

ACQUIRED CHARACTERISTICS

'I thought about using one of the guys I date,' Marj told Cecile.

'But they can tell when you just want their sperm.' By Alexandra Shelley

They'd already tried clubs with original names: Life, Mother, The Primal Underground. They'd tried lounges and after-hours joints in meatpacking warehouses. These places were filled with ex-dotcomers and severance-package *bons vivants* for whom the future was tomorrow morning, with women who looked like models but were investment bankers, with men who looked like investment bankers but were models. The men appeared xeroxed—perfect and a bit pale. And if they were interested in women at all, it was in the investment bankers, who wore beauty so competently and, with the help of a cigarette held up between two stiff fingers, wrist bent backwards, managed to look as indifferent as Egyptian glyphs.

The music was nonspecific: techno, trance, jungle. Sometimes there was a voice, but never lyrics—rather, an inchoate growl. Men and women danced close, butt to groin, an ungraceful excuse for contact. Some held glowing little rods and waved them slowly around, like creatures in dark ocean chasms. Everyone seemed to be waiting for something to happen.

For Cecile Dayton and Marj Alterman, it never did. Three months into their quest they'd finally abandoned these clubs and floated down the island of Manhattan. They were now well out of the Fertile Crescent, which ran from the Upper East Side across and down the west side to Tribeca and across again to the East Village. They had arrived at the Beaver Dam, a bar in a scruffy neighborhood near Wall Street. The Everything \$10 stores were shut for Saturday night, and they were beyond the radius of Ground Zero disaster tourism. The only sound on the street was the jangle of a plastic bag of cans riding on the unsteady back of a mat-haired man.

They stood just inside the door, feeling around their purses for money while simultaneously surveying the room, considering where they might deploy themselves: at the bar, where it was mostly men watching a basketball game with the sound off; or in the cleared space in front of the band, where a couple was doing an energetic two-step; or maybe by the pool table, where players slunk and leaned with one eye shut, calculating angles.

"Five each," the bouncer repeated. "Live music charge."

"What's this music called again?" Cecile asked.

"Loud," said Marj. "Fucking loud."

"Rockabye, rockasomething . . . *rockabilly*," said Cecile. "From high school, remember?"

The band, skinny legs in worn denim, was covering Marshall Tucker tunes. The place looked like a living room no one had cleaned after last night's party. There were stained couches against the walls, and over the

smell of spilled beer floated the sweet cherry scent of bathroom disinfectant. It was 10:15. The doors wouldn't even be open yet at Life and Mother, but the patrons of the Beaver Dam had the relaxed slouch of hours they had stopped counting.

Cecile's fingers fluttered around the neck of her silk dress, checking for bra straps. Tonight she had cleavage. This was produced by a piece of underwire architecture and a neckline that didn't exactly plunge but did sink farther than she was used to. She had discovered in strobe-lit clubs that outfits were reduced to cloth and the absence of cloth; the zone of bare skin was what made an impression. The geometry of attraction.

But here under the green-glass hanging lamps she felt seminaked, everything creeping and seeping: the mascara that always smudged under her right eye, the lipstick that bled beyond the liner, and her hair frizzy, refusing to be cowed into the neat layers that Salvatore called "very What's Happening". Cecile was still trying to get the knack of this beauty business, having been excused well into her 30s from the regimen of painting, plucking, zapping and hoisting by a natural prettiness of the sort called "outdoorsy". But hers was a look that, instead of mellowing into one of refined vintage, could suddenly turn. She could wake up one morning and find she had grown leathery, stout, agricultural.

Cecile realized she had crunched up the \$5 bill in her hand. The bouncer was staring at her. "Is it worth it?" she said quietly.

Marj had already paid and was making her way to the bar.

Surprisingly, the bouncer smiled at Cecile. "Five bucks?" he said. "Consider the opportunity cost. What else could it get you?"

Cecile laughed. "Right. Not much." She handed it over and joined Marj at the bar, the greatest concentration of "deliverymen"—Marj's coinage. From this assumed heartlessness, Marj and Cecile stole a bit of courage.

"Time to split up," Marj announced.

Cecile felt a flutter of panic. "But we—"

"What're the odds two acceptable deliverymen will be together?" Marj said calmly. "One of the pair is going to be a loser, we'll fight over the other one—it'll come between us."

Just now Cecile despised Marj. And admired her—this single-mindedness, this rampage. Marj was tall and angular and tough from rock climbing, clinging by her fingers and toes to a fiberglass wall in the gym. She was powerfully prehensile, although perhaps not morally. At the first gray, Cecile had started "highlighting" (it seemed less of a concession than dyeing), but Marj allowed the white to streak through her dark, blunt-cut hair so that it looked as if it were carrying electricity. She wore lipstick the color of a stop sign.



Once alone, Cecile knew, Marj would find the man who seemed least interested in meeting a woman, the one shouting “Slam! Yesss!” at the silent TV screen, or the one leaning against the wall behind the band, his eyes closed, keeping time with his frat ring on the neck of his beer bottle. Marj would use a line that was all wrong—“Don’t you hate this music?” Or, pointing to his bottle, “I used to drink that.” Some men were too startled to protest. These were the ones Marj was looking for: malleable, the youngest of four siblings, very attached to their dogs. Marj was a therapist, with a successful private practice specializing in eating disorders, and she exemplified, Cecile thought in uncharitable moments such as this, the kind of screwed-up person who went into the mental health field, who felt that applying the proper terminology to one’s neuroses was enough. Cecile herself was a copy editor, and even when she was out of the office, her subjects and verbs always agreed.

Marj made her way to the pool table, began talking to a player waiting his turn. He seemed annoyed. He gazed past her, tracking his opponent’s

shot. The next time Cecile looked over, Marj was chalking his cue.

Cecile climbed onto a wobbly stool at the bar.

“What’ll you have?” The bartender stood in front of her.

A boy baby, she thought. *I don’t want to have a girl who 37 years from now will be sitting on this stool.*

Cecile checked her watch again. It was only 10:20, the beginning of a long night; the timelessness that loud music and drink inevitably produce hadn’t set in. “I need a—” *stiff drink*, she thought, and ordered club soda. She didn’t trust herself to flirt while impaired.

Cecile set her glass down on the bar and made herself look around. What she was training to do these days was to subtract: acne scars, pudginess, bad posture, a broom-dull mustache—anything a man was not born with, although frankly, she still had trouble with mustaches. What was to hide? What innocent mouth or too-soft cheek? Cecile pictured a crowd of sperm, a twitchy, boastful herd—“How ’bout them ovaries, huh?”—proudly stroking their mustaches with thumb and forefinger

before stampeding the regal ovum.

In high school biology class they had mocked Lamarck, with his absurd 18th-century notions about the heritability of acquired characteristics: the mama giraffe craning for the juicy top leaves of the acacia tree, then passing that stretched neck down to her offspring. There was a pretty picture of a

You had to say, 'I'm not a peanut person'

giraffe family in the textbook with the caption "Ha, ha, ha". Or maybe that was just how Cecile remembered it.

She picked up a swizzle stick and a soggy napkin from the bar and began tracing the four neat boxes of a Mendelian chart. She filled in two big *M*'s and two little *m*'s and two hybrid *Mm*'s. Maybe the *tendency* to grow a mustache was genetic? Was it dominant or recessive?

He spoke with an outer-borough accent, and she thought she heard him say "alls"—"Alls I asked you was . . ."—but she couldn't be sure, because he had begun talking during a drum solo.

Accent: acquired trait.

He was asking her again. "Don't I know you from somewhere? A commercial? Nicorette gum?"

Was this a compliment? She wasn't sure she wanted to look like someone trying to quit smoking. "I'm not an actress," she said.

"Artist?" He gestured at her napkin.

She hastily scrunched it up. "No."

"So what is it that you do when you're not at the Dam?"

"I'm in production," she said, thinking, *That sounds fishy*. So she added, "At a publishing house. Copy editor."

"In-ter-est-ing," he said, drawing out each syllable. "Reading's good for your word power, I always say. *All Creatures Great and Small*, you gotta love that book."

"Sure." Cecile had no idea what he was taking about. She worked for an academic publisher whose niche was culture studies and femcrit. She was in the midst of copyediting a history of masturbation as intimate narrative.

"You live around here?" he asked.

"Around *here*?"

"You know, the city."

"Oh, sorry. Yeah." She did not plan to give out any specific location information. "In . . . an apartment," she added.

"You have pets in that apartment?" he asked.

"Nope. Allergies," she said.

She knew she was not holding up her end. But she was suddenly exhausted by this making of conversation, this effort to learn precisely enough about the other person so that you were no longer strangers, but not enough for dangerous revelations to occur. In the interstices of loud music, words had to be chosen, counted out. You had, above all, to take the shortcut to intimacy by classifying yourself. You couldn't just say, "No, thanks, I don't care for peanuts right now." You had to



say, "I'm not a peanut person."

Are you a dog person or a cat person? she should have asked this man, although what she really wanted to say was, *We can dispense with this chitchat. Just show me your chromosomes.*

"Allergies!" he said with surprising vehemence. His breath smelled brackish. "That sucks. A person needs a pet."

"Yes. Well. Pets." She tried to get the bartender's attention. She wanted a drink involving vodka.

"The band's not bad," he said.

"No," she said.

"They remind me of high school," he said.

She looked at him for the first time. He seemed healthy, somewhere in his 40s, and his bone structure wasn't bad, behind the mustache. His sleeves were rolled halfway up sturdy forearms, covered with whorls of fine brown hair. His pants weren't too tight.

"Did you play in a band?" she asked.

"I played air guitar," he said, his beer bottle halfway to his mouth as he waited for her to laugh.

But instead she said, "I played air clarinet."

"Are you shitting me?" He smiled. "You're shitting me."

"No, really." She showed him: leaned her head back, closed her eyes, described a cylinder with her fingers and blew. "I made the all-county air orchestra," she said, opening her eyes and dropping her hands back to the raised lip of the bar. She frowned at her fingers. She'd had a manicure, and now her hands seemed to belong to someone else. What had looked like a demure pink in the bottle had come out like shellacked bubble gum. Well, perhaps she could live up to the promise of that color, imbue herself with brassiness, from the nails up.

"I wanted to play air drums," she said brightly. "But Mom said it would piss off the neighbors."

"You're too much," he said.

But this wasn't *any* of her. She could blow him out of the room. She knew this guy. She could see the impression of the remote control in his palm and of the couch edge in the bend of his legs. He watched the Weather Channel. Between the winter storms, the ozone alert and the sunburn index, he had good reason not to go outside. He had a "nother day, 'nother dollar" job and was looking forward to early retirement. Marking time. He'd married young and was still trying to understand why his wife had left, saying, "You never get out of the house."

And that was how Cecile knew he would dance with her if she asked. That was what he was doing at the Beaver Dam: being game. What she hadn't bargained for was his enthusiasm. He held onto her hand, spinning her out and back, twisting her under his arm in an awkward maneuver she remembered from Mother May I as an umbrella step. The moves were too big for the music, not to mention the dance floor. Cecile crashed backwards into the two-stepping couple but was whisked away before she could apologize. His fingers were dry and warm. "Ready? Dip!" he called out, bending her backwards over his arm. She did not feel like she was going to fall. Across the room and upside down she saw Marj smiling at her, and that was when she realized she was smiling herself, breathless, umbrella-stepping, having forgotten for a moment why she was there.

How *she* had gotten to the Beaver Dam was a mystery to Cecile. The years had piled up, and now she was smack in the middle of her 306th menstrual cycle, give or take. She could easily skid into her 40s without noticing.

She had spent her prime childbearing years nestling serial commas into their proper places, correcting little lies and sending books into the world with their footnotes on. During this time she went out with men who were too smart for their own good. They were often junior academics with delicate, bird-bone faces. They were startled by life—by student evaluations, by orgasms, by subways.

Cecile consoled these men and appreciated their references, and they in turn made her feel needed. They weren't scared of her because they could see that, although she was more than competent, she lacked ambition, or at least the kind of linear tenure-track ambition that they understood. "It's like you're still deciding what you want to be when you grow up," one of them had said to her, perhaps meaning to be helpful.

These men liked spending Sundays in Cecile's apartment, which was on the top floor of a dilapidated West Village town house. There were no unpacked boxes of books, and there were flowering plants and a fireplace (nonworking, but still . . .). Cecile kept spiced cider brewing in winter and tea cooling in the fridge in summer. The endings usually began with "You're still my best friend. . . ." Ibid.

It had been over a year since her last relationship, with a married culture

studies professor, had crumbled under its own weightlessness. Since then she had even tried to answer personals. But the punctuation was so bad. When she'd spotted one that was at least a bit ironic—"MISSHAPEN TROGLODYTE enjoys walks on beach"—she found out that he worked for another publishing house. Too familiar.

She had recently discovered that if you held a manuscript close to your face and fluttered the pages, it felt like breath on your cheek.

Specifically, she made this discovery while sitting at her desk on the first Friday in October, at 7 p.m., an hour when she did not strictly need to be in the office. She had separated the jumbo from the small paper clips in her desk organizer, loaded the new Liverdance screen-saver and was now watching a troupe of internal organs clog dancing on her monitor. Outside it was fall. She always knew things were bad when she thought of this time of day as *dusk*.

And since this was the moment when Cecile had called her old college roommate, Bess, and invited herself for a visit, she considered it the beginning of the timeline that had ended, three months and eight days later, here at the Beaver Dam.

Bess and her husband, Richard, and their two kids lived in Bethesda, High Suburbia, with cul-de-sacs and state-of-the-art playgrounds and a "kiss and ride" parking lot at the metro station, where Richard picked up Cecile. "Bessie wanted to come meet you, but we just got Trevor down," said Richard.

"Down?" said Cecile, picturing a wrestling match with Richard and Bess against the baby, attired only in his diaper, dusted with powder and able to worm out of any hold.

Cecile hadn't visited Bess since the older child, Henrietta, was a newborn, portable and unobtrusive. Now, Cecile saw as she entered the front hall and sidled between a Big Wheel and a Little Helper's kitchenette, the place had been taken over by two tiny people.

Bess had become slovenly. There was a yellow crust of some sort on her sweatshirt, and around her ponytail was a hair band with two plastic balls. When they hugged, Cecile smelled applesauce. The children, on the other hand, were beautifully attired. Henrietta wore a Paddington hat, and

She knew this guy. He watched the Weather Channel

Trevor's turtleneck matched his overalls, giving him a natty look in spite of the red mark on his cheek where he must have slept on a wrinkle in the crib sheet.

Henrietta and Trevor, Cecile learned over the course of the weekend, reigned benevolently. Henrietta, however, did not brook "grown-up talk," which she found dull, although every so often she asked for clarification on things.

"Daddy, why is it called water?"

"It's called water because it's wet," said Richard.

"Yeah," said Henrietta faintly, as if she'd already known the answer but it had slipped her mind.

Having spent three years becoming a person, Henrietta was disdainful of Trevor, who had spent only 11 months and, in her opinion, had not used

the time well. He was, she informed Cecile at lunch, a “spitter-outer”.

When Trevor crawled laboriously over to where his sister was pulling the handle on her animal-sound wheel, she shrieked and hugged the toy to her chest, from which came the muffled crowing of a rooster.

“But your brother loves you,” said Bess. “That’s why you should be nice to him.” With an intuition that would serve her well in womanhood, Henrietta seemed to know this reasoning was faulty.

By about 10 Saturday night, both Bess and Richard were drooping. Cecile

was settling into

her second glass

of wine. As they

sat at the kitchen

table, Bess and

Richard drew her

out about men.

“What about the

brilliant one whose book no one understood but himself? And wasn’t there

a lawyer for a change?”

“Look, you wouldn’t want me to domesticate,” said Cecile. “I date for all my married friends.”

“It seems so glamorous,” said Bess, who was absently examining her split ends. The self-defrosting refrigerator cycled on, and the hum filled the room.

“Another day gone by and I haven’t done a thing,” said Richard, getting up to go to bed. He kissed Bess on top of her head and left.

“After Henrietta, we had to set a weekly date,” confided Bess. “Don’t worry, it’s Wednesday. Though I was horny as hell when I was pregnant with Trev—”

“I know altogether too much already,” said Cecile.

“But you’ll find out soon enough—” Bess stopped herself. She corked the wine bottle, then uncorked it. “More?”

“You’re so good with her,” Bess said while Cecile lay belly-down on the rug crayoning her 12th Mr. Potato Head portrait with Henrietta. “She doesn’t usually take to people so quickly.”

Cecile suspected that all parents said this. She had heard it before. But maybe it was true? She didn’t talk down to kids—although, to be honest, this was because she didn’t know how—and they seemed to appreciate it; that and some tricks she could do with her eyelids.

“Where’s *your* house?” Henrietta asked, reaching over to draw a few lines through Cecile’s neat portrait.

“New York,” said Cecile.

“Why?”

“Well, it’s the hub of the publishing industry.”

“Yeah,” said Henrietta, nodding.

But Cecile was a passing amusement, like the circus, not much in anybody’s mind after it struck its tent and moved to the next town.

“Cecile’s leaving now,” announced Bess on Sunday afternoon. “She’s going on the Peter Pan bus.”

Henrietta looked away from her video for a second. “Peter Pan?”

“Not that Peter Pan,” said her father. Henrietta looked back at the TV.

As Cecile was putting her coat on in the front hall she heard a *slap, slap, slap* on the floor and Trevor appeared around the corner, smiling up at her like a wise turtle.

“He wants to say goodbye, don’t you, buddy?” said Bess.

“Bye, Trevor,” said Cecile. “Thanks for having me.” She knelt down and petted his head. It felt like an overripe kiwi.

On the bus Cecile shrugged off the kid world. She read several *Washington Post* articles start to finish as she took small bites of a croissant she’d bought at the bus station. No one demanded anything of her.

But somewhere in Delaware, Cecile began to have difficulty breathing. It took her a moment to realize she was crying. *Uh uh uh*, it started, a quiet stutter. The inhale was raspy.

The man across the aisle looked over with interest as he refolded his newspaper. But the woman in front of her—the woman in the white fake-fur jacket whom Cecile had immediately despised for putting her seat all the way back—twisted around and said, “What’s wrong, honey? It can’t be as bad as all that.”

Cecile could only shake her head.

“This girl here needs a glass of water,” the woman shouted, making her way down the aisle. “Does anyone have any water?”

The woman returned. “Diet Coke, honey?” She held out a can. Cecile took it, but the flip top defeated her. Hearing a stranger call her “honey” made her cry harder. She’d watched Trevor do it all weekend: the full wail, lost to the world, unable to hear comfort. How lonely he must feel at those times when he couldn’t explain.

“Sorry,” Cecile said finally.

The furry woman sat down in the empty seat next to her. Cecile held the Coke can in both hands. The woman looked at her proudly, expectantly.

“I have a question,” said Cecile.

“Yeah?”

“Why didn’t anyone tell me there was a too late?”

The first thing Cecile did when she got back to her apartment from Port Authority was throw her flowering plants—the flighty azaleas, the trusty kalanchoe, the prissy cyclamen—into the garbage. These plants made her not want to leave home. She sat among them on Saturday evenings reading George Eliot or Charlotte Brontë or Mary McCarthy—any writer whose women were staunchly, admirably heading for destruction. Soon it would be winter, the windows closed, a siren from the street below only a distant accompaniment to the fictional emergency.

She had felt content, a word that to her implied the absence of happiness but also the absence of desolation. Now she let herself realize what she had known for a long time: It wasn’t just the kids that were missing, it was the whole setup, the refocusing of life from the past to the future—*someone else’s* future. She had so much to share that she was bursting with it. She filled her date book with tiny occasions: “Change Brita filter!” Many of the things that had once delighted now-bored her, and she knew that they had been preparations—learning to hem, to strip furniture found on the street, to deadhead flowers.

After she finished disposing of the plants, she put the empty pots—pretty, glazed things—back on the windowsill as a reminder of her bold gesture.

When she showed up at Marj’s door that Sunday night, Cecile’s face was still sloppy from crying. There was potting soil under her fingernails.

“Marj,” she said, “I had a moment on the Peter Pan.”

"You look like hell. Peter Pan syndrome?"

"Bus. But yes, also syndrome."

"I've been thinking about just the same thing for a while," Marj said after Cecile had tried to explain the despair that had overtaken her on the bus. They were sitting on the couch, Marj with her knees drawn up and caged in her sinewy, rock-climbing arms, and Cecile holding a cup of tea for which she couldn't remember asking. "And I've decided,"

Marj continued, "I'm going to eliminate the middleman."

Marj unwound herself, went to her desk, and came back with a folder labeled Future. "Take a look." She handed it to Cecile. There were back issues of *Fertility and Sterility*, articles about adoption from Korea and the former Soviet republics, materials on a support group called Single Mothers by Choice—"By Default," scoffed Marj as Cecile gingerly turned the pages of the newsletter.

"I even went to a workshop for prospective solo moms," said Marj.

"A workshop?"

"Yeah. They wanted us to make crayon drawings of our future with a child and our future without a child. But I don't know how to use crayons. That's the damn point—"

"Wait," said Cecile. "I thought this was *my* crisis." How, she wondered, could they have talked so much, so seemingly intimately, without this coming up? "I mean, who else is in this secret society?"

"Take a ticket," said Marj. "Anyway, then I looked into fertility clinics, like Xytex. Romantic, no? They do zygote intrafallopian transfer, intrauterine insemination using frozen sperm, embryo cryopreservation," Marj recited, as if from a script.

"Then there's sperm banks," she went on. "But what do you know about these guys? Hair color, height, religion, education—who gives a shit? I want to know, does he listen? Does he have issues with his mother?"

"Of course, I thought about using one of the guys I *date*"—Marj emphasized this word like it was a foreign term—"but they can tell when you just want their sperm. For some reason they don't consider it flattering."

"How come you never said?" Cecile finally managed.

"You weren't ready to hear it," said Marj.

And then Marj told Cecile about The Protocol. It was her experimental design for getting with child. On Thursday, Friday and Saturday nights, she would go out on the town, collecting deliverymen. She already had a list of criteria to apply to the sample, which she would then rank and work her way through, starting at the top, sleeping with them on her days of peak fertility. "It's the best I can do without a control group," Marj was saying.

Cecile raised the mug to her mouth but didn't take a sip. She was shaking. "How do you expect to bring up . . . I mean, aren't there moral, like, issues?"



"I shouldn't have told you," said Marj, snatching the Future folder from Cecile's lap. Tea sloshed onto the couch.

"Shit," said Marj, heading to the kitchen.

Alone, Cecile realized she was shaking not from outrage but from the enormity of the realization, the realization that something could be done, that family did not only mean husband, house, kids—all the Bethesda trappings—the realization that it would not come to her if she waited, if she were good, if she deserved it.

"I'm sorry." She took the damp rag from Marj and blotted the tea-stained cushion next to her. "Marj?"

"Maybe you'll be a bit more *empathic*," said Marj coldly, "if I show you. Come." She ushered Cecile into her

bedroom and opened the bottom drawer of her dresser. It was filled with tiny shoes, all brand new: sandals and doeskin moccasins and rubber rain boots. Cecile picked up a jogging sneaker and fit two fingers inside. Then she set it on the dresser and tied the laces in a bow. She looked from the shoe to Marj.

"I know," Marj said. She stood square, her arms crossed, embarrassed and defiant.

"No. I don't think it's strange," Cecile said after a while. "I'd go for Velcro closures, though."

"I'm old-fashioned," said Marj.

They looked at each other for a second, startled, and then broke out laughing.

"Traditional. Just like our grandmothers," said Cecile.

"Didn't they shop for genetic material at nightclubs?" said Marj.

"At the Grange hall," said Cecile. "Grandpa was a square-dance caller—we think. He might also have been the guy who slipped Grandma a carnation during the Virginia reel. But Marj," Cecile sobered up, "is it doable?"

What struck Cecile was not Marj's scientific approach but her faith that somewhere there had to be a man who could father a child and then disappear back into the New York night, leaving her with at least a piece of her dream.

And that was how Cecile found herself leaving the Beaver Dam at 1:20 a.m. with a man who on the way out the door took a few swipes at his thinning hair with a pocket comb—a tacky but nonhereditary habit—and asked her, as a seeming afterthought, "Are you married at all?"

She had led him straight to her bedroom, calling pro forma over her shoulder, "Want something to drink?" Her bed was made, the pillows plumped, the candlewicks trimmed.

In one motion she pulled her dress over her head and dropped it to the floor, the silk sizzling onto the parquet like a match put out in water. She knew that any hesitation and either she or this man, whose name she had forgotten—and now it was clearly too late to ask—might run from the room. It must be ineluctable, the whole procedure, from the sliding off of



her bangle bracelets to his ejaculation—one fluid movement, one movement of fluid.

“What’s so funny?” he said, smiling awkwardly. He sat on the edge of her bed with his legs primly together.

“Nothing. Fluid dynamics.” She ran a finger over his mustache. It was softer than it looked. He was still fully clothed. She would have to work on that next. *What would it say under “father” on the birth certificate?* she was thinking. “*Beaver Dam*?”

“I always say undressing a woman should be like opening a present,” he said with a little hurt in his voice.

“Ideally,” she said, reaching back to unhook her bra and feeling the relief of freeing herself from its wire grasp.

“Nice breasts,” he said. He cupped them in his palms, as if to weigh them.

“Thank you, they match.”

“You got protection?” he asked.

“Like Fort Sumter,” Cecile said.

“You have an answer for everything?” he asked.

She was silent. She reached for his belt buckle.

“I guess not,” he said. He took his hands off her breasts and, twining his fingers together, cracked his knuckles. “Maybe this isn’t such a hot idea. I may have to work early tomorrow anyways.”

“On Sunday?” said Cecile, pulling back. It came out in a high falsetto, more accusatory than she’d intended.

“Nature of the beast,” he said.

“What is it that you do?”

“I’m a vet,” he said. “In Flatbush.”

“A veterinarian?”

“You wouldn’t think there’d be such a lot of work, but you’d be amazed. A lot of old ladies with schnauzers. And the homies have pits they treat like

kings. The dog so much as coughs and they’re bringing them in, all concerned. Last weekend? I had a potbellied pig in for colic. You ask me, it’s crazy to keep one in an apartment, but they can be very affectionate, so who am I to judge?”

Cecile tried to focus on this. Pig. Apartment. Affection. But clouding up her head was a familiar miasma: Loss/Regret. He would have no trouble diapering. What she had mistaken in the bar for dullness was a kind of calm that she had rarely seen in a man. He seemed to feel no need to impress her. And he was such a bad dancer. She already missed that.

“I’m talking too much,” he said.

“But I’m listening,” said Cecile. She sat down next to him on the bed. Slumped. Naked except for her control-top pantyhose but beyond caring. “You wouldn’t have thought,” she murmured. She reached out and stroked the fine, brown hair on his arm, once, lightly.

“What?” he said.

“That pigs could be affectionate like that.”

“Yeah. Welp . . .” He slapped his thighs with his hands and stood up.

On the way out he glanced at the empty flowerpots on the living room windowsill. “I guess you don’t have much of a green thumb,” he said, reaching the door. “I’ll call you, Cecile. We’ll play some air symphonies. You bring your clarinet.”

“You’ll call,” she said dully. She could already hear herself telling Marj about this: “And that was *two weeks ago*. . . .”

“I will,” he said, kissing her cheek. “I’m not that type.” ✕



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