort was out of the question where Deirdre was concerned, because once upon a time, Deirdre was happy. She got all As in school, laughed at everything, talked to everyone, and made up clever songs about Mom’s customers on the spot. She smiled at strangers and she had a way of making the people we knew feel as if they actually mattered. When she was nine and signed up for junior cheerleading, she became squad captain within six months, not because she was particularly good at splits or high kicks or looked good in pleats, but because she knew how to rally the girls. It’s a shame she didn’t pursue her cheerleading in high school, but by then the light in her had dimmed a bit. No one really knew why. At the time, I just figured that she was going through stuff and that Mom and Dad’s divorce had taken its toll. Puberty could have also explained it. Everybody knew that puberty could cause all kinds of unexpected changes; it was just a matter of degree. For Deirdre, the degree had been extreme.

“I think she needs a new look,” Leonard said, sipping his Diet Coke through a slim, red cocktail straw. “Something sassy. Something that says, ‘Hey, get a load of me.’”

Even Mom rolled her eyes at that one.

“And just for the record,” I interjected, “this was Leonard’s idea. The restaurant. Not Deirdre’s. Not mine. His.”

A word about the Fin & Claw: The Fin & Claw is basically a summer business, but it serves the community throughout

the year as a tragic backdrop for birthday parties, anniversary and reunion celebrations, dinners in honor of graduating seniors, newborns, bank presidents, and the Elks club. Every family within twenty miles has contributed to its success. We never had much choice, really. It was one of the few places in Neptune where you could celebrate Thanksgiving Day in public. The place was described on the front of the menu as “a Neptunian lair fit for a king,” but really it was just a lot of cheap souvenirs and seaside frippery designed to inspire the summer trade into believing that they had traveled far from home. Starfish, palm fronds, and life preservers were tangled in swags of fish netting, all of it draped dramatically from the rafters and crossbeams. Stuffed sea game and fishing tackle hung on the walls. Large seashells (*not* native to the Jersey shore) were arranged along the ledges of the room. The salad bar had become a big draw long before they installed the see-through sneeze guard.

But the décor was not the only reason I’d hated the Fin & Claw with such a deep and abiding passion. The problem was that no one in Neptune could step foot in there without suffering from a severe attack of remembering. My family was no exception. The last time I was there, I turned to Deirdre and whispered that from now on we were going to refer to the place as “the tomb of our passed youth.” It was as if everything that had ever happened to us as a family was dead and hanging up in the rafters. My seventh-, eighth-, and tenth-birthday celebrations, as well as Deirdre’s sweet sixteen. My dad was up there, too (though I tried not to look at him). Every prayer I

ever directed toward that beamed ceiling of the Fin & Claw during those endless Sunday dinners was hanging alongside those horrid plastic lobsters and the splintered oars.

Josh Mintern, who was posing as a busboy in a bloodred jacket that clashed with his bright-red hair, delivered a basket of dinner rolls to our table. No wonder he couldn't look me in the eye—the rolls were so stale, they clicked against one another when he set them down in front of me. He had a golden trace of a mustache on his upper lip, and I thought, *My God, we're all growing up, and in about ten minutes we'll be old people ordering the early bird special and complaining about lumps in the gravy.*

"Hey, Josh," said Leonard, and he flashed a bright smile up from the table.

We were all stunned that Leonard was on a first-name basis with anyone in town, let alone someone a grade above him. Josh seemed surprised as well. He just stood there, looking as if he had just been hit on the head with one of his dinner rolls.

Once Josh had loped across the room and disappeared into the kitchen, Leonard leaned over and looked toward the entrance as if he were expecting someone. A person would have to be blind not to notice that Leonard was acting weird, even for him. Mom shot a glance at him.

"Leonard, I don't know what's up with you, but you're acting very queer."

"Mother!" I said, using my restaurant voice. "We have told you six trillion times that 'queer' is not a word you should be using."

What I didn't tell her was that "queer" was a word I had stopped using anywhere near Leonard—not in the same sentence, not in the same room, not in the same thought. Words like "faggot," also "fruit loop" or "poofa," "fairy-pants," "sissy," "girlyboy," "freakazoid," "nellie," "big Nell-box," "Nancy," "Mary," and "Margaret Anne" were, for the time being, also off-limits. I had forbidden myself to even consider what these words meant—especially since the kids at school had started using them in broad daylight.

Leonard, on the other hand, never seemed to mind. Whenever I happened to be walking with him and someone lobbed a word bomb like "queenie-boo" in his direction, he acted as if there were a faint electrical buzzing in the air, one that had no discernible source to bother complaining about. Once, Leonard just looked at me, sighed, and then drew my attention to the shine coming off his new oxblood penny loafers.

"Do you think these shoes make my feet look small?" he asked, oblivious to the threat that was breathing down his neck.

At moments like that, I couldn't tell whether I wanted to hug him or to step all over his new shoes. I suppose if I had been a better person, I would have found the nerve to stand up to the local bullies. I would have told them to their faces that they couldn't go around terrorizing people who were posing as my cousin. But the last thing I needed was to get a reputation as a smart-mouthed do-gooder and defender of the local queenie-boos.

“Stop turning around in your seat,” my mother said to Leonard.

“I know. But I really shouldn’t be sitting with my back to the door,” Leonard said.

Whenever we went out to a restaurant, Leonard insisted on a seat facing the front door of the restaurant. He claimed that it was an old Italian custom.

“You never know who could walk through the door,” he told us.

But that night at the Fin & Claw, my mother put her foot down and made him sit across from her with his back to the door.

“You aren’t even remotely Italian, Leonard,” she told him, “so don’t start.”

He raised his little eyebrows (I swear he plucked them) and said, “Haven’t you ever heard of it happening? Middle-aged men in sweat suits get shot over a plate of spaghetti all the time. They forget to watch their backs.”

“Leonard, you’ve been watching way too much TV,” was all I had to say on the subject.

Just then all the blood drained from Mom’s face and her features seemed to disappear. She looked as though she had just spotted a hit man toting a machine gun the moment before he opened fire. We all stopped breathing.

When you are connected to a person by blood or by the force of love, it’s as if you had some kind of internal Geiger counter that begins to tick quicker, louder, whenever that

person gets close to you. At that moment, mine was ticking like crazy, and even without turning around, I knew my father had just walked into the restaurant and he was coming toward us.

“Go get Deirdre,” my mother said without looking at me directly. “We’re leaving right this minute.”

I got up from the table, raced across the dining room toward the ladies’ room, and bumped into Aunt Bet (who is not our actual aunt); her small, compact body was right in my path, and it didn’t look like she was going anywhere fast. Aunt Bet had an apple-shaped face and a pear-shaped body; her hair, which had been permed and tinted a pale champagne color by my mother, always looked a little crooked on her head. She locked me in her gaze and then shot me a smile that was entirely false.

“Ho there. Where’s the fire, young lady?” she asked, putting on her people-pleaser voice and taking hold of my arm. “Slow down. We don’t want to be rushing you to no emergency room, not on Thanksgiving Day.”

Just then Deirdre came out of the ladies’ room and stopped in her tracks. She was trying to figure out what was going on between Aunt Bet and me. But when Aunt Bet let go of my arm, Deirdre focused her gaze beyond us and saw what was happening over at the booth. She saw Dad, large as life.

“Come on,” I said to her. “We’re going. Mom said we’re outta here.”

Mom was making a beeline toward the front door of the restaurant. Deirdre and I decided to fall in behind her, though I had made the decision for both of us by grabbing hold of her

sleeve and pulling her along with me. We'd almost made it to the exit when Mom came to an unexpected halt. She just stopped like a woman in a dream who suddenly realizes she's forgotten her clothes but is too afraid to look down and find out that she really *is* naked. Because Deirdre and I were literally right on her heels, there was a pileup.

"Our coats," Mom said, realizing that we were about to leave without essential outerwear. It was November, after all. The next thing I knew, Mom was headed back to the booth, where Leonard and my father were sitting.

"Uh-oh," I said to the back of Mom's pumpkin-colored pantsuit as I tried to get my shoe back on. "Mom? We ought to be leaving here. We ought to be leaving this minute."

But Mom was already standing beside the booth and glaring down at Leonard and my father as if they were felons. It's a good thing she didn't have a gun handy.

"Hey, look who's here," Leonard said to her as he pointed to my father. "How about that? Something, right?"

I looked Leonard hard in the face and tried to control his brain with my thoughts, but he was very dense when family matters were involved, so it didn't work. He merely straightened in his seat and said, "It's him. It's your father," as though there had been some confusion about the identity of my own flesh and blood.

I always thought of my father as a handsome man. I once admitted to my best girl friend, Electra, how I thought he looked like a more golden version of George Clooney. She laughed out loud and then caught herself when she realized

that I was being serious. “I guess, sort of,” she conceded, and then added, “but not really.” In any case, there was a resemblance—at least to me. He had pale, freckled skin and coarse, ginger-colored hair. His features were all sharp and to the point, his lips were thick and cushy, and the fine yellow hairs on his forearms glistened. Whereas I had inherited all the darker traits of our mother’s southern Italian clan, Deirdre had inherited the good looks, bright tones, and green eyes from our dad.

That afternoon, he looked older than I remembered, and tired. He was sitting with his fists on the table, wearing a pale-green plaid short-sleeved shirt and looking over at us as if we were insane. We just stood there. He didn’t say a word. Nothing. His mouth tried to smile, but his eyes were sorrowful, and they began to fill with tears. I looked away. I couldn’t stand it. Deirdre was staring up at the fish netting as though she had just located some lost thing up there. She looked hopeless and utterly alone in the middle of the crowded restaurant. We all were.

Meanwhile, Aunt Bet was flitting around the room from one table to the next chatting up the customers. She had her eye on us; she knew enough about the situation between my mom and dad to know that this could be trouble, but she was playing it down and pretending not to notice our unscheduled stop at what was now my father’s table. It was obvious that something was wrong.

“Everything’s fine,” I heard her say to three old women with sweaters draped over their shoulders and hair the color of

their dinner napkins. They were craning their necks to see what was going to happen next. Something was obviously up with us; but Aunt Bet just said, “It’s nothing. Just family matters.”

The idea that the previous three years and everything we’d been through—the separation, the divorce, living without my father, watching Mom trying to make ends meet—amounted to *nothing* in the minds of other people made me crazy. I wanted to scream or scratch somebody’s eye out, but instead I just stood there like everybody else, waiting for the next thing to happen.

“Come on, Leonard,” Mom said. “We’re going home.”

“Ellen . . . ?” My father’s voice came as a surprise. We all looked at him. He took a heavy breath, as if he were about to make a big speech and appeal to my mother’s sense of fairness.

“Don’t. Okay?” Mom said to him. “Just don’t.”

And then she stretched her left hand flat out for emphasis. I noticed that she wasn’t wearing her wedding ring. When did that happen? I wondered. Maybe she never put it back on after that night when Leonard touched the diamond chip and introduced her to the Titanic cocktail.

“Coats,” Mom said to us over her shoulder, which was her way of ending the possibility of a conversation and getting us out of there as fast as she could.

Leonard got up. We all tried not to look at one another as we put on our late-autumn, early-winter outerwear, but I could see that Leonard was a nervous wreck.

Then I heard my father say, “I’m sorry.” But he said it low and into his chest and not quite loud enough for it to do any good.

Mom said, "Excuse me?"

He looked up at us and then in a louder voice he repeated himself. "I'm sorry. Believe me, this never should've happened. It's my fault. I'm . . . I'm so, so sorry."

The words came out of his mouth, but each syllable sounded cheap and flat. I suppose these were the words that we all wanted to hear from him. We had wanted him to be sorry, to cry, to see him squirming in his seat and then begging for our forgiveness. But as it was happening, I felt like it wasn't really enough.

Aunt Bet came over to the table. She was slightly stooped over and she was wearing the most pitiful expression.

"Girls, please," she said, "let's not block the aisle."

We all looked at her as though she were an alien creature as she moved on toward the kitchen. That's when Deirdre seemed to come back from whatever far-off planet she'd been visiting. She blinked a few times and laughed. It was not a happy laugh. It was low and smoky and slightly menacing.

Then she reached over and grabbed a handful of lettuce from the salad bar beside her. She tossed the lettuce at my father lightly, almost as if she were showering him with rose petals. The individual curls of lettuce landed on his shoulders and in his hair, a few fell to the floor and onto the table. I heard one of the nearby diners gasp in horror. Everyone was stunned—my father, too. He just sat there examining the mess in front of him.

Deirdre reached behind her again, but this time I was ready

for her. I was able to grab her arm and stop her. But then she pivoted her whole body and got a hold of a handful of lettuce with her other fist. This time her aim was off, and the stuff flew wildly through the air, hitting no one in particular but everyone in general. It landed in water glasses and dessert flutes.

Aunt Bet came rushing back. She was looking at the lettuce scattered on the carpet like it was broken dishware. She was really upset. She had had it, she was saying as she pushed Deirdre and me and Leonard toward the door. Under her breath, she threatened us with police action, and said over and over that we would *not* be allowed in her restaurant anymore because of our outrageous behavior. We were, she hissed, a disgrace.

Deirdre and Leonard and I stood in the parking lot for at least twenty minutes wondering what to do next. We waited for Mom to walk out the door, get into the car, and then drive us away so we could all sulk at home as a group; but she kept not coming out. We discussed going back inside to rescue her, but none of us wanted to risk another scene with Aunt Bet. Leonard agreed to investigate. He walked around to the side of the building and peeked through the window like a spy. When he came back, he reported that Mom was seated across from my father in the booth. They were chatting. "Like old friends," he said cheerily. The shreds of lettuce had been picked up from the carpet and everything looked pretty normal.

"We should go back in," Deirdre said.

"Why would we ever want to do that?" I said.

“To get Mom.”

“No way. Personally, I plan to never set foot in there again. I will certainly not eat there. Ever. In fact, I might not eat another meal for the rest of my life. I don’t know about you, but I could die over this. I could literally die. For real.”

That was it—my big speech.

“I think it’s kind of funny,” Leonard said.

“Funny?”

“Yeah. Isn’t the Fin & Claw where your parents first met?”

“Yes,” Deirdre said. She was perched on the hood of Mom’s car in her hat and scarf, looking like a bundled-up beauty queen after the parade had passed by. “What’s that got to do with anything?”

“Nothing,” Leonard replied. “I’m just saying.”

As I whipped my head around, I happened to catch him smiling, more to himself than to anyone in particular. When he saw me looking at him, he dropped the smile, raised his plucked eyebrows, and said, “What?”

When I didn’t respond with anything other than a mean, all-knowing look, he added, “Wha-at?”

Mom came striding out of the restaurant and made her way across the parking lot. Her keys were in her fist, and she looked as if she might hit anyone who tried to stop her from getting into the car. For once, she wasn’t smiling. We all hopped down from our perches and waited for her to unlock the doors, but instead of aiming her keys and giving the car the beep, she walked straight up to Leonard and grabbed him by his coat collar.

“If you ever, *ever*, pull anything like that again, I will personally kick your sorry ass back to wherever it came from and be done with you. Do you hear me?”

Leonard just dangled there, unsure of what to say.

“Do you hear me?”

“I hear you,” he replied. And that smile, which had rarely left his face since he had arrived on our doorstep, entirely disappeared.

four

THE HOLIDAYS WERE bearing down on us, and every customer had an appointment scheduled. Like all red-blooded Christians, Leonard and I had a responsibility to get our shopping done before the twenty-fifth of December, so even though Mom was booked, she agreed to drive us to the mall and then pick us up afterward. I knew from past experience that if I wasn't waiting outside Sears and in plain sight at the appointed time, she would leave without us and we'd have to find our own way home. That was the deal.

I've always considered myself an expert at the timing and execution of my weekly expeditions to the mall. I would make the usual rounds, stopping at the Gap, Foot Locker, Banana Republic, Victoria's Secret, Barnes & Noble, the Candle Corner, Dollar Bob's, and still have time to get a slice and a Coke at the cheesy Pizza Hut that was built to look like

someone's idea of an authentic Italian villa. I could be in and out of those places like a mad bee flitting from flower to flower, ready to sting anyone who got in my way. But Leonard had insisted on coming along with me, and though I did manage to lose him in a surge of shoppers going through a revolving door at Stern's, my shopping clock was off, and I was running late.

Leonard was the kind of person who always stood out in a crowd; but that day he was pushing it, sporting a cherry-red beret, pink-and-purple-striped jeans, and a white patent-leather belt. I had almost forgotten how outlandish he looked in plain daylight. But when I rounded the corner of the Bagel Boutique and saw him standing there wearing those ridiculous six-inch platform sneakers, I stopped in my tracks.

Right after Thanksgiving, Leonard made up his mind to find a pair of platform sneakers. He felt that these were about to become a major thing, the big featured item of the next fashion wave, and he shopped for them as though they might actually be out there, an undiscovered item just waiting for the right person to appreciate them publicly and thereby start the trend. When he couldn't find a pair for sale anywhere within a fifty-mile radius, Leonard made up his mind to create his own. He bought a dozen pairs of flip-flops at Dollar Bob's, cut off each thong part that fits between the toes and then glued the rubber slabs of flop to the bottoms of a pair of purple Converse high-tops. When he had added six inches of rainbow tread to each sneaker, he proudly modeled them for us in our living room.

Hideous.

I tried to warn him, but he wouldn't listen. Wearing

rainbow-colored platform sneakers, I informed him, would put him in physical jeopardy. They were a definite fashion hazard. Finally, I had to explain to him in plain English that if he intended to go out in public wearing those things on his feet, he would soon be running for his life.

He claimed that they were entirely safe for walking and, to prove it, he pranced around the living room several times.

“You’ve got to help me!” he said in a desperate voice that is usually reserved for actors when they find themselves in an action movie. “They’re after me.”

Under normal circumstances I would have stayed out of sight until my mother showed up, but Leonard was waving and calling to me as if he were in real danger. He called out my name several times and then clomped quickly toward me.

“What’s the matter now?”

“Travis Lembeck and that Calzoni kid with the pig face. They cornered me outside Payless and took all my money. Okay, so I don’t care about the money. They can have the money. But they took my gold-plated Yves Saint Laurent money clip, the one my mother gave me, and it’s all I have left of her in this world.”

Travis and Curtis (that Calzoni kid) came striding out of Sears, pushing the doors hard and looking very satisfied with themselves. Both of them were toting hefty shopping bags.

Travis and Curtis were a grade ahead of me, and you could tell just by looking at them that they were trouble, the kind of boys who had too much past and no future. As a result they

had a power over everyone in town. People were speechless around them. Nobody called them “poor white trash” to their faces or made fun of them for having parents who couldn’t care less. Nobody offered to tutor them in algebra. Nobody bothered them about their SAT scores, asked them what they did over spring break, or where they planned to go to college. The fact that Travis’s eyes were a little too far apart and had an evil slant to them never came up as a topic of conversation either. Curtis’s badly bowed legs, which caused him to walk with a conspicuous waddle, were also not discussed. No comments were ever made about their clothes; no one said, “Why do they wear those matching black down parkas? It’s May, for God’s sakes.” And as far as I know, nobody had ever asked them point-blank if they carried firearms.

Something had to be done. Leonard didn’t look like he was capable of anything other than a flood of tears at that moment, and there was no one else around. It was up to me to step up to the plate.

“If I don’t get that money clip back right now,” I told them, “both of you are dead meat.”

Anyone with half a working brain cell could tell you that threatening Travis Lembeck was not a smart idea. Not in public. Not anywhere. Ever. But I couldn’t just stand by and let him and his henchman, Curtis, walk away with Leonard’s lousy clip.

“That’s right, Lembeck,” I said, moving closer to where he and Curtis were standing. “I’m talking to you.” And then I added, “Now.”

I reached out my hand expecting him to fork over the clip. I could almost hear him thinking, *Who does she think she is?* When nothing happened, I realized that he was in shock. He never would have predicted that I had it in me to do such a thing. Then the right side of his face resumed its usual sneer, and he looked at me out of one narrowed eye.

“Really? And what if I don’t feel like giving it up?”

“No problem. I just report it stolen and give the police a couple of names.”

There was a moment when everything just hung in the air between us. I thought Travis might haul off and hit me in the head. Curtis kept looking back and forth from Travis to me, from me to Travis. This was making me very nervous, because I knew that Travis was going to have to do *something* in order to prove to Curtis that he was still the alpha idiot.

“Tell you what,” Travis finally said. “How ’bout I give you the clip and then *you* get to be the one who’s dead meat. How’s that?”

“Whatever.”

I was suddenly a cartoon superhero with cartoon superhero powers. I felt that I was able to see through the cloth of Travis’s down parka and into his sorry little pocket—some stray lint, a few bits of loose tobacco, coins, an old butterscotch-flavored LifeSaver, and a pack of matches were all nestled up against Leonard’s money clip. I just knew it was there and I wanted it.

I had no way of making Travis give it to me. Not really. Leonard’s sob story about how his mother had given him this useless thing would never sway the likes of Travis and Curtis. I

just kept thinking, *What next? What next?* And then a new thought occurred to me. *What if I had miscalculated my move, what if I was in the middle of leaping a tall building in not quite a single bound, what if I didn't know what I was doing?* I wasn't sure if it was the fright, but my legs began to wobble beneath me, and my shoes felt like they were shrinking as I stood there for what seemed like forever.

"So, you queer, too?" Travis asked me.

"Excuse me?" I heard him all right, but I needed some time to think about how to answer.

"You heard him," Curtis piped in. "Wants to know if you're a lesbo."

And then Curtis let out a squeal of girlish laughter that shook his middle and forced tears to his piggy eyes.

That's when I made my move. I'm not even sure how it happened; I was just there, attached to Travis's mouth. Leonard gasped with surprise, or maybe it was horror. Curtis lost control of his shopping bag, and it landed with a clank on the pavement. He had stopped laughing and just stood there watching me kiss his friend. Travis went rigid for a minute and tried to pull away from me. But his mouth had developed a mind of its own, and I could feel him kissing me back. His tongue, small and darty and fully alive to the possibilities, was busy leading him forward, into the future and closer to me. He tasted like an aluminum measuring cup or those old canteens from our camping days with my dad. I also caught a whiff of tobacco that clung to his hair and skin, and the smell of him, a surprising mix of chocolate milk and hard candy.

“Whoa,” I heard Curtis mutter in the background.

When I stepped back, Travis looked like a totally different person to me. All his usual hard edges had been smoothed. He seemed like someone I might want to talk to once in a while, someone who could take a joke. I wondered whether I looked different to him, too. It was probably just a lot of hormones getting released into my bloodstream, causing me to see things in a whole new light.

The honk of my mother’s car horn broke the spell.

“Come on, let’s get out of here,” I said, grabbing Leonard and pulling him along toward the car.

“But—”

I was not about to let him finish his sentence.

“Just get in.”

I took the front seat. Leonard climbed into the back.

“Who are those two boys?” my mother asked as she checked out her hair in the rearview mirror.

I rolled the leftover taste of Travis around in my mouth, savoring my success.

“That’s her new boyfriend,” Leonard chimed in from the backseat. “That one. The one on the left.”

“Shut up, you. He is so *not* my boyfriend. And you of all people should know it.”

“I hope not,” Mom said as the car pulled away from the curb. “Neither of them look much like boyfriend material to me.”

I sat there in the front seat of Mom’s car, fingering Leonard’s stupid money clip inside my coat pocket and feeling that little lift that comes when I’ve scored. As someone who has had

some experience in the world of shoplifting, I've learned that the release of endorphins is definitely one reason to take the risk and pocket merchandise. I mean, for people like me, it's rarely a matter of actually *needing* the stuff. It's the high I'm after, the lift.

When I was good and ready, I reached over into the back-seat and presented Leonard with my balled-up fist. Then slowly, really slowly, I opened my fingers one by one until the money clip was visible in the sweaty center of my palm.

"Here," I said.

Leonard's mouth literally dropped open.

"But how . . ."

Even after he had grabbed hold of the clip and then sat there staring at it, I could feel the ghost of the thing still in my hand. When I looked, there was a deep impression in the middle of my lifeline.

Leonard looked at me as if I were the Blue Fairy in the Pinocchio story, the one who had the power to turn him into a real boy. There were actual tears in his eyes, and he mouthed the words "thank you."

Jeez, I thought, I'll never get rid of him now.

And that's when I burst out crying.

Don't ask me why. Maybe the wiring of my deep inner emotional life had gotten crossed and I had lost the ability to tell the difference between happiness and sadness. Maybe crying was just a new form of laughing, and vice versa.

When we got home, I marched Leonard out behind the house, sat him down on the trash bin, and told him the story

of Winona Ryder. Because I had once been a huge Winona Ryder fan, even going so far as writing letters to her and sending them to her talent agency, I knew her *E! True Hollywood Story* by heart and had no difficulty working it into our conversation. Even though she had already had a whole career by the time I was old enough to appreciate her and had gone into semi-retirement when I was about ten, she still held some kind of fascination for me. Her story was enough to inspire anybody.

“Winona was, like, eight or nine years old and living in Petaluma with her family. She was a total tomboy, and the first week at her new school, these kids attacked her, called her a wuss and worse. Then, for good measure, they gave her a beating. And you know why?”

Leonard was engrossed in the story; he stared at me and didn’t seem to realize that the question was, in fact, directed at him. So I repeated it.

“Do you know why they beat her up?”

“Um . . . I dunno. Because her last name used to be Horowitz?”

Frankly, I was surprised as hell that Leonard knew this. But that was not the reason she got beat up.

“No,” I told him. “The reason they beat her up was because they thought she was a sissy boy.”

Leonard blinked at me as though he were determined to send me an encoded message by opening and closing his eyelids. I didn’t know the code, however, so it had no effect on me.

“Thank you for getting my money clip back,” he said.

I felt that it was important to tell him the rest of the story;

he needed to know that following the beating-up incident Winona's parents took her out of school, gave her home study, and enrolled her in the prestigious American Conservatory Theater in San Francisco, where she was later discovered and given a screen test for the role of Jon Voight's daughter in *Desert Bloom*. And even though she didn't get the part, it did lead to her being cast as a poetry-loving teen in *Lucas* (a movie I've seen seven times).

But telling Leonard this was obviously a big mistake, because he smiled too brightly and said, "Wait. Are you saying I should take acting classes?"

"No," I said, because in fact I was not saying that and he was totally missing the point. "I'm saying that you can't go around looking like a big sissy or you'll get the shit beat out of you just like Winona did."

"But it turned out okay for Winona Ryder, didn't it?"

"Look," I said to him, lowering my voice and trying a different tack, "I don't care one way or the other if you're gay or if you're not gay. I'm just saying do you have to be so obvious about it all the time?"

"Obvious? How do you mean?"

"The shoes? The beret? The pants? I mean, just for starters."

"But I like the way they look. They make me feel good."

"Good?" I asked. "How can they make you feel good? You look ridiculous and everybody's laughing at you."

He glanced down at himself—his pants, his shoes, and the parts of himself that he could see. Maybe he was trying to get

an idea of how he looked from someone else's point of view. He shook his head.

"I'm just being myself. I mean, obviously."

That was pretty much the end of our discussion. I left him sitting there and went inside the house to do something that at the time I considered important but now can't even remember. About an hour later, when Mom called up the stairs to tell us it was snowing, I looked out my bedroom window to see for myself. That's when I noticed Leonard; he was still sitting there on the trash bin, leaning back, dangling his stupid platform sneakers and singing like a girl in a high soprano voice.

*"Girls in white dresses with blue satin sashes,
Snowflakes that stay on my nose and eyelashes,
Silver-white winters that melt into springs—
These are a few of my favorite things."*

I couldn't believe my eyes—or my ears. And I remember thinking, *If he doesn't understand that being himself in the world is a complete and total liability, then he deserves whatever comes down the pike to bite him on the ass. The kid's an idiot. Obviously.*

five

MY BEST FRIEND, Electra Wheeler, had her hands around Leonard's throat and she was pressing her two big thumbs into the hollow areas on either side of his Adam's apple. His wind was cut off, which would explain why his face had gone bright red, his lips were turning blue, and his eyes were bugging out of his skull. He was gagging.

"Careful you don't kill him," I warned from my place on the sideline.

My job was to stand next to Electra and hold her dreads behind her neck. We didn't want them to swing down in Leonard's face and distract her from the business at hand. I refused to be the one who actually did the choking. I couldn't trust myself to not go too far and accidentally murder Leonard.

Ever since school started, he had been making my life a living nightmare. Everyone knew Leonard was my cousin by

marriage, and as a result random schoolmates were always approaching me to ask me what was up with him. As if I could explain. By spring break, Leonard had become famous because of the way he dressed, because of the way he walked, because of the way he talked, and because he sang show tunes in the school corridors. He just couldn't see how far outside the bounds of normal behavior he had strayed, and so he kept acting more and more outrageous. His name had even appeared in *The Trident*, our school newspaper, when the senior class jokingly nominated him for queen of the Christmas Cotillion. Everyone on the committee was hoping that he would accept the nomination, go on to be crowned, and make history at Neptune High. For weeks, the talk in the cafeteria was all about what Leonard might wear to the cotillion. Leonard, in his usual style, pretended that it wasn't happening. Christmas came and went, and just when I thought the whole thing had blown over, rumors started to circulate that Leonard's name was being put forward as a possibility for queen of the prom. When he was confronted with the news, he said he had other, more important things on his mind.

The choking game was Leonard's idea. He wanted to give it a try after he'd heard about it from several girls in his class who had recently gotten very good at it and had lived to tell the tale. I was against it from the start. But then Leonard offered Electra and me actual money to do the honors, and how could we refuse? Forty dollars could buy us each a movie with all the extras, like a combo popcorn, Twizzlers, and maybe even

an order of nachos. We decided that there was no harm in providing Leonard with his idea of a good time.

Electra could have been beading a necklace or hemming a skirt; she was that into it. Her brows were furrowed, her eyes neatly focused, her mouth shut tight, her lips sucked into her mouth. Her cocoa-colored skin was flush with excitement, and I could see a natural blush blooming on both cheeks.

Some people think that black people don't blush, but that's because they probably never knew a black person or maybe they never really looked at one closely enough. If they had, they would have discovered that African Americans not only blush, but they also can get sunburned pretty badly, too.

Mom liked to embarrass me by telling a story about the first time I saw an actual black person. It was years ago, before Neptune got all mixed up racially, and folks hadn't yet moved beyond the bounds of what was considered *their* area and into what was known as *our* area. There were still little enclaves of Asian families or Hispanics or whites or blacks, each of them separated by the invisible barriers that were only understood by each respective group. This is *ours*; that is *theirs*. People pretty much stuck to their own areas for reasons that made sense only to themselves. The weird part is, the areas weren't that big; they could extend for maybe a half a block on one side of the street, and once you crossed over to the other side you could be in a whole other area, populated by a different race of human. But it wasn't as though people were being forced to live within their assigned areas; people just naturally stuck to their own.

Then in the mid-nineties it all just broke down and everyone started moving all over the place. Money became the primary factor in determining where a person chose to live. If you had the bucks to buy a big house, no sweat, you could move in and no one was going to give you a hard time or even raise an eyebrow—at least to your face. After a while, we even started to consider Neptune a progressive town because we had all these ethnic groups living smashed up against one another and pretty much everyone got along. We even forgot the fact that only ten years earlier everything had been completely different. My mother often told the story about me, not with the intention of embarrassing me but rather to make the point that the situation in Neptune had changed for the better.

As the story goes, I was about three or four years old and playing with my dolls on our front steps. A black man came walking down our street. I don't remember this, but Mom says I started yelling to her, telling her to come quick, because there was a chocolate man in front of our house. She said I was frantic with excitement.

When I first told this story to Electra, she and I were sitting on her canopied bed in her bedroom, confessing the secrets of our youth to each other. It was my turn, and I figured if I told her the chocolate man story myself instead of her hearing it later on from my mother, I might not come off seeming like a pint-size racist. As I set the scene for Electra, I was careful to include all sorts of caveats, like “What did I know? I was only three or four years old,” and “Hey, I'd never seen a black person up close and personal; what could you expect?” She listened to

the whole story and then stared at me for an eternity. I thought she was going to hit me, but then, finally and very unexpectedly, she burst out laughing and fell back onto her bed. The idea that she herself could be chocolate seemed to delight her no end. When she had pulled herself together, she held out her forearm and said, "Lick it, bitch." We howled and then fell back onto her bed together. After that, whenever anyone showed any kind of racial prejudice or disrespect toward her and I happened to be around, she would hold out her arm to the offending party and say, "Lick it, bitch." Eventually, all she had to do was hold out her arm and we would both understand and laugh.

"Ohmygod, ohmygod," said Leonard, trying to catch his breath and looking all excited, like he had just seen Jesus. "That was . . . ohmygod, that was . . . wow. I'm like . . . wait . . . Okay, it's still . . . no, it's done. That was fabulous. You guys . . . you guys should totally try it."

Electra and I looked at each other and began to laugh out loud. We didn't need to have the oxygen cut off from our brains and then restored in a sudden rush just so we could have a good time. We went in more for watching movies or doing our nails.

"Right. Like I would ever let you put your hands around my throat," I said to Leonard. "And anyway, you wouldn't do this if you saw your face. You looked gruesome."

"Totally," Electra concurred. "Nobody oughta give themselves over to ugly like that 'less it's gonna save lives or get you on *Oprah*."

Leonard was massaging his neck and examining himself in the mirror, gingerly fingering the bright-red marks that

Electra had left around his throat. I wondered whether at home I would get blamed for the telltale bruises and forced to say how it had happened, but then I noticed Leonard putting on his turtleneck and figured that maybe no one would ever find out.

“So when do we get paid?” Electra asked him.

Leonard looked at her and then tilted his head to one side. I knew what was up. He was quietly assessing her look, wondering how he could improve her, make her over, and he was about to offer his services.

“You know, Electra—” he began.

“Forget it,” I told him before he could go any further. “We’re going to the movies. Fork it over.”

“I’ll pay the money. It’s not *instead* of the money. I’m just offering to . . . I don’t know . . . like the dreads. How important are they to you?”

Electra just stood there and gave him deadeye. She wasn’t even going to discuss her look with him. She had witnessed what had happened to Deirdre’s hair; and even though the cool kids had revised their thinking and begun to treat Deirdre like one of their own again, Electra didn’t want to take any chances. She had worked too hard to find her style, and she wasn’t about to give it up for the likes of Leonard.

“Uh. No,” said Electra with imperious finality. “No touch-ee the dreads. Okay? These are my girls, and they ain’t goin’ nowhere.”

“No prob,” he replied.

Leonard held to his position that the barber had simply chopped off too much of Deirdre’s hair, and we all needed to

just chill until it filled in. “Wait a week or two,” he kept telling us. “You watch. You’ll see.”

And he was right, of course. But right after it happened, Deirdre’s just-cut hair was all anyone at school could talk about, and the salon was buzzing with the news as well. Mom hadn’t reacted nearly as badly as we thought she would. Everyone knew she was shaken to her core by so unexpected a change, but whenever a customer commented on Deirdre’s new look, Mom simply *tsked*, checked herself out in the nearest mirror, smiled and said, “Honey, things change.” No one bought it, but everyone was grateful she wasn’t making more of a scene.

Deirdre announced right away that the cut had been Leonard’s idea, and maybe that was why Mom wasn’t too upset. So many of Leonard’s innovations for the salon and his improvements of my mother’s look had worked out perfectly despite her initial skepticism. So maybe this was just another case of wait-and-see.

We watched, we waited, and sure enough in time, we saw Deirdre’s hair grow back. Soon she began to look “cutting edge” instead of “skinheaded.” The beauty of her features, her eyes, her ears, her cheekbones, which had been eclipsed for too long by the outstanding and overriding beauty of her hair, were suddenly revealed for all the world to admire.

Mom started getting requests from customers who had seen Deirdre’s do and wanted to copy it even if it didn’t fit the shape of their heads. Mom tried to talk them out of it, fearing that this new shorn look would put her out of business altogether. But once again Leonard stepped in and made it clear to

my mother that if she planned to survive as a hair stylist into the twenty-first century, she might want to learn a few new skills. They shopped for a handheld buzzer and then got some helpful hints from the sad-faced barber, Mr. Fallston, who had a shop on Main Street. Mr. Fallston was the guy who'd given Deirdre her look, and though he had been happy to do the honors, he wasn't that interested in expanding his business to include the fairer sex. He said that his customers counted on an all-male environment so that they could feel free to sit back and relax. Mom said the same went for her customers.

And so Mom expanded her business to include the shorn and buzzed, Deirdre began hanging out with the cool kids again, and Leonard's disgrace turned out to be a triumph.

But before the happy ending was in place, something happened that allowed me to see how much it mattered to Leonard to be right.

I had come home from school, and all I wanted to do was go straight to my room and lose myself in *Mansfield Park*. The reality of Deirdre's haircut had been revealed to the entire school that day, and it was all anyone could talk about, but really what I wanted to know was whether Fanny Price would, in the end, marry Edmund Bertram. Added to that, I was sick of answering questions that involved Leonard and Deirdre. I just wanted to be alone.

I was relieved to find the house empty. But as soon as I threw my backpack into the corner of the kitchen, I heard a weird sound coming from downstairs. My heart began to race and I stopped breathing altogether. The noise could've been

someone with a slashed throat gasping for his or her last breath, or it could've been the washing machine backing up, choking suds and about to explode. In either case and despite my worst fears, I ventured down the stairs.

"Hello?" I croaked.

The sound, as it turned out, was Leonard; he sat huddled in a corner of his "room," his knees drawn up to his chest, his arms tightly wrapped around himself. He was sobbing. Hard. I knocked on the side of one of the boxes to announce myself, and he looked up at me. His eyes were red rimmed and brimming with tears; his face looked hot and swollen. The shape of his mouth perfectly imitated that cheesy mask of tragedy that hung on the wall outside Ms. Deitmueller's Drama Club, except that in Leonard's case, a thin string of dribble was dangling from the gaping hole. As soon as he saw me, he sprang up from his position on the floor and threw himself facedown on his bed. It was a dramatic move, but one I recognized from my own dramatic childhood; it was the kind of move designed to signal that there was really no hope to be found in this cruel and heartless world, and the only solace was being able to block out everything in sight. He buried his head in a pillow, and even though his sobs were momentarily muffled, it was clear he wasn't going to stop any time soon.

"Leonard . . . ?"

"Go away."

"What's the matter?"

"*Go. A. Way.*"

I stood there letting my presence convey what my words

couldn't. I wanted him to know that he wasn't alone, and whatever it was that was causing him such grief (I suspected it was the Deirdre Debacle), it couldn't be *that* bad, not really, and even if it was that bad, the whole thing would probably blow over soon enough and be completely forgotten.

"Well," I finally said, "*something* must be the matter."

He popped up, swung around, and stared at me with real hatred.

"Well, let's see," he began, infusing his voice with venom and mock curiosity. "Could it be maybe that my father never did much for me except be a jerk? Or wait, maybe it's that my mother's dead and I'm now forced to live in a stupid cellar surrounded by crappy cardboard boxes and people who secretly hate my guts?"

He fell back onto the bed and started up a whole new jag of crying. I wanted to say something, something like, "Hey, no one hates you here," but it was such an obvious lie that I couldn't utter a single word of it.

"You don't know how hard it is," he mumbled into the pillow. "You can't even imagine." And then he let out a loud, mournful wail that made me actually take a step back in horror. I so wished he were a backed-up washing machine. Anything but this.

"If you're crying about Deirdre's hair . . .," I began.

There was more wailing, followed by a noisy intake of breath. By this point, he had worked himself into a pitch of hysterical proportions. I knew the signs; I'd exhibited them myself often enough during my adolescence and childhood.

Once you got going with a performance like that, there was no stopping until exhaustion set in. I decided to sit on the edge of the bed and wait it out with him. Seemed like the least I could do.

Finally I managed to offer this: "I thought you liked it here?"

"I *doooooooooo!*" he howled. He lifted his head to wipe his nose on the pillowcase. Gross. "It's not . . ." Another gasp for breath. "It's not . . ." For a moment I thought he was saying *it's snot*. "It's not"—he motioned all around him with a gesture that was theatrical to the extreme—"here that's the problem. It's *here!*" And to make his point, he began pounding his head with his two clenched fists. "It's my brain, my mind. *It's me!*"

Poor kid. It was hard not to feel sorry for him. He'd been through so much and he wasn't even fifteen. But then, when he started to literally pull his hair out, I knew I had to do more than pity him; I had to intervene. Grabbing hold of his spindly wrists, I pushed against his strength, which as it happened was something to be reckoned with for a kid so slight and swish.

"Don't. Okay?" I said. "You're scaring me."

He looked up at me and tilted his head, and in that moment all his resistance fell away. He just sat there, staring at me, scanning my face and clothes and hair, assessing it all and calculating the cost of change. I felt for sure that he was a heart-beat away from making some pronouncement about my look or offering a suggestion about how to style my hair or rearrange my outfit. I could see that all his attention was suddenly focused on me and he had stopped crying. I figured, hey, if this was his way of coping, the least I could do was to hear what he had to say.

“Go on,” I said.

“What?”

“Go ahead. Say it. I know what you’re thinking.”

“I’m not thinking anything. Honest. I’m just looking.”

Unable to stand the pressure of his gaze another moment, I glanced around the room looking for I-don’t-know-what. I happened to notice that one of the boxes had been opened and there was a small stack of books on the floor. I walked right over to the pile and picked up one of the books.

My grandmother, Judy Hertle, had a collection of books written by people who had died and then come back to life, people who could see into other dimensions, people who spoke to spirit beings on the other side, people who wrote automatically. She was into that kind of thing back when she was still alive and living in Bradley Beach. I never actually read these books, but I had poked around in her boxes of stuff enough to know what they were about and to know they were not for me. I also knew them well enough to recognize them sitting beside Leonard’s bed.

“You’ve been going through these boxes,” I said as I brandished a copy of Edgar Cayce’s *Channeling Your Higher Self* in Leonard’s face. “You know you’re not supposed to. This is not your stuff.”

“I couldn’t sleep.” He was suddenly done with the crying; all of his attention was focused outward—on me. “I wasn’t snooping. Honest. I was just looking for something to read.”

I started furiously packing the books back into the open box.

“She must’ve been something. Your grandmother.”

Nothing from me. He wasn’t getting a word.

“I don’t remember what book it came from, but I read this thing all about how the whole world is actually a pulsing, glowing web of invisible fiber optics that connect one person to another.”

I turned and stared at him hard. “They don’t belong to you.”

He was now up, kneeling on his bedspread, and even though his face was swollen and puffy from crying, he was lit with excitement.

“But still,” he went on, “it said that the stronger and truer the bond between two people, the brighter the strand between them becomes. The more strands there are, the brighter the overall glow. Not everyone can see this, of course, because not everyone is looking, but certain people—the guy who wrote the book, for example—could see it all the time. He said sometimes he was blinded by it.”

“Anything else?” I asked, giving my voice as much edge as I could without actually drawing blood.

“Actually, yeah. A lot,” he said, ignoring my tone. “Like sometimes the glow got so dim, he worried it would completely disappear. And I was thinking maybe that’s why you shoplift. Maybe you steal stuff as a way of making more connection. What I mean is, maybe you *want* to get caught so that—”

“What’re you talking about? I do *not* shoplift. Are you saying I *steal* things? What’ve I stolen? What? Name one thing.”

He just knelt there staring at me. He didn’t need to name anything. I was busy doing a complete mental inventory, trying

to recall every item I'd ever stolen, while forcing my face to adopt the most innocent expression I could manage under the circumstances.

The phone rang. It was Mom calling to find out what all the howling had been about. She said she'd heard it over the sound of the hair dryer, for God's sakes. When I told her what had happened, she immediately left her station to be by Leonard's side. Even though the crisis had passed, Mom cradled Leonard in her arms and talked softly to him while Mrs. Ferrante was kept waiting in the salon with a wet head and a fashion magazine. That kind of coddling never happened to me when I was Leonard's age and I happened to fall into a pit of despair about the sorry state of my life. I returned to my room to read the last of Fanny Price. She and her new husband "had removed to Mansfield Park," and soon those people who had caused Fanny "some painful sensation of restraint and alarm" began to seem "thoroughly perfect in her eyes." Lucky for her. Of my makeover nothing more was said.

A month later, as I sat perched on the edge of Electra's bed pretending to have trouble with the zipper of my sweatshirt, I couldn't help wondering why Leonard had never gotten around to at least suggesting some improvement to my person. Was I too far gone? Did he think I wasn't worth it? Had my personal glow completely disappeared? He had zeroed in on almost everyone in town. Either he had made substantial changes to each of them or he had had a plan. Even if they

point-blank refused to change their hair color or have their faces peeled or their tummies tucked or any of the 1,001 things he had in mind for them to do, they seemed to blossom simply because someone had them in mind and was willing to think of them as more than what they were. In this way, my mother had become someone else, and my sister was now unrecognizable. Surely I *had* to be next. But when? After so many months of waiting for Leonard to propose a plan for my improvement, I was beginning to see that I might be mistaken. I just wasn't in the running. He had no interest in me. Whenever I saw him coming at me, I ducked into my room and prayed he wouldn't find me. He usually walked right by. If he came upon me while I was doing my hair or putting on makeup, he stared at me hard but never made a suggestion. And Lord knows I could have used some suggestions. You might think that I'm putting myself down when I tell you this, but I'm not; it's just something I've learned from experience. I'm just not the type of girl a guy like Travis Lembeck kisses twice.

"What's wrong with *me*?" I asked Leonard, blurting out the question that had been rolling around in my brain for the past several weeks.

Electra and Leonard stopped discussing the merits and failings of various modern movie stars and their respective current hairstyles and upcoming projects. They both turned their attention on me, a non-movie star.

"I mean, how come I never get a makeover?"

I was looking directly at Leonard, though I gave a sharp, quick look over to Electra. I wanted to let her know that this

was not some sort of practical joke that I was playing on Leonard. I wasn't setting him up for a fall like we sometimes did just so we could watch his shoulders slump and his mouth turn down the moment when he discovered we were actually putting him on. No, this was serious. I wanted to know once and for all.

"Everybody else seems to get some kind of program, while I'm just left to sit on the bed and play with my zipper."

"Pheebz," said Electra with real hesitancy in her voice, "for real?"

"Yes, for real. But hey, it's not like I would do what he says, or anything. And I'm not going around thinking anything's wrong with me, like I *need* fixing. I'm fine. But after a while, when no one's paying attention to you . . . I dunno. It makes a person wonder is all."

"I pay attention to you, Phoebe," Leonard said in the most pathetic voice imaginable. Then he tried to take hold of my hand in a tragic attempt to comfort me. I swatted him away, smacking the back of his freckled wrist with surprising force.

"Get off me."

Leonard just stood there, stung. He held his hit hand in his other hand and looked at me. Electra fell into an overstuffed chair and threw her legs over the arm. She gave her head a couple of quick shakes to indicate that she didn't know what the hell was going on. Who could blame her?

"I don't know," said Leonard, looking up toward the ceiling and literally sticking his neck out to offer his opinion. "Maybe you'll hit me again for saying it, but as far as I'm concerned,

you're the one person around here who doesn't need a make-over. I mean it. To me, you're like my total ideal. You're kinda perfect."

Electra's face registered the shock first. She blinked and then nodded her head once real fast, as if she were trying to wake herself from a dream. Her mouth opened, but she didn't say anything. She started to laugh and then pointed at my face.

"What?" I said to her.

"You. Your face. Man, if you could see your face right now."

I turned back to Leonard, and it was clear from his expression that he wasn't playing me. He meant every word.