

# The Year I Learned To Text

*Why Am I Having Sex with a Muslim  
in My Basement?*



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in My Basement?*

*Juliet Montague*



abbott press®

A DIVISION OF WRITER'S DIGEST

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I dedicate this once-upon-a-lifetime love story to every girl  
that ever hoped to change a boy and to every boy that loved her.

Juliet Montague



*ONCE UPON A CARPET . . .*

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## Chapter 1

### *Buttered Popcorn, Penile Pumps, Snow, and Marilyn Monroe*

I must stop dusting, cleaning out the refrigerator, taking a toothbrush to the tile grout—all the while listening to Michael Bublé’s painfully romantic CD. It helps me to keep the blues sustained—and just write this story before I forget because somehow, someday, God willing, I shall forget. If I can forget the horrific pain of two childbirths and blindly breed yet once more thirteen years later, I shall certainly be able to forget his aura, his scent, his youthfulness, which has turned me into a certifiable pedophile, and rid myself of this stomachache.

Why is it we repeat dull tasks over and over, again and again? The folding of laundry, the sorting of the same stained socks, the Windexing of rain-spotted windows, all that at the end of our lives will have meant nothing? I must leave the triviality of my dismal routine behind to write this story, to expel it from my sad soul and onto the paper, for I am worn out from crying like a lovelorn adolescent girl over a boy.

Sarah Kane, aged ten, wrote, “No boy is worth crying over. And the one who is won’t make you cry.” And certainly crying over a boy who kept me a virtual love slave in my own basement should get me checked into a mental institution right quick.

Somewhere in the very beginning, he summarized his personality for me. “Hey, I’m a laid-back kind of guy.”

Note: men to avoid displaying such characteristics under the DSM-IV as antisocial personality disorder.

#### Checklist:

Glibness/superficial charm

Grandiose sense of self-worth

Need for stimulation, with a proneness to boredom

Pathological lying

Conning and manipulating behaviors

No sense of remorse or guilt  
A very shallow emotional affect—they display emotions they don't  
really feel  
A lack of empathy for others  
*Bizarre desire for older women*  
Check, check, check . . .

He had me at “Hello. Sorry I’m late.”

But before I tell my story, I first must throw away this gnawed piece of nicotine replacement gum and drive to the drug store for cigarettes. Smoking, it has been proven, the honest truth, delays dementia and sharpens the mind.

I am back. CVS Liquor and Pharmacy on Vine was busier than usual. White rum on sale for \$9.99. It is Thanksgiving Eve. My desk chair here at my kitchen office desk has mysteriously sunk, as it does every time I spin it around. But I will not stop to correct its position. It's just too much trouble and I might get hurt. This particular model of hardwood over fake with a slated back must be turned over onto its arms and then gingerly lowered onto the Spanish tile in order for me to reach with a screwdriver, loosen the screw, and rewind the seat into a higher position. My knees are not up to the task tonight, so I shall write humped over the keyboard all the while wishing, dreaming, and hoping for the addictive sound of the woo-woo-woo text message that will send me gleefully into a life crisis. Will I be strong and save myself?

For the past five years I have been sleeping with a very frisky, very naughty, handsome small white dog. Well, who else is going to greet you at the door that can lick his own balls, if he still had them? I had been celibate, not of my own choosing, for the fifth year. I began my menopausal journey ten years ago and was well on my way into postmenopausal life when I signed up on Match.com, before totally drying up, to try once again to find the perfect mate. I had previously spent an exhaustive three hours filling out the eHarmony questionnaire, only to be rejected after submitting my most truthful, intimate answers with the following smack in the face:

We regret that at this time we are unable to match you to any man, woman, nor animal. Please try again when you clean up your act.

Match.com was less judgmental and much more forgiving of my previous life choices and allowed me to become one of thousands of other lonely impetuous hopefuls eager to type in their VISA debit card number and to begin their Internet search for their soul mate.

Unfortunately, the only men that wrote to me were either unattractive, overweight, married, or my age. So when he showed up on my computer, I threw common sense out the kitchen window. Today, I am sure his first e-mail to me was of a generic blend, sent to many women, as it did not mention any particulars regarding my Match.com personal profile; and by answering his note, I surely had found a place in some kind of lottery.

The morning of December 18, 2008, Matchdotcome999 from Beverly Hills wrote:

I'd like to send you my photo if it's alright . . . I'm truly impressed! I'm looking for a long-term relationship, something fun, special and lasting. I'm an open book, so please feel free to ask me anything you like and I'll gladly answer you. I really like ur fotos ☺ and it seems like we have some things in common. Alan.

There was no photo attached to his profile. Alan had inserted a quote, "A life not lived for others is a life not worth living" (Albert Einstein). Statistics: Never married; no kids; white/Caucasian; slender; five feet ten inches; lives alone; his politics were middle-of-the-road; he had a bachelor's degree from UCLA; his occupation was sales/marketing; his religion was unspecified; doesn't drink alcohol; he was turned on by tattoos, thrills, and thunderstorms.

He wrote a synopsis: "Laid-back nature lover, shy, love ocean wave sounds and feel, travel to Europe's fancy places, athletic and fit, not about just sex, vibrant but very calm; reader, gentleman. Looking for a lovely and attractive woman."

Alan was thirty-eight years old.

Match.com does not do background checks. You're on your own.

His favorite hot spots: Paris, Milan, New York City, London, Palm Springs.

He was seeking women 18-121.

Sitting at my kitchen desk in my lavender terry-cloth bathrobe, I didn't ponder my response for even one second.

Hollywoodgal2008: Oh, for Pete's Sake. What do you want with a 60-year-old woman? What is wrong with you?

And right then, right there, after clicking Send, I should have cancelled my subscription to any and all online dating services, unplugged the MacBook, and joined a monastery, if they would allow a Protestant in. Instead, I put it to sleep and I prepared myself for a day of showing foreclosure condominiums in North Hollywood, left my two dogs to their own devices (with the backdoor open to our little yard), checked in at the real estate office for the weekly mandatory meeting. At 1:00 p.m. I met clients at a short-sale condo on Lankershim Boulevard in North Hollywood. At 2:40 p.m., I slipped into an audition at 200 S. La Brea for a cholesterol-medication commercial. I returned home early in the evening to be met by my aging yet gregarious dogs always glad to see me. "She came back!"

After throwing out most of the mail, I poured myself a rum and Coke and lit up at my desk to check my e-mails for, hopefully, another audition or a client's note of interest on a property. And there he was again, messing with my simple, organized, nonsexual life.

Matchdotcome999: Your so funny . . . the answer is I find you attractive and would like to be with you. When I was a boy, my father was a government man in Iran. We had several drivers. Send me a nice hot kiss, Julie, and ask me to call you, please. That would very much please me.

Hollywoodgal2008: It's not "your" funny. That is the possessive. It's "you're" funny. Are you a product of the L.A. school system? Julie.

I am not funny. I am hysterically funny. Just ask my three children, who have all grown up and left me alone with two dogs and a loathsome female cat. Send a "hot kiss"? That certainly was not an appropriate request to make to a grandmother.

Matchdotcome999: I graduated with honors from UCLA as a history major, magna cum lauda. I hope I spelled it right. In a rush.

Hollywoodgal2008: Is your father single? I am not giving you my number.

Matchdotcome999: My father is married. I know “you’re” instead of “your.” It’s been a long week. Julie, is that your real name? My true name is Ali. We could be good together for years to come. Give me your number. Let’s talk and at least explore. Perhaps follow it to intimacy. Or am I incorrect in my assumption? Much to gain, little to lose. If we didn’t get along on the phone, so be it. If we do . . . it could be amazing. Let me call you. Let’s talk a bit . . . at least as friends, if not romantically.

Matchdotcome999: Watching boring movie. Write back, as you are home and, obviously, bored also.

Hollywoodgal2008: My tummy is scarred from stretch marks, overweight, and I don’t have any money.

Matchdotcome999: I’m guessing you’re joking. I don’t need any money. I was just asking you out on a date. Meet me for a drink tonight?

Hollywoodgal2008: I’m going to bed early.

Matchdotcome999: Okay. Send me your number. I’ll call you over the weekend because I’m not going anywhere. Sweet Dreams.

I did not give him my number and he did not write to me during his supposedly empty, lonely weekend.

Christmas 2008 came and went with the usual strife and family discord. New Year’s Eve passed me silently by as I crawled into my bed with my little Maltese snoring as he dreamed of God only knows what. The German shepherd mix was protectively settled on the rug by the bed. The cat was wandering the streets. I hadn’t received another e-mail from Alan, now Ali; and I was happy with that, because I had began an e-mail correspondence with a fifty-something gentleman on Match.com, a gentleman with an Irish name, red hair, and freckles, who had not yet asked for a “hot kiss.”

Besides making the decision to search for and invest in a small vintage cabin as my escape hatch when I tired of aspiring to be (a) TV sitcom star, (b) real estate sales tycoon, (c) requalify for my inexpensive Screen Actors Guild health care one more year, I woke early on New Year's Day and wrote out my resolutions. I would stop drinking or stop smoking or stop eating. It was hard to pick just one. They all seemed like great habits to break. Breaking my own heart did not make the list.

January 5, 2009, was a usual Monday. I got up early to get in my forty-five minutes of living room disco dancing, showered, readied myself for the world, and headed for Vine Street Elementary School, Marilyn Monroe's alma mater, for my weekly 10:00 a.m. date with the kindergarten class. The teacher greeted me with cheers and hurrahs, as my one-half hour of reading gave her a chance to exhale. The kids were happy to see me too.

"Instead of reading you a story, who wants to tell me what they got from Santa?" As all the children were of the Latino culture and, therefore, Catholic, I was pretty safe in not rocking the political correctness of the Los Angeles School District with my question. There were shouts of bikes and skateboards and new tennis shoes that glowed in the dark. I did read one small book, something about a princess and a frog.

I made an appearance at the real estate office on Larchmont Boulevard and chatted nonsensically with a few of the female agents there. I was the new gal. What better time to get into the game: foreclosures, short sales, and misery everywhere. On the sales board were at least six transactions, but none of them with my name attached. My time was coming. I poured myself a cup of stale coffee and sat at the computer to gaze at the multiple listing service, but first I checked my Yahoo! e-mail account.

Matchdotcome999: Please give me your number so I can call you. Maybe we'll get along, at least be friends. What do we have to lose? Ali.

He sounded like a serious young man who, it was obvious to me, was smitten by my picture, the fact that I had been married four times, that I was a stand-up comic who sold real estate, an actor who worked in commercials. I would not want to date this woman, but who am I to judge?

Hollywoodgal2008: Are you Persian? Isn't that Iranian? Was Omar Sharif Persian?

He was online and answered while I was in the ladies' room.

Matchdotcome999: Yes, I'm Persian. Let me call you tonight.

Hollywoodgal2008: How about a picture first? Fair's fair.

And there he was staring at me, my very own personal Aladdin. He had simply shot himself on the photo booth at his computer. He was looking into yet slightly away from the camera. The blackest eyes I'd ever seen. A perfectly staged five o'clock shadow framing his closed pouting lips and there was an adorable dimple in his square jaw. His hair was shaggy, dark, and just hit the bottom of his neck behind his ear. His nose seemed a little wide, but I could always turn out the bedroom light. His complexion was light and flawless.

Hollywoodgal2008: I'll be home after 6:00. 323-423-3121.

I've always suspected I've been the redeemer of several reincarnations. God, "Well, Julie, what do you want to come back as this time?"

Gee, how about an adorable Persian maiden with her reproductive time clock loudly ticking?

I sense that in my past lives I've been a bawdy pirate, a nun, and a belly dancer. I used to watch Disney's animated *Aladdin* with my youngest girl child over and over and never bored of it. And I hate cartoons.

As a young girl I watched in awe the movie *Arabian Nights* and really got into the magic carpet thing, the genie with the three wishes, Ali Baba and the forty thieves, and the tale of the Persian harem girl, Scheherazade, who told stories for over two years to keep from having her head chopped off by the king.

The story goes that every night, the Shahryar, Persian king, would marry a new virgin. He wasn't one to wait for death to get seventy-two of them. A bird in the hand, as the saying goes. And the next morning, after consummating the marriage, he would have her beheaded. After all, she was now a ruined woman and obviously a whore. He had killed thousands of such foolish women, all of them hoping to change his cold heart, before Scheherazade came to his bed. Wise, witty, and well read, she told him a

story on her wedding night but refused to finish it, saying that the next day she would resume the tale. He was so consumed with her storytelling that he let her live and fell in love with her, and at the end of the 1001 nights of half-told tales, she became his queen.

Fairy tales do come true.

The next morning at the real estate office, "I've got a new weight-loss plan: I'm going to start having sex and I'm starting this week," I touted to the agent in the next cubicle. And at five feet seven inches, weighing in at 175 pounds, it was time to get dead serious about getting back to my fighting weight.

"That's nice," John replied as he waved a shush to me, alerting me he was on the phone with a client. "There's no deal unless you throw in the chandelier. Well, do you want to sell or don't you? Hey, they haven't asked for any repairs. They just want the damned chandelier." Gay men have no qualms about setting the record straight.

I sauntered up to Janie at the copier. "How old do I look to you?"

"Gosh, fifty-five." What did she know?

John was off the phone. "How old do I look to you?"

"Forty-five?" Gay men have no qualms about setting the record straight.

Returning home, I could hardly wait for night to fall. I tore through the mail; changed into sweats and socks; fed my mangy fifteen-year-old outdoor cat Morticia, a remnant from husband no. 4's ex-wife, who refused to take in another stray kitten, a gift to his two daughters, as the last check he wrote to their vet had bounced; and poured myself hot tea with honey and waited for the landline to ring.

I live alone in Hollywood in a 640-square-foot, one-bedroom, 1926 Spanish revival bungalow purchased in 2004; and the last time I checked, I still own it. It's a front house in one of those rows of minihouses lined up in muse position along busy Cahuenga Boulevard. The old-timers here tell me Paramount Studios built the units for their contract players. Five mornings a week, the traffic flow takes Valley dwellers down the Cahuenga Pass, a short distance south of Sunset Boulevard, to various studios, production centers, and editing facilities in the Media Center and then takes them home again in the early evening. The sound of ocean waves coming in and going out.

My little one-bedroom dollhouse, complete with a carpeted and wired minibasement, did not come with a garage; but that's okay because there is no driveway. I like a little drama, and street parking filled the void when

audition rejection was no longer upsetting to me. I evened the odds of finding a spot by trading in my seventeen-foot four-door Volvo for a thirteen-foot four-door Toyota Scion XA. The cute one, not the Japanese taxi one. I no longer must park six blocks away from my gate. For \$289 a month, I am able to bring home more than one bag of groceries at a time and carry them less than a block; and sometimes, if I'm a good girl, God gives me that little space in front of my house that backs up to Barry's driveway. Barry is single, fifty, and has a driveway that leads into a garage; so why look any further for a man? Two cars could fit neatly in that garage. Never pee where you eat. Or is it never pee where you sleep? Unfortunately, I've never had the teeniest desire to kiss Barry. Kiss his twelve-foot extension ladder maybe, but not his lips.

I like living alone. You can go for days without a shower. You can drink until you pass out. And my toilet seat is always down, unless I'm throwing up in it. To give you some perspective, I'm a lush of sorts, but I clean up well.

According to Hollywood, California, standards, at sixty, I'm over the hill; I am old. In fact, according to Kansas City, Missouri, standards, I'm old. Inside where my heart is still beating, I'm sixteen going on seventeen, always the high school homecoming queen: sweet, lovable, and optimistic. All excellent traits to get myself in big trouble in this small, cruel world called Tinseltown. I tear up just thinking of just how vulnerable and hopeful I am. Let us define *vulnerable* more accurately as "really stupid" and unknowingly very horny.

Six o'clock came and went, so I stopped looking like a fool to my two dogs, Hound and Brute, and made a salad and poured myself a glass of wine. Enough with the tea and honey and the desire to sound respectfully sober over the phone. Soon I found myself at the computer, searching for the e-mail containing his picture. Soon I was printing it. I was now in possession of an 8½-by-11 pornographic masturbation aid. *Masturbation*: what an ugly word. Masturbation. Something I enjoyed only on a very rare and private occasion, semi-annually, and only after watching Pierce Brosnan for an hour and a half. I had never touched myself as a child. Apparently, doing so would have been a grand idea in the scheme of things. But my mother saw to it that particular activity, even though I had not the slightest idea of what it neither was nor how dreadful, would never be participated in while in her care.

My toddler sister and I had been deposited at Grandma and Grandpa's home for an evening while Mommy and Daddy tripped the light fantastic

in finery somewhere in our hometown of San Bernardino. We were both asleep on that summer night in cotton baby-doll pajamas—sister Rae, the blonde, always in blue; I, the brunette, always in pink—under crisp white sheets, when suddenly the light was flipped on. In a state of utter shock and in a flurry of flying red chiffon, Mother wrenched my small five-year-old hands from between my thighs and began screeching at me, “Never, never touch yourself down there again!” And I did not until the age of twenty-three when my first child was two years old and only after careful study of a small self-discovery book, the title now having deserted me, complete with step-by-step instructions on female orgasm techniques.

After tucking Elizabeth into her crib, I bathed and settled myself into my own bed in my little room. The room dark, I switched on the bedside lamp and propped myself against the pillows and began to read. In the midst of chapter 1, I left the bed to shut my door. Soon I was dutifully following the instructions. Determined to find out the secrets of my own body, bravely but a bit frightened, I allowed myself to find the magic button. In less time that it takes to fry a three-minute egg, I put out the torch that had been left burning by my one previous accidental coital climax one year before. I was officially a do-it-yourselfer. Through smiling tears, I turned out the light, sank into my sheets, and with my hands between my thighs fell fast asleep.

After propping the Persian headshot against my thesaurus, I saw an e-mail from the age-appropriate freckled Irishman asking me to call him so we could make a coffee date for this week.

I quickly picked up the phone and began to dial. Then just as quickly, I sat the phone back down on the cradle. What if Ali was trying to call and I’d be on the phone and there would be a busy signal and — I have call waiting. Light a cigarette and get on with your life.

“Hi, it’s me, Julie, from Match.com.” I managed to convey a welcoming voice.

“Hey, thanks for calling.” Irish sounded old, boring, and normal. But a voice is not the end all, even if it doesn’t ring your bell; so I decided to test his worth, his adventuresome spirit, his availability.

After a few minutes of cautious conversation on both ends, I excitedly shared the plan. “I’m planning on buying a cabin in the mountains. I have chosen four properties to check out and have the lockbox combinations, so we can just go up and take a look. What do you think?”

“Isn’t there snow in them hills?” Irish seemed knowledgeable of the weather. “I usually just have a first date for coffee, but okay.” He was willing. He was going to the mountains. He was to pick me up Thursday morning

at eight thirty. I guaranteed him that the main roads would be snowplowed and clear, but that I would bring a shovel. I gave him all the information he needed. We said our “good nights,” and I truly was excited about the prospect of a man in boots wielding a tool.

The clock ticked away, and at seven thirty, I realized that my young lover-to-be had seen the error of his ways and had recoiled from the anticipation of a conversation with his mother. And then the phone rang. His voice was gentle and his Middle Eastern accent very slight. I heard a bell ring. Actually, I could hardly hear a word he was saying. He said he wasn't feeling well, that he was congested, that he had me on speakerphone. He coughed. He sneezed. He asked about my dogs that I had mentioned in my profile on Match.com. He had smartly done his homework before his call. I shared that they were “leftover” dogs, my youngest child having moved out on her own some time ago into an apartment and was unable to take either one. As I spoke, both the Maltese and the German shepherd listened intently as I told stories of their mishaps, their love of walks, their sleeping until noon.

He shared about his childhood dog that seemed to run away weekly but always came back. He told me he lived with his younger brother, a fashion photographer, that they had left Tehran with their mother when he was five and returned at age eight to fetch Dad, but his father was unable to leave the country. Ali had lived in the Los Angeles area ever since. He had built a computer-Internet business, and he and his brother both worked from home in their apartment in Beverly Hills. He coughed. He wheezed. I purred. That damned bell was rung.

I boldly suggested we meet the next day: three forty-five at the ArcLight Cinema to see Clint Eastwood in his new movie starting at four fifteen. I figured that if I didn't like him, I could romance Clint. I did not tell him where I lived; therefore, I could walk to the theater and walk home and leave him in the dust of my black leather boots. I would meet him outside the theater doors. He seemed excited. I was ecstatic.

I woke early to dance off the pounds, hoping that my size 14 would shrink to a decent size 12 by our rendezvous time. Thank goodness for the slight chill of January. I covered myself in a straight black denim skirt with tall boots, a soft black cowl-neck sweater, and the forgiving flare of a blue denim jacket. It was the best I could do. Why had I not kept that jewel-dangling belly-dancer costume? The walk to the ArcLight was foreboding yet exhilarating. What was about to happen to me? *Let's go break some hearts.*

He called on my cell that he was running late and asked if we could meet at four o'clock? He only coughed once. I jogged through the underground parking entrance and up two flights of stairs to the patio area past the tanning salon and stood in front of the automated-ticket kiosks to the left of the glass doors. In front of the theater at 4:12 p.m., I resigned myself that I just might be buying myself a ticket and popcorn. And he could just try and find me, I hoped.

Just in case Ali was lost, I wandered past the Le Cordon Bleu cooking school and peeked around the corner to the Sunset Boulevard sidewalk in front of the Cinerama Dome, the original theater that had inspired the complex. Standing outside the Dome lobby, nostalgia struck. When a child, our family enjoyed very few events, summer vacations, or road trips. Daddy, a master sergeant and noncom E-7, was assigned to the 29 Palms Marine Base in the early 1960s. I was in the seventh grade when we drove the three hours from the desert to this very spot to see *How the West Was Won*, Jimmy Stewart in fringed chaps, in the Cinerama Dome, an enormous theater with a screen that wrapped around the entire half of the theater. Daddy, as usual, chain-smoked the entire three-hour trip with Mother insisting that he at least keep the wing-wang open on his side of the black-and-white Ford. My younger sister, Rae, and I had been raised in the yummy scent of secondhand smoke. That smell meant Daddy was at least home, physically in our presence, if never emotionally. After first emptying our bursting bladders, for there were absolutely no potty stops allowed, we settled into our seats: Daddy, then Mommy, Rae next to Mommy, and then me to fend for myself next to a strange man wearing English Leather Cologne, which was overtaken by the smell of his buttered popcorn. That luscious smell came from in front of us, behind us, and the stranger was enjoying his popcorn one greasy piece at a time. Daddy had refused to pay the high cost of movie snacks. We would find a McDonald's and eat take-out on the long no-bathroom-stop ride home.

At 4:16 p.m., a young Keanu Reeves-Johnny Depp type sauntered toward me dressed in a caramel corduroy jacket and matching loose pants. His outfit was complete with a trendy caramel print scarf about his neck. He leaned into me and apologized for being late, something about not expecting the traffic to be so congested this side of town. There was something exotic about his smell. The two-inch heels on his snake boots put him at just the right height for me, one inch above his claimed five feet ten inches. He carried a soft calmness about him and wore a half smile.

“Julie? Hello. Sorry I’m late” had swept me off my feet. The dimple in the chin sucked me right in. Now, a bit off balance, I pulled my tongue out of my throat and greeted him with the confidence of Norma Desmond silently taunting Mr. Gillis. “You are forgiven.” And then I stupidly spoke again as myself at the ticket counter.

“I’m a senior. He gets the discount.” The boy at the counter didn’t flinch, and Ali simply placed his hand against my back and paid with his credit card.

His hair was turning me on, something I had not experienced since stalking a long drink of water with blond surfer curls from history class to English in 1965. He doesn’t look thirty-eight. He looks twenty-eight. His shoulders were strong under his soft jacket. I envisioned my face buried into his sweat-soaked armpit. Would he be the stereotypical hairy Middle Eastern?

\* \* \*

Ten years back, before my sojourn to Mecca, while still living in suburbia and before the planes flying through towers woke America up one morning, I was playing cat-and-mouse with another handsome Persian: Omar, who made cucumber dip as often as I made coffee, who drank bourbon and always had plenty of peanuts to munch on at his place. Omar was introduced to me by my Jewish neighbor.

“Hey, you’ve got to come by and meet my new boarder. He’s single and lots of fun.”

“Irv, he lives in a bedroom at your house. I don’t think that’s exactly the kind of guy I’d be interested in.” Irving arranged a barbecue to get the lonely lovebirds together. Omar was tall, thin, dark, and handsome but for his flat, crooked nose. After mixing me a strong one, Omar led me to Irv’s garage to show me a map of the Old World. Taped to the garage framing was a colorful old map.

“This is where I was born, Persia. It’s called Iran now. My mother and eight brothers and sisters still live there. I go back every other spring. I am an American citizen for twenty-five years now, since I was twenty-five.” I learned that summer that Persians love to talk—with that slight sensual accent. We spent the summer “exercising.” I could always lose a few pounds and Omar was Mr. Runner, so I tagged along on cool summer nights. He would run, and I would catch up for an ass pat or a little kiss.

We spent a lot of time together in Irv's kitchen while I watched Omar slice cucumbers and talk to his mother on the phone. Of course, I had no idea what he was saying to her because he spoke to her in Farsi, his native language, which sounded to me to be a mix of camel jockey and French chef. That hot summer, there was a lot of kissing, sweating, and drinking. Omar was a bad kisser, so none of my buttons had been pushed.

One night when Irving was away, Omar entertained me by showing a home movie: a three-hour videotape with what seemed like a cast of thousands—all shapes and sizes of dark-haired men, women and female children, their hair and heads covered with scarves. In a large, overly decorated living room, dancing and generally cuttin' the rug were Omar's family. Cousins, aunts, uncles, and Mom, all but the children, drinking a clear liquid from glass jars. I couldn't understand a word that was said as it all came out as Farsi gibberish to my ears. There were close-ups of various vegetable dishes on gigantic silver serving trays. The serving trays were placed on a large colorful rug. There were two well-used brocade couches against two walls, but members of the clan sat cross-legged on the rug to finger the feast. It was, of course, a Persian rug. The music playing was, gosh, Middle Eastern. "There's a place in France where the ladies wear no pants"—not correct lyrics but the same tune. Omar had missed this particular family reunion, so Mom had sent him the tape.

"What are they all drinking?" I inquired.

"It's against Islam law to drink alcohol, so we make our own and only drink inside the home." So much for following the Ten Commandments.

"Islam? Is that a religion?" I had attended San Bernardino High School in the Inland Empire, a vast valley below the mountain ski resorts. My graduating class ethnic profile consisted of one-third Caucasian, one-third Mexican, and one-third black, an even split of Protestants and Catholics. The only strange religion I had any knowledge of was Judaism. Between Gentile husbands, somewhere around my forty-fourth year, I enjoyed a short love affair with a twenty-eight-year-old Jewish progolfer. I knew what Hanukkah was: the twelve days of Christmas.

"Oh, look! That's my brother Majid, my cousins Abdul and Khalib . . ." If Omar thought after two bourbons I was going to remember any of these names, he was about to be very disappointed. The names were all foreign to me and everyone looked exactly alike.

We sat propped against the couch sipping bourbons and tossing peanuts into our mouths. The fresh cucumber dip was chilling in the fridge. Suddenly, the Arabic top-forty music on the video took me to my feet. Slightly buzzed

and wearing a long gauze, pastel summer skirt, and pink cotton tee, I began to entertain my host with my version of Persian choreography. Omar rose to join me in my silliness and soon he was bad kissing me again as he tried to find my ovaries with his stiff tongue.

“Whoa, honey. It’s time to train that tongue of yours.” Enough alcohol can turn a fifty-three-year-old grandmother into a dominatrix when the occasion calls for it. “Sweetly, deliciously, tenderly searching tongue. Not Mick Jagger style, okay?” Omar went along with the program, and soon I was on my back on the shag carpet with a passionate partner sprawled over my buttons.

Then he carried me to the couch, and straddling over me on his knees, Omar pulled his white T-shirt over his head and tossed it confidently onto the floor. Immediately in front of me was a huge black forest sprawling over his chest and crawling its way over his broad shoulders to his back. From his armpits flowed more long black bear fur. Omar saw the fear in my eyes, and for my own safety, I froze in hope the animal would go away.

“I will shave for you.”

I did not stay for the cucumber dip.

I didn’t see Omar again until one Sunday in spring of the next year. I hadn’t called him to ask why. I was taking my trash cans out to the street for Monday-morning pickup when his little black sports car, top down, pulled up and he jumped out over the driver’s door.

“I have been to Iran to see my family!” He was, as usual, excited and animated.

“It’s nice to see you, Omar,” I sincerely shared as I set the recyclable can curbside.

“Do you notice anything different about me?” His head bobbed side to side and his eyes rolled. I peered, but I couldn’t see under his clothing.

“No. What’s up?”

“I had my nose fixed in Iran. Very cheap there! I did it for you.” Stunned and flattered, I took a closer look, and sure enough, Omar’s nose was now Americanized. I wondered if he had ever shaved, but I didn’t ask. He looked so sweet standing there so proud of his new nose, but I had to let him know that I was seeing a Dutch gentleman and was no longer available.

“I should have written.” Soon he was back in his car heading out to another woman’s house to surprise her with the news of the new nose.

On September 11, 2001, Irv called to see how I was feeling, if I wanted to talk, if my sixteen-year-old daughter was okay. He told me that Omar

had moved out a few months before, that he was now a realtor in Paramount City, selling condos to clients who spoke Farsi.

\* \* \*

At the snack counter, Ali bought for us one large buttered popcorn, when I suggested that we share. Normally, I'd have an entire large buttered for myself, but as of this very moment, I am on the diet of my life. With two drinks, our popcorn, and plenty of napkins for any unforeseen mess, we found our way to Screen 12, as I jabbered all the way.

"I was an usher at a movie theater one summer during high school. My uniform was a black pencil skirt, a gold blazer, and white gloves. The popcorn machine was always broken, so Mr. Brown, the manager, would have me walk to the Gold Room Bar around the block to pick up their fresh popcorn, return to fill our machine with it, and turn on the heat lamp."

"So you worked the snack bar?" He found an opening in my conversation, all the while juggling popcorn, drinks, and a forceful hand to my nervous back.

"Oh, I sold tickets too and cleaned the restrooms in between shows. My big job, though, was flashighting couples that insisted on necking during the movie. That was not allowed."

At the ArcLight Cinema in Hollywood, one is given an assigned seat, but he led me beyond our seats to the back aisle, where we plopped down against the back wall. Now I am so far back, I'm going to need my glasses, but I am too vain to put them on. I am about to spend an entire two hours trying to keep the wrinkles in my neck from showing. I don't need to add glasses to his disappointment.

The previews were coming to an end, as he held the popcorn barrel between his cross knees and I ever so delicately fingered out just a kernel or two. He filled his hand and tossed the buttered morsels into his adorable mouth. I knew that if the popcorn was removed from his knee that the awkward intimacy of handholding would ensue.

Ali handed me the popcorn. "You can set it down on the floor," he whispered into my cheek.

"No, no, it's my turn to hold it," I whispered back into his cheek, which suddenly became his mouth as I quickly brushed my open mouth past his. The popcorn was now on my lap, one hand on the barrel, the other continuing to become deliciously buttered with each bite.

If I keep nibbling, (a) he can't hold my hand, and (b) I'll look like the little piggy I really am and turn him off and I can leave this place with my life intact.

Butterflies. My inner core was being invaded by a flight of the butterflies: luscious, beautiful black-and-orange butterflies. I moved the popcorn tub, still half-full, to the floor. I licked my fingers and then dried them with a multitude of napkins while using my Diet Coke to surreptitiously flush the lodged kernels from my teeth. The moment my hands were still, his small clean hands picked up my large greasy right hand, and he placed all three on his crossed knee.

"My hands get very cold," he whispered into my ear as I leaned in to hear him. Then he began to gently massage my carpal-tunneled wrist caused by over twenty years of machine stenography. Clint popped a Pabst Blue Ribbon and lit a cigarette.

The butterflies in my stomach flickered from one flower petal to the next. I couldn't hear what Clint was saying.

"May I kiss you? Maybe it would relax you." It wasn't Clint's voice. He faced me and turned my face toward his intently gentle gaze.

"That's not allowed." Where was my flashlight?

Men use kissing to induce sexual desire in women while they unconsciously use kissing to assess the level of estrogen in a woman's saliva to determine her stage in the ovulation cycle and her fertility. I had read that somewhere. I had not ovulated for ten years. Kissing is a way to try each other out, to taste each other before commitment. His full lips conveyed compassion and friendliness. My full large lips, now flushed, signaling arousal, were attractive to him. If he kissed me, he would know I was eggless and not the future mother of his children. And of course, he already knew that. Matchdotcome999: Wanted: Women from 18 to 121.

He turned away and continued to hold my hand. He caressed my hand and spoke my name as he took my fingers to his lips. Clint popped another Pabst Blue Ribbon. My poor, innocent hand was massaged, stroked, and aroused. Then my hand was somehow dropped to the V between his legs and the hardness of his presence there in the darkness of the back row. And I pulled away, but I didn't speak. A sign from God? Or is he just happy to see me? Another chance to run, but soon the credits rolled and he was leading me from my seat down the dimly lit walkway stairs.

"Did you like the movie?" he asked. Yes, my right hand was overwhelmed. Yes, I loved feeling desired. Yes, I loved the anticipation of a lover who can deliver. No more Viagra episodes or penile pumps necessary.

There is nothing romantic about watching your man place an amber-colored plastic vacuum tube over his limp penis and begin pumping it violently.

\* \* \*

I was still working at the San Bernardino courthouse when a fellow community-theater thespian introduced me to the Dutchman. “He’s a Renaissance kind of guy. He wears a tuxedo and a white chiffon scarf while riding his golden palomino around the neighborhood. Everyone says he looks just like Clint Eastwood. I think you two should meet.”

And indeed, he did resemble Clint in his stature and strong facial features. Dutch had left Amsterdam at the request of his parents to “go to America and get a life.” So at age twenty-two, after being dismissed by the Holland army, he secured relatives in Michigan as sponsors and began a new life in five-foot snowdrifts.

After three failed marriages and one adult daughter who no longer spoke to him, Dutch had settled into a peaceful life on his dusty two-acre piece of horse property in a small town near Riverside, California. We were instantly attracted to each other. He was romantic, attentive, and bipolar, but I didn’t mind. He drove what I affectionately nicknamed the Lamry, a Toyota Camry inside with Lexus symbols mounted on the outside.

The sex was sweet and wild, and Dutch knew how to please me with his large hands and didn’t seem to mind that our intercourse did not bring forth parallel orgasms. When I could, I would spend the night and was treated with breakfast in bed while he would tend to his horses, a few he owned and five boarders. He was sixty, and I was fifty-four. We fell into some kind of love-and-respect relationship, and at the end of our first year, it still turned me on to watch him shovel horseshit with his jeans tucked into his knee-high boots with his white blond hair drifting over the turtleneck of his shirt.

But somehow, I no longer turned him on. Thus started the pushed, hopeful blow jobs and hand jockeying, which didn’t take. Dutch visited the doctor for an explanation and returned home with Viagra. We planned our rendezvous around his pill-taking schedule. When that no longer did the trick, Dutch brought home the pump. The problem with that contraption was that my man was very well endowed and uncut.

“Julie, can you come in here?” Dutch called to me from the bathroom. I wrapped the sheet around myself from his bed and stood in the doorway to find a pitiful sight.

“Oh, my God, Dutch. It’s turning purple in there!”

“It’s stuck. I can’t budge it.” He was degraded and embarrassed.

“Maybe I could tie a string to the door and a string to . . .” And now I was giggling, covering my mouth to stop a big laugh from sneaking out.

“Well, that worked. Thanks.” We both looked down to see that his penis had shrunk away, withered up and died inside the plastic casket.

He was eager to fix the problem that had mysteriously not come up and registered us for an erectile dysfunction class put on by the county health department. Soon we found ourselves in a line of quiet classmates: the young, the old, and the unattractive—couples that obviously shared the same limp-dick crisis.

“I’ve never seen so many ugly people in one place in my life,” Dutch whispered to me as we took our seats behind small classroom desks.

“Shhhh. Stop it,” I whispered back, as I tapped him on the hand. Dutch was totally right-wing and judgmental, which is one reason we got along so well.

“Give each one of these guys a twenty-five-year-old blonde and his problem would immediately go away,” he teased and nudged his elbow into my arm.

“Thanks. Give each of these gals a twenty-five-year-old jock,” I retorted to what seemed to be a personal affront to me.

“These women would have to pay for it, but not you, honey.” Dutch leaned into me playfully and placed his hand on my thigh.

Soon the doctor was playing instruction videos on the proper way to utilize “the pump.” I had never seen a porno flick, and here I was amidst strangers watching a flaccid pinky-brown penis being inserted into a tube and then engorging inside of it. The trick was to then place it in the vagina of the female lead as soon as possible. Dutch began to make little circles on my blue-jeaned thigh. My clitoris called out to the circular rhythm of his strong hand. I covered my eyes at the climax of the film and soon we were both breathing heavily. Silently and swiftly we left the classroom.

The short drive back to the ranch was hot and frenzied, as a sudden downfall of rain followed us home in the dark. Dutch placed my hand over his crotch as the fever pitch heightened. Through the gate, out of the car, we ran through the mud to the barn.

“I need to bring the horses in” were the only words he could get out before I pushed him onto a bale of hay and brought out the stallion. I sucked hard and steady before he pulled my jeans down below my knees and lifted my buttocks onto his lap. Dutch was home.

But over time, the horse became barn sour again; and soon I sold my home and left for Hollywood with my eighteen-year-old daughter, our two dogs, and the mangy cat.

\* \* \*

“Yes. I always like watching Clint.” As is the usual, I knew how the movie would end, so it didn’t surprise me. But how would this end? Or should it ever begin?

“How about if we spend more time together? Maybe get a glass of wine.” My house was just a short two-block walk. I could run the distance. He was holding my hand and leading me through the foyer of the theater, past the couples enjoying dinner in the patio, down the steps to the parking garage, and to his car.

“I was just planning on walking home.” His eyes were a pool of black. It seemed to me the pupil was missing. He sniffled a bit and explained that he thought perhaps he was catching a little cold.

“Come on, don’t be silly. It’s not even seven o’clock. We can sit and talk. I’d like to get to know you. Don’t you want to get to know me?” Ali opened the passenger door and guided me into the seat. The camel-colored leather upholstery of his black BMW SUV smelled new and sweet, just as he did. There was absolutely nothing in the car, not even a trash receptacle. I was impressed and extremely nervous.

“I like your accent.” Well, I wasn’t going to tell him how handsome I thought he was or how his scent, the scent of a man unclogged by cologne, was driving me crazy.

“Do I have an accent? No one has ever said that before.” He paid the garage attendant and we were on our way east on Sunset Boulevard, away from West Hollywood, away from Beverly Hills. The lights of the strip malls flickered in the window as I snuck some lip gloss on. He reached over and took my hand. Green lights took us down the boulevard until we stopped at the red light in the left lane leading to Western.

“Let me give you a kiss. You seem nervous.” I’m in a car with, possibly, a beheading Iranian twenty-two years my junior and no one knows where I am. And as he took my chin in his hand, I leaned into his full mouth. A simple press of lips to lips and the poor butterflies flew through the car, banging themselves wildly against the windows. It can be said that women exploit kissing to promote male bonding, but who was bonding to whom

here in the darkness of Ali's car? The light turned to the green arrow and we were soon on Los Feliz Boulevard.

As he opened my door, "Do you think my car will be safe here?" Ali inquired of me, me the older, market-wise woman of the world, as we left his precious BMW on the residential streets of Los Feliz Village.

"It looks like a quiet residential neighborhood." As a realtor, I knew that these 1940 bungalows were still fetching \$700,000 even during foreclosure flurry. Was I to be responsible for his car being stolen while we sipped wine?

"Yes, you're right. It'll be okay." The wonder of his hand guided my newly erotic middle back down the sidewalk to Hillcrest Avenue, swiftly under the entrance sign, and into a rustic patio of cushioned booths and worn wooden tables. Southern California: even in January you can dine al fresco, as long as there are a few heat lamps nearby. The proprietary name carved over the front gate: *There's No Place Like HOME*—another turn-back-you-fool neon sign posted on my own Yellow Brick Road to damnation. We were the only patrons seated in the worn, tiled courtyard.

He asked if I was hungry, if I wanted to order dinner. Of course, I said, "No, thank you. I'm still full of that delicious popcorn" (and the hard penis preview). I would never need to eat food again. He ordered red wine for us. *Us*.

"We'll have two merlots," he spoke politely to the Latino waiter, who returned quickly.

He explained to me that he was Muslim and that Muslim men always paid. I had said nothing to garner this information, like I had not reached for my wallet, but everything Muslim was forthcoming: Muslim men always tell the truth, it is against the Islam religion to lie and he is very religious, Muslim men are very masculine, sex is important to them, and Muslim men pray to Allah several times a day.

"I'm Protestant. Well, I was Baptist, and then I turned Methodist. I used to sing in the choir at the Toluca Lake Methodist Church," I chimed in.

"It's good that you believe in God." Which god were we talking about?

Ali went on to tell me he had been without a woman for four months, having let go a young woman that he had been dating for four years. I had been without a man, not needed a man, not thought of a man for five years. I did not share, and he did not inquire.

"I had to let her go. She wanted to be married."

"Why did it take four years for you to realize you would never marry her?" I was sad for her, this young woman without a name, without a

description. She must have loved him very much, as after two sips of wine, I seemed to be falling into the same deep, dark hole.

“I could never marry her, and I told her that from the beginning. We never lived together.”

“So how is she? Do you see her?” I was just going for the facts and nothing but the facts.

“She moved back to Missouri. She’s getting married to an old boyfriend.” Recycling is the popular trend.

“So what do you want with a sixty-year-old woman?” Now I’m no dog, but the skin starts to move south and the eyelids begin to fold over the eyelashes.

“I find you very attractive. We could have a lot of fun together for the next five years.”

He leaned in and kissed me, and this time, the French came out in him. “Let’s go for a drive, eh?”

Like a robot on drugs, I was soon back in his car, heading west on Sunset Boulevard. “I’m going to stop for a bottle of wine, if that’s okay?”

“Sure,” I agreed. Apparently, one glass of merlot, two kisses, and the talk of a five-year-fun plan had freed me of suspicion and inhibition, but not my common sense. He left the SUV and flew into the liquor store. I quickly opened his glove compartment and as quickly slammed it shut, but not before scribbling out his address on my business card. The car was registered to him. I was perfectly safe.

Take me home. Take me home.

I want to feel you close to me.

With you is where I want to be.

Wrapped in your arms tonight. Music and candlelight.

Stars up above. I’m in heaven. Come on and take me.

Oh, Take me Home. Baby, it’d be ecstasy. Take me home.

Cher, I love you.

The dogs greeted us inside my wooden gate with cheers and paws. They were not used to company, especially males, but “if he’s with you, he must be okay.” He was cordial to them but didn’t stop to rub their begging bellies. I opened the wine, poured two glasses, and plopped beside him on my love seat. I had no intention of becoming his lover tonight or I would have put on the Michael Bubl  CD.

We were laughing now, and my head found his shoulder most welcoming. Soon we were kissing in the silence of the well-lit living room. The wineglasses were on the wooden TV tray, bungalow interior-design definition of coffee table. The dogs were happily sprawled out on the oak floor at our feet. We were somehow now in a prone position, when my leg suddenly kicked out in a moment of unexpected passion, sending the glasses hurling and smashing to the floor. The dogs scattered as he rushed to fetch paper towels from the kitchen. "Don't let the dogs get cut," he warned as he bent down on his knees collecting the debris. I was still on the love seat, watching him in awe. A man who cleans up my messes? A man who is concerned that the dogs may be injured? I suddenly trusted him. All three of us wanted to smother him with licks.

We were still laughing as I helped him remove the damage. "Good kick. That's what I like: a passionate woman," he said as we both fell back down onto the love seat. "Let's go lay down on the bed." My bed was five feet away through the doorway. I simply followed his lead and laid myself fully clothed and giggling on my side of the bed next to my alarm clock.

"You're on the wrong side," he commanded, so I rolled over to my right. And immediately it struck me that he, being right-handed, would not have a good grip on the situation. We kissed and kissed and kissed. He initiates wet, wonderful openmouthed saliva-mingling sensations, gathering information as to my accessibility. My body melted into my duvet and up into his masculinity. I clutched his checkered cotton shirt. His jacket had been discarded in the living room. His smell intrigued me. I knew I wanted it and I wanted it now, but I must show some restraint. I can't be that easy. I never was before him.

"No, no, not tonight," I simply said as I pushed him slightly away. "You're adorable, but I really don't know you and . . ." I wanted his young penis inside me more than I wanted a series regular contract, but I had to play a little hard to get. And confidence is sexy. But was I really fooling anyone?

"As a Muslim, when I come in this house as your lover, I am your husband. It must be that way. When I leave, I am no longer your husband until I return." He was fully clothed and straddling me. The light from the living room haloed his face, and as he spoke to me, I succumbed in a rapture of divine submission. "You're a good girl. I like good girls."

Newly elected President Obama, not yet crowned, had asked his people to love our enemies, so why not start at home? I consider myself to be a good citizen. I would love him, but not tonight.

We said our good-byes at the gate without any plans for a tomorrow. The dogs sat together as protective voyeurs from the open front door. I watched him disappear around the corner to his car that would take him west to Beverly Hills. I had no need for the usual late-night snack or cigarette. After scrubbing, toning, and creaming my face raw, I curled up in dream sheets and slept well feeling more beautiful than I had in such a long, long time.

The next morning, Irish from Match.com arrived irritatingly a half hour early. Showered and made up, I was still in my bathrobe. I had hoped that he would renege on his promise to drive me to view cabins in the forest, but there he was: thin, white, pasty, freckled, and curmudgeon. Complete with a thin black belt holding up his baggy jeans. I invited him in to use the bathroom before beginning the hour-and-a-half drive. "It's right there through the bedroom." I stood waiting at the bedroom door for an eternity, listening to a hose fill up the bowl. At last, the flush.

"Really cute place you have here. But why do you have your couch there? Wouldn't it be better up against the windows?"

"They are french doors. I like to be able to open them." I disliked him instantly. "I need to dress." I shut myself into my bedroom and threw on a pair of blue jeans, fake Ugg boots, the black cowl-neck sweater that I had thrown carelessly on the bed from the night before, and a heavy hoodie.

"Where do you want to put the shovel?" I asked at his car. He opened the trunk of his ten-year-old silver Camry, and I gently placed the shovel inside on top of the yellow battery cables. He shut the trunk and, presto, was at the wheel. I was on the curb, already counting down the minutes before this day would end. I opened the door, and that nasty screeching sound of metal scraping concrete sent him into a minitizzy.

"Wait, wait. Let me pull away from the curb. Shut the door!" See, asshole, that's the no. 3 reason to open the car door for a lady. No. 1 reason: you get to touch her hand. No. 2 reason: maybe the chance to ever see her again.

By the time the 134 turned into the 210 West, I was smitten with myself. What in the world was this ravishing new woman doing spending even five minutes with this nervous old man when I could be burying my nose into Ali's armpit? Because I follow up with my commitments and because he had not asked to see me today.

The conversation dragged through Sierra Madre, through Ontario, to San Bernardino. Cat got your tongue? No. Ali had my tongue. All I

wanted to speak about was this “thing” that was happening to me, so I kept quiet. Irish talked nonstop, but I wasn’t even trying to comprehend it all. Something about how he had lost everything, was living in a one-bedroom apartment in Encino, how his thirty-five-year-old son was living with him, and how his ex-wife was out to destroy him. Good grief, Ralph Kramden. Stop the car; I want to get off.

When we began the climb up into the San Bernardino Mountains, I feared for my life. The man had obviously never driven a steep switch-back road. His whiny voice kept asking the same questions. “Are we there yet? How much longer?” It was like being on a road trip with a four-year-old. Thank goodness I had persuaded him to visit my bathroom before heading out.

“Just a few more turns. And when we get to Top Town, I’d like to treat you to breakfast, if you’d like?”

“Thanks. I’m starving,” Irish agreed with the excitement of a four-year-old. Muslims always pay.

Snow had graced the mountain twice since Christmas; and the snowplows, as usual, had packed the snow along the sides of the two-lane highway, the roads, and in front of every driveway. Minimum sun and cold nights had frozen the piles into brown and yellow ice sculptures. Black ice spotted the roadway in the early-morning hours. We might have trouble getting into some of the cabins on my list. I was up for the adventure of house hunting in the timberline, but I had doubts about the fortitude of my date for the day.

At the Loose Caboose, one of the least-trendy greasy diners in town, there is a toy train that choo-choos its way around the ceiling. Finally, something to look at that doesn’t whine. Irish seemed to order everything on the breakfast menu and then some, all the while talking, talking, talking. I, being on the diet of a lifetime, ordered dry rye toast and one scrambled egg, coffee, and a large water to flush it all. When my order arrived at the table, hot and steamy, I could smell nothing. My olfactory system was distracted. I doused the eggs with salt and pepper and asked for mustard. Could the cook maybe just throw on a little grated American cheddar?

My nose drifted to the softness of the black cowl sweater draping my neck. I clutched it and brought the cloth to my face. And there he was all over it. He had kissed me in this sweater. His dressed chest, the cotton shirt soiled with his fragrance, had made love to my sweater. The scent went up my nose and into my brain, and I closed my eyes for just a moment. It was

as if he were seated there, his hand taking my hand and placing it on his leg and then onto his hardness.

“Aren’t you going to eat your eggs? They’re getting cold,” Irish asked suspiciously, as I suspected him of wanting anything on my plate that I wasn’t eating fast enough for him. I could hear my mother. “You need to keep up your strength.”

“Yes, of course. We have a big day of house hunting. I need to keep up my strength!” Now I was in combat mode. Nothing this man could do or say was going to stop me from being the sexiest, mightiest, most lovable woman on top of this mountain, clear to Hollywood and Vine and west all the way into Beverly Hills. Not today.

\* \* \*

First stop was to visit my childhood memory: Grandma and Grandpa’s vacation cabin just down the road from the Loose Caboose Café, which in the 1950s was the Town Hall Restaurant and Bar. The short street, now lined with vintage and antique shops, real estate offices, and two diners, fifty-plus years ago was lined with penny arcades, where Uncle Edwin, three years my senior, and I used to play ski ball, slide a copper penny into a glassed gypsy and have our fortunes told, and where Uncle Edwin would spend most of his coins watching ladies undress down to their underwear on fanned playing cards inside gilded gold picture boxes. We’d spend the summer mornings searching for glass bottles along the road from Grandpa’s cabin leading up to the little town and redeem them at the grocery store. The grocery store had no front walls or doors until closing time, when it was secured with heavy wrought-iron grates. The fruit-and-vegetable-filled kiosks reached onto the sidewalk, and the one cash register sat in front of the magazine stand. The two of us would pool our cash to pick up the newest *MAD* magazine.

In the evenings, Mom and Dad and my grandparents would drink bourbon and 7’s on the big deck, play cards, and laugh while Uncle Edwin and I read our magazines in his attic bedroom above them. My little sister would bang incessantly on the bedroom door.

“What are you doing? Let me in.” We were usually wetting our pants from finding the silliest things in our new magazine. Like the nonsense of finding the funniest name ever written: Irving Smedley.

I remember only once visiting the vacation cabin in the winter. Grandpa was steadfast in his declaration that the cabin was just a summer getaway

from the heat of the San Bernardino Valley summers and that he was not shoveling snow.

When Ed turned eleven, our summer vacation lives changed forever.

“You can’t sleep in here anymore. You are to sleep with your sister in your parents’ room.” My British grandmother stood at the small door of Ed’s room with her arms folded in front of her.

“What did I do?” I stomped my feet and folded my arms.

“Edwin is at an age where he shouldn’t have a young girl sleeping in his room, dear.” Whew, it wasn’t my fault. I had no idea what she meant, but I was glad I was not to blame.

That summer, Uncle Edwin invited a girl to play ping-pong at the cabin and wouldn’t let me play. I sulked in the hammock at the top of the driveway and saw a bald eagle fly over the top of the trees. No one believed me when I ran up to the deck to share my discovery with everyone. That winter at Grandma’s house in San Bernardino, Uncle Edwin went into the bathroom when I was taking a bath and asked me if I’d ever seen a boy naked. He proceeded to share. My scream disrupted the card game going on in the kitchen. No one believed that I’d seen another bald eagle.

\* \* \*

“The driveway is steep. Let’s park over there.” Irish reluctantly drove the Camry’s passenger side tires into a hard pack of snow.

“It’s not just steep. It’s deep with snow. You should have told me to wear gloves.” We’re going to the mountains in winter, so?

“Do you want to wear mine?”

“Thanks. My hands are freezing,” Irish mumbled as he fumbled into my fur-trimmed mittens.

We trudged through the slushy two-foot-deep snow up the driveway, and there were the two great trees that once secured the hammock. There were the worn wooden steps that lead to the grand front door; there was the crumbling deck. There was my childhood. Irish stayed back in the driveway.

“Those steps aren’t safe. I’ll wait here,” he moaned in disapproval.

The cabin, which had shrunk somehow, appeared vacant, unloved, not for sale, and wasn’t on my list; but I left my realtor card with a note that I’d like to buy the cabin, that I had spent the best days of my life there. No one has ever called.

Our next stop was a meth-lab foreclosure close to the lake. Mountain-man Irish begrudgingly parked once again in the snow on the side of the road and grabbed the shovel from his trunk. The walkway down to the front door of the sad two-story cabin was buried in the white stuff.

“Why do you want to buy a cabin up here?” So that when I grow weary of earning enough money to keep me in Hollywood, I’ll have an inexpensive place to live out my days. This 720-square-foot cabin was going for \$82,500. I had purchased my bungalow in Hollywood for \$310,000.

“The forest of my youth is calling me.” I grabbed the shovel from his gloved hands and forged a path down to the lockbox. The hardest part of my job as a realtor is finding the lockbox, opening it, finding a key inside, and opening the door. It was double trouble in 40 degrees.

It was nasty in there. Drywall hell. And the drywall was wet with black mold. The carpet was brothel burgundy and stained. The kitchen appliances had been removed, and no one had swept where they had once been. All the light fixtures had been removed, and wires dangled from ceilings and walls. There were no aesthetic architectural features but for a stone fireplace which had been painted psychedelic orange.

After a long, treacherous drive on the rim of the forest, which turned out to be a wild-goose chase to find a foreclosure claiming to be a “vintage jewel,” I directed my date-for-a-day to the 1930 cottage off Highway 138. I had seen it once before, and I knew this was the one, but wanted to see her one more time. She stood bright white with long windows on all sides. Her steep-pitched green roof patched with the snow. After shoveling our way up the front concrete steps, we followed the walkway railing with its Christmas tree cutouts to the front door, where with frozen fingers I spun the lock and fetched the keys; and we were inside. Every white window sash and french door was the original; neglect, weather, and time had left them peeling and brown with dirt. The paneled pine walls and light pine floors on the bottom level and up into the large loft invited European accents and cottage white ceiling fans. Dust flying through the air found its way into my nostrils with every breath, but she seemed to need me. Spiders had made their home in every corner and closet. Ali and I would make love there in the loft in the big bed that I would set next to the large windows and we would wake to a view of green timbers and blue skies. I warmed my nose in my love sweater.

As I was opening the back door, dirt fell onto the kitchen floor. Stretched before me was a blanket of snow covering at least two feet of soil on what I hoped to be a stone-and-concrete patio. Shovel in hand, I started my dig

for gold. Yes, there was a patio floor. And yes, there was a rock wall. As I threw snow and dirt over my shoulder, a neighbor appeared on his deck over my head.

“No one has cleaned that off for eight years. Hate to tell you, but you may be shoveling dog shit.” He appeared friendly and full of information. The last owner, a lady in her fifties, hadn’t gone out the backdoor for years. He welcomed me to the neighborhood.

“Hey, I haven’t bought it yet.” I laughed as I propped the shovel up against the siding and moved closer to his voice. His name was Cole. He lived there alone and was an independent owner of an air-conditioning-consulting business. His cabin peered into the yard but was painted a forest-blend green. His three dogs rushed out of their doggy door and greeted me at the chain-link fence. “I have two dogs and a cat. Think they’ll be happy here?”

“Don’t leave them out at night. Coyotes.”

Irish was bored and hungry again, so I treated him to lunch at the Mexican restaurant that sits directly across from Lake Gregory, a county regional park, and the center of summer magic in the mountains. Gentlemen, take note: When a woman buys you lunch on your first date, chances are she is not looking forward to a second. In the summer, there are paddleboards to rent and skim from shore to shore, pedal boats to take you under the water spray, a water slide to glide away the day, if you buy a wrist band for \$15. At the snack bar, they make the best cheeseburgers in Southern California. The red onions are grilled all day long to tempt beachgoers sprawled out on towels and under umbrellas there on the sand.

But this was the eighth of January and a brisk breeze lifting from the lake hit the outdoor tables at Tony’s Restaurant, sending a lonely chill through my body, the body, which last night was warm and awakened by him. Now I sat across the table from a tired, angry, miserable old man, five years my junior. I ordered margaritas. We nibbled on tortilla chips and guacamole and mild salsa while I remembered the way he made me feel.

Leaving the restaurant, we hit ice on the shaded road. Never brake at this moment. Irish braked. We ended up in a hard-packed, snowplowed pile.

“This is the longest coffee date ever,” Irish muttered as he spun the car back onto the roadway.

The next day, I sent an e-mail to my Irish date-for-a-day. “I do not feel comfortable with you. Good luck to you.” The same day I put in an offer for the 1930 vintage cottage.

The bank was asking \$92,500. I offered \$79,500 and waited for the bank asset manager to respond. The mountain communities were overflowing with foreclosures, but no one was trudging through snowdrifts to view them. I crossed my fingers. After three hundred twenty-four auditions from 2002 to 2006, I had finally booked a national commercial for an insurance company, and the residuals just kept rolling in. In 2008, my luck struck again and I booked a cholesterol-medication commercial in which I played an overworked emergency room nurse who allowed no one to die on her shift: national television, Internet, and cable. All the residual cash had been socked away in my “actor” savings account. I was ready to invest in my getaway/retirement petit chalet with 20 percent down, closing costs, and enough money left over to bring the little cabin back to her glory.

Ali called the landline midmorning. Was I available that evening? Maybe we could go for a bite? He had a busy day ahead and would call later to let me know his arrival time.

At 4:00 p.m., I began preparing for my first Friday night date in years. At my first visit to a nail shop in even more years, I relaxed while my toes and fingers were manicured, massaged, and painted scarlet. I stayed and read an entire magazine to be sure my nails were dry before driving home. I filled the bath with bubbles and hot, steamy water and soaked myself. I then showered and washed and moisturized my hair. I changed the sheets on the bed. I lit several candles around the house.

Polished, prepped, made up, but still in my bathrobe, I stood in the light of my bedroom in front of the mirrored closets and let the robe fall to the floor to reveal the unwrapped sixty-year-old present I was about to give. Twenty-five extra pounds of girth erased any sign of a waist. Three jolly pregnancies had left scars and loose skin. The breasts would certainly be a topic of discussion. But the one thing staring back at me was the bush. The black curly V topped two dark lips no longer pink. Pregnancy does that. Four husbands and several lovers, and no one had yet complained. If Ali were offended by the au natural, I would make an appointment to do the trendy, popular unspeakable: THE WAX. Each month before the mani-pedi, the Vietnamese lady would direct me to the room behind the closed door, better known as the torture chamber. My scream as she ripped off my protective patch would be heard out into the parking lot of the strip mall. And she would charge me for the pain. He may turn out to be a costly extracurricular activity.

Dressed for a casual dinner out, anxious and excited, I poured myself a light gin and tonic and waited for the call. This is a fairy tale and it is

Hollywood, where no one under forty is seen outside their apartments until after 10:00 p.m. The clock over my desk was sneaking up to seven thirty when I lit a cigarette and walked out to sip my drink in my little garden. And there it was. That full winter moon was making his slow ascent from the east to sit over my house for a time. I sat there in the moonlight, trying to keep doubt, suspicion, and irritation from spoiling my anticipation of the romantic evening that lay before me.

Would he bring me flowers? How would he be dressed? Had he made reservations at some chic Middle Eastern restaurant? Was he ever going to call?

The dogs followed me back into the kitchen, where I poured another gin and tonic and lit another cigarette. My smoking was a private, personal bad habit, which I did not share with many. I finished the cigarette, hid the ashtray and the pack, brushed my teeth once again, sprayed the house with vanilla, and turned on the television. At eight o'clock, the house phone rang.

"Hey, it's me. Are we still on for tonight?" My left brain rushed with answers that fit the occasion. Where the hell are you? How rude of you. I've been waiting for your call since four o'clock. Who the hell do you think you are?

When people show you who they are,  
Believe them the first time. (Maya Angelou)

My right brain took over. "Of course. I can't wait to see you." My genitals swelled.

"I'm going to shower and should be there by nine o'clock." He spoke gently and directly. No excuses, no explanations. This is a fairy tale and this is Hollywood.

The January evening was mild, so I brought candles to the front porch and placed myself at the glass table and gazed out at the CNN sign at Sunset and Cahuenga Boulevard. The hipsters were beginning to walk from parking spaces on the street up to the Amoeba Music store, the ArcLight Cinema complex, the clubs that were hidden behind black metal doors up, down, and around the area. I poured one more drink and I waited.

I could smell him even as he parked his BMW in the only available space two blocks from my gate. And I wasn't wearing the black cowl sweater. Lust and passion enveloped me in an endorphin haze. His pheromones filled the air I breathed. A dopamine rush erased all suspicions of his intentions.

The gin secured my confidence in this blossoming relationship. And the voice of Barbara Cook conjured up my deepest longings.

Don't let the sun go down on me.  
I do not want to be alone tonight.  
We'll be right, you'll see. (Barbara Cook; *Candlelight*)

We were all over each other inside the gate and up the porch steps. The kisses were long and deep as we clutched at each other. Somehow not too gracefully, we had become unclothed. Ali lifted the bedsheet and we climbed inside. With every subtle purposeful touch, my pleading body pulsed as if a small electrical charge had been grazed over my sense of reason. He was on his knees in front of me, placing my knees upright. The joy was all mine as I watched him wanting me, as if I were the only girl left in the world. He caressed my thighs and expertly tore open the package with his teeth and placed the protection over his young, lovely penis. And I didn't look away. I hadn't seen a condom being unrolled onto a dick since 1992, and that particular dick was as soft as a two-week-old bruised banana. I didn't want to miss a thing, not one moment of this glorious adventure that had intentionally come my way to awaken all my brownish pink little parts.

He entered me cautiously yet boldly, and crowned me, his queen. I had never felt a sensation quite so delectable. Had my vagina changed somehow to prepare me for this delicious attack on my pubococcygeus muscles? Had all those Kegel exercises for better bladder control geared me up for just this moment? Then he was turning me over and calling out to me, as Barbara serenaded us, and I caught every other word she was singing.

Lay me down, astound me.  
Not a sound, surround me.  
I've been afraid to love, but lay me down, lay me down;  
I just can't wait . . .  
And I confess the night is a pleasure you can't miss.  
Lay me down. Now I know how to lay me down.  
Now I know how to live. (Barbara Cook, *Candlelight*)

"Don't say *pussy* to a grandmother," I protested, my mouth muffled in the pillow as he entered me from behind. At the front door, one brush of his hand to my crotch and my clothes that I had carefully selected for our second date had been carelessly thrown about in the blackness of my

bedroom. The dogs had scattered in shame. My cat sat on the outside garden wall wailing. I hadn't even had time to turn on Michael Bubl .

"Am I too rough?" and he turned me back over to face his beautiful face and kissed me softly. He lowered his lips to my breasts. "Your breasts are lovely. They remind me of making out with girls in the backseat of my car in high school."

"Thank you. They're new."

He buried his nose into a nipple. "You're so funny."

\* \* \*

Sixteen months earlier, during my yearly Pap and physical exam at the Bob Hope Health Center on La Brea, Dr. Wilson had asked me, "Have you thought of having a breast reduction?"

"Sure, but I just keep cramming them into small bras," I assured her, as I lifted one sagging breast to where my chest should be. "Is it that bad?"

"That little hump on your back should be telling you how detrimental all that extra weight is to your posture."

Yes, and over twenty years of sitting bent over a stenograph machine taking down fevered cross-examinations nonstop.

"If you meet the criteria, you could have a breast reduction at no charge. I can refer you to a cosmetic surgeon." Dr. Wilson made notes in my chart.

"Are you saying that my SAG health insurance will pay to fix these puppies for free?" I protectively cupped both dangling beauties.

"Yes, your Screen Actors Guild health insurance will pay for it. Call this doctor and make an appointment for a consultation." And off I went to contemplate my new boobs.

The referral found me in Beverly Hills at a plush office on Ca on Drive. A beautiful assistant with perky breasts introduced me to a handsome young Persian-Jew cosmetic surgeon, who shook his head in dismay at my pendulous bounty. The good doctor took nude pictures of me from the waist up, felt me up, and smiled a lot.

"I will submit the request to your insurance. I am sure it'll be covered. I need you to bring in a picture of the breasts you'd like to have." The surgery was scheduled, executed, and successful. I returned home three pounds lighter, scarred with smiles under my breasts, high on painkillers, but with my own nipples sewn neatly in place on my copycat Marilyn Monroe tits.

\* \* \*

The room was dark but for the soft stream of light from the antique streetlight passing through my sheer curtains. The sidewalk into the row of bungalows was quiet as he parted my thighs, and I watched as he watched his dressed penis reinsert. The fit was perfection. Not too big, not too small, and a hardness I had never experienced. His chest was smooth and broad. He did not intimidate me with six-pack abs, but warmed me with the small roundness of a tummy. Shoulders squared, yet soft. I was not ashamed of my body; it was giving him pleasure. He pulled back and entered me again, his eyes penetrating my gaze. We smothered each other's faces with deep, searching kisses. His rhythm quickened. "I love your body. Julie, I love . . ." He lowered himself and covered my quivering skin. My insides squeezed one more time around this wonder inside me. I clutched his precious hairless back as his full lips passed my neck and fell into the pillow.

"Where are you going?" I whispered and reached out my arms to him as he leaped off me and rushed to the bathroom. He closed the door tightly, switched on the light; and I could hear water running into the sink. I had not reached orgasm. Nothing new. I was a clitoral girl, and the little man in the boat was bobbing wildly on moist, warm waves. "Please hurry back, sweetie."

"It burns. I need to wash my semen off," he explained to me from a crack in the doorway. "Is it okay if I put the condom in your trash can?"

"Sure." Like the moral committee or my twenty-three-year-old daughter were coming by any minute to check my trash. The bathroom light went out, and he stepped into the bedroom and began to search for his clothes in the dark.

"Don't you want to get something to eat?" He asked me over his shoulder as he stepped into shiny running pants.

"Please come back to bed. I'm twitching." Ali pulled his black sweater over his messed head and went back into the bathroom.

"Can I use your hair brush?" Sure. We'd been swapping fluids for an hour. "Don't worry about it. Our bodies will get used to each other. You'll come," he assured me as he stood in the doorway brushing his hair into place. Officially, this was the most intimate conversation I'd ever had concerning sexual matters in my entire life. Was I growing up?

"Get up and get dressed, babe. I'm hungry." He looked so cute standing in the dimness of my room. I decided to keep discussion of this touchy

subject until another time. Our chemistry was raw, uncontrollable, wild; and I wasn't going to spoil it by asking that my needs be met.

"You were glowing when I was inside of you. I'll leave you to dress." He grabbed his shoes, socks, and wallet from the nightstand and went out onto the porch. Still in the dark, I searched for my underwear: a black midriff-clenching spandex bra ensemble and black low-cut, thigh-rise grandma panties. If this lust was to continue, the Macy's card was going to catch fire with lingerie shopping. I quickly redressed, freshened my face and straightened my après-fuck hair, and soon we were walking hand in hand up the boulevard to join other lovers under that giant lovers' moon.

The sushi bar at the ArcLight Cinema center served a full menu including pizza, American grill, and salads. I placed my napkin on the thighs he had caressed. I was flush from passion and confused about the part I was to play in this five-year plan. Unlike myself, I was quiet. The waiter was talkative and the lively restaurant was busy with full tables, big screen TVs, alternative-rock mood music, and the welcoming shouts of kombanwa from the sushi magicians behind the glass display cases. I don't eat sushi unless you count tempura vegetables, California rolls, and edamame. I ordered a chardonnay and a chicken salad. Ali ordered miso soup and green tea.

When the waiter whisked himself away, he explained, "Muslims are not supposed to drink alcohol, but it's okay if you do."

"But you drank red wine the other night."

"I did that for you. Wine is okay once in a while. I don't like to drink. It fuzzes my concentration." That's what it's supposed to do: stop one from thinking clearly. Suddenly, he sneezed. One, two, three. He blew into his paper napkin. "I must be allergic to your dogs. Does your cat come inside?"

"No, she is strictly a wild outside cat. Maybe it's the jasmine about to bloom outside my bedroom window." The love of my life sabotaged by all the flora and fauna I had planted lovingly around the tiny perimeter of my little house. He wheezed and coughed over his soup. His eyes began to run. "Did you have this reaction the other night?"

"I did, but I didn't think anything of it. Now I think it's your dogs."

Well, let's run home and gas them!

"Maybe we could go back to your place after dinner?" I offered.

"No. I can't host there. I live with my younger brother and he sleeps in the living room. He's better looking than I am. You'd like him." He blew his nose into his napkin. The waiter passed by and Ali asked for more

napkins. He had finished his soup, and I was still nibbling. “Sorry. I eat fast. Take your time.”

Over the din of the sports bar, he shared with me his plight. He was going to be thirty-nine soon; he was tired of dating young, loose models, the women in Los Angeles dressed too provocatively; he was hoping to find in me a respite from the demands of being a single man in this town; he was expected to be married and start a family by his forty-fifth birthday; we could be very happy for the next five years, and did I have any sexually transmitted diseases?

“Wouldn’t I have to have sex to get those?” I asked.

“I’m clean too” was his answer.

And I just sat there taking it all in and questioning nothing. I had been recruited for a five-year tour to an exotic paradise. And somewhere not so deep inside, I didn’t believe a word he said.

The walk home was sterile. I waited for him to take my hand, but it was not offered. I turned my romantic heart to the moon, leading us to my gate. And as a cloud came upon the moon, we climbed the stairs to the porch and the dogs ran around the garden path to greet us. He quickly backed away down the steps.

“Hey, I’ve got to go. Is that okay?” His hand was on the gate latch.

“Of course. I need to get up early for a yard sale at my daughter’s place anyway. Thank you for dinner.” Thank you for the kisses, for the rush of dopamine, for making me feel like a woman. What kind of woman, I wasn’t quite sure.

“Call you tomorrow, if that’s okay.” He let me kiss him as he fumbled with the gate lock. “I’ve really got to go, darling.” There were sweet smiles and a rocking hug, and then Ali headed down the dirty city sidewalk into the night. It was 11:00 p.m., the hour when the club lines begin to fill the sidewalks; when the girls in their short black leather skirts find their spot at dark tables in dark, noisy corners; and the men valet their black BMWs and sit at tables with other sharks out fishing—11:00 p.m., the hour when older ladies wipe the makeup from their lined faces and boil water on the stove for sleepy-time tea.

I locked the front door and put on the *Saturday Night Fever* soundtrack, the volume bouncing the picture frames on the top of the cream gold-leafed entertainment center. I danced off the chicken salad in celebration of my juices again flowing. If at 175 pounds I could attract a handsome thirty-eight-year-old hypochondriac with obsessive-compulsive disorder, selfish sexual confidence, and a deviated septum, imagine the man

I could attract at 150 pounds. Life was good and the future bright. And my twenty-three-year-old daughter and I were having a yard sale at her place in the morning. Time to throw out the old to allow the new to enter.