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FOR MY MOTHER

-/

WHENEVER I touch cold tile, I remember praying for a bathroom lock.

"Privacy. Who wants privacy?" Mom would shout through the door just before barging in. She would hold that worn rubber bag as if it were the Topkapi diamond. "This won't take a second. Get down on your knees and relax. You know you always feel better when it's over."

Then she would work that nozzle in, and did it hurt! That never stopped Mom. She kept shoving. Soon enough it did fit. Mom knew what was best. You bet.

That was then. Tricycle time on Easterly Road, Allentown, Pa. My childhood. Now she's learned to leave me alone. A little.

As I return to the bedroom for a suitcase, my past comes back to me. But then it's all up on the walls and all over my mother's apartment. Paintings from U. of P.'s art classes and covers from modeling days hang under fluorescent lighting in metal frames from Lamston's in the Lehigh Valley mall. (Mom's a mall groupie.)

When I did the *Time* cover, Mom thought my red hot pants were too short. For *Esquire* the "Pet Me I'll Purr" T-shirt was too tight. In *Elle* my bikini was too small, and in *Vogue* my neckline too revealing. She approved of the covers I did for *Mothersto-Be* and *McCall's*.

My father liked them all. He liked anything I wore, anything

I did. His sole disappointment was that I was never on the cover of U.S. News & World Report.

As I fasten the buttons of my silk shirt, I fondle my breasts. They haven't changed since the days I modeled. Modeling bras for ads paid big bucks. Top manufacturers wanted my pert breasts. I never wanted their bras. My face and voice were bankable too. I still live off the money my body has earned. Just a month ago a former client asked me to be photographed in a bikini for a poster promoting his latest line of swimwear. I gave an autographed copy to Mom at Christmas. She cut off my bikini-clad body and pasted my severed, still-smiling head in her scrapbook. I was not surprised.

Grabbing an antique silver necklace and wrapping it around my neck, I return to the bathroom and adjust each strand.

"Maya, what are you doing in there?"

I thrust my chest out and stand erect, just as I did before the camera.

"You'll miss your train if you don't hurry up."

Playing with the chains makes time stop.

Mother's footsteps. Now she barges into the bathroom, wearing a polyester pantsuit. She never wears skirts.

"My goodness, child, you can see right through your blouse."

My shoulders droop.

"Aren't you ashamed to dress that way?"

I try not to listen, and return to the bedroom.

"Put a jacket over yourself!"

I slip on a blazer.

Sometimes I think my mother's perverse. Then again, maybe she's just being Pennsylvania Dutch. Being the eldest in a family of fourteen with a handicapped father and an alcoholic mother had made her feel like the man in the family. When I wasn't angry with Mom, I felt sorry for her and would do anything to make her happy, almost anything.

"Be good," she says, "and stay away from those sex-starved men. Keep that jacket on!"

"Mom, that's enough!" I close my suitcase and carry it to the living room filled with unmatched pieces of overstuffed furniture, a twelve-inch TV, African violets, a small aluminum Christmas tree and a caged parakeet.

"Why don't you get a nine-to-five job?"

"Didn't I just wish you Happy Birthday? I take that back." The parakeet squawks.

"Birthdays don't mean a thing to me. Who wants to be seventy-four?" Mom goes into the kitchen and brings back a shopping bag filled with goodies.

I get my ten-year-old mink out of the closet and drop it on the plastic-covered Barcalounger. "Well, I won't come home next year, if you keep this up. I'll love you courtesy of Pacific Telephone."

We hug and kiss. My mom, Elsie Mae Dunkelburger (why I changed my name to Endicott), smiles, revealing her one dimple. "I love you, Maya, you know I do." I smell freshly baked shoofly pie.

Releasing her four-foot-eleven bundle of willpower, my five-foot-six pillar of anxiety is out the door—suitcase, mink, shoofly pie and all. I run down the hallway past senior citizens looking for action. Back to the real world.

A stocky driver stands by a Red and White cab. His chubby hand reaches for my suitcase and throws it into the trunk. I open the back door and slide in.

Accidentally, I swear it! my wraparound skirt opens to the center of my pink satin bikinis. The driver gets in, looks back, pauses.

Something goes off inside me. Call it a buzz. Call it a hum. It's real. I close the door, and my body tingles. I read his name on the taxi license over the glove compartment.

Raphael Garcia Llopis drives off. I like Mexicans. Black eyes. Black eyebrows, bushy and overgrown. Black hair full of hair cream. His lower lip protrudes, exposing the inner pink lip. His upper lip is hidden by a moustache. Dark curls run down his neck, disappear under his green baseball jacket, pop up on the back of his hands. His fingernails are dirty.

No scratched plastic partition comes between us. In the rearview mirror I study his eyes. He watches me, then the road, then me.

I feel flashes. (Here we go again.)

Where are my sunglasses? They make me feel safe. I hunt down my Ray-Bans in the caverns of my pocketbook and put them on. It begins to rain. He looks nervous.

He has one of those stupid faces that love sex. He is not into becoming rich or famous. Good old working class. Loves to fuck. Poor idiot. He's as bored with driving his lousy cab as I am close to crazy after three days in my mother's house. Every day the same nine-to-five drudgery. He's given up the fight. His spirit is sucked; he's a follower. Give him a road and a passenger, and off he goes. Whoopee! Schmuck.

I feel sorry for the poor asshole. Better believe it. My legs open wider. His eyes continue to look at me in the rearview mirror. We stop at a red light.

He turns around, showing a mouth of gold crowns. "Would you like some music?"

"Sure." Why not? I smile as if I don't know what's going on either. I can't think.

"Nice view, lady."

"Think so?"

Who's he kidding? I pull my legs up to my chest. My skirt falls away to both sides.

"Hey, we're about to go on the highway," he says. He can't think either.

"So?" Just as the traffic next to us starts up, I pull off my panties and draw my spread legs back up to my chest.

"Jesus Christ!"

He thinks. He recovers. "Maybe," he says, "you want to get off at an exit and have me join ya?"

Silence.

"Huh?"

"Drive!"

As we round the bend entering the highway, my chains brush against my breasts. The nipples are standing up like maraschino cherries. My right hand plays with them; my left does things with my skirt.

"Sex-o-matic. Sex-o-MA-tic," Prince screams over WIBG.

Breathing deeply, I squeeze my buttocks to the beat.

Now my right hand undoes the buttons on my shirt. Oh, Mom, if you could see me now. I keep looking at Raphael Garcia Llopis, right in his rearview. I rub each chain over each nipple. My head arches. Poor guy. He is looking back every chance he can. Traffic whizzes by us.

He turns his head for an instant, 180 degrees, like a devil. We're going 60 mph. I spread my knees more and move to the beat. My beige knee socks are still on, and my shirt is open all the way. That's what I used to be. An ad. I sold sex. Look at me, but don't touch me. You can't.

"Lady, I've got to slow down if you keep this up." He looks back again. He wets his lips. It is a funny chewing gesture, almost grotesque.

I like it. It's very Latin. He's weird. Stupid. I rub on. What do I care about him? Or cars going by? I'm hot. Hot all over. Like I rarely am. Never argue with what makes you hot. Laying my head back on the seat, I stroke the hood. Tip of my pleasure. Trees blur. Billboards pass. Gardner's Gin. That was me once, smiling under an umbrella, selling gin. You drank Gardner's and you got someone like me. Lucky you! I was on the buses and trolleys of the Northeast corridor for three full years.

"Look, lady, I got to pull off at the next exit."

"Shut up and drive."

He moans at the sight of my secrets. "We're gonna have an accident," he says.

I push my pelvis upward into his gaze. I spread my legs on

his cracked maroon vinyl. I am about to burst. I let out a scream. It comes and comes and then it's over. My legs fold. I feel clean. Empty. Good.

"We're almost there. Want me to pull in an alley?" he asks.

"No." I pull my panties back on, fasten my skirt and shirt. I see Philadelphia's 30th Street Station ahead.

"Wanna get together later, lady?"

"Look, I've got a train to catch."

"I don't believe it! You do this all the time? I don't get it."

We stop in the loading zone.

I gather my handbag and overnight case and step from the cab. Mumbling to himself, he gets out and hands me my suitcase from the trunk. I give him the exact fare and walk off.

"Hey, lady, where's my tip?"

"Are you kiddin'? You had it, mister!"

Why do I do this every time I leave my mother's?

run down the stairs for the Amtrak train to New York and board at Gate 11. Not only do I feel better, but I'm glad it's over. I collapse into the first free seat. What is it with me? Do other women ever do that? Men do, I know. But women?

Am I a pervert? Why cab drivers? And why must I get so angry? I couldn't do it if I didn't get angry. Orgasms aren't easy for me to come by. I'll do anything for that release. That's your daughter, Mom. An orgasm junkie. Well, chickadee, I tell her, flashing is safe. No evidence, no involvement.

I feel helpless. My mind won't quit. Where's the bar? Three cars ahead I buy a Bloody Mary and return with it to my seat of stained, faded black leather. Sitting on it feels rough, uncomfortable, but it beats being in that cab. Stale cigarette smoke bothers my sinuses. I watch the ice cubes in the cold plastic glass being jostled by the train.

Sometimes I feel there is a partition between the world and me, as if I'm merely looking at life, a permanent passenger. Mom told me I was born with a perfect body. If it's so perfect, why can't I enjoy it? Out the window, New Jersey is passing by. I remember how I felt when I first became pretty. I knew at once that being pretty plus good makeup added up to beauty. I learned to use it. I had to. My father suffered from a special deformity. He had had a lobotomy when I was thirteen, and his eyes no longer blinked. His nose ran. He drooled. He grunted.

His shoulders were hunched around his neck. He twitched violently. His smile was a pasty grin. People would stare and jeer.

Sometimes I could divert attention from him by looking my best. Then people would be more polite to Daddy. I resented the hypocrisy my appearance brought out in people. What if I looked just like him?

After he got sick, Daddy loved to read dirty books. He would hide torn-out pages under his mattress. Mom caught him once and hit him. He twitched away like a giant metronome. He stuttered forth a defense. I wanted to tell him to stash the pages in my shoe bags; she'd never look there.

Before the lobotomy he had been put in a psychiatric hospital in Philadelphia. No one knew what was wrong with him. The doctors thought it was mental. The nurses liked him, and said he ought to be out of the hospital. He helped them make beds. He made me ceramic ashtrays and a hooked rug. When he was released, the doctors told Mom he needed to have sex.

I don't think she took their advice. Soon he was back in the hospital. After the lobotomy—which he wanted—he was worse. He never made sense, and he was incontinent.

He never made sense? Did I?

"New York. Amtrak train from Philadelphia arriving in New York City."

I'm home. Well, I'm back in New York. Soon Hollywood is going to be home. My West Coast theatrical agent, Michael Stone, has asked me to move to L.A. "New York is OK if you wanna do stage," the Ivy League-looking Michael said, chuckling. "Personally I don't see that as your thing. Now if you wanna do movies or TV, you gotta move to Hollywood. Pilot season's coming up. You're a great type. Sexy women are in!"

The Michael Stone Agency—he's considered a young hotshot—is reputed to be one of the best on the West Coast. He doesn't have an East Coast office. As he said—or did he imply? —I'm not talented enough to do theater anyway.