

 Library of American Fiction

OY PIONEER!

A Novel



Marleen S. Barr

Oy Pioneer!

Library of American Fiction

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Marleen S. Barr

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For my husband, Maurice—who provides the story's
real happy ending



My generation of women was experimenting with a new life pattern, one never tried by women before in all of history. No wonder we felt so lost, alternatively like pariahs or like pioneers. We were breaking every female taboo—putting our creative lives, our self-expression ahead of the demands of the species.

—Erica Jong, *Any Woman's Blues*

We lived, if you can believe it, in a little middle-class enclave called Forest Hills.

—Alice Walker, *The Temple of My Familiar*

“You must not tell anyone,” my mother said, “what I am about to tell you.”

—Maxine Hong Kingston, *The Woman Warrior*

Jewish women from Queens don't fly.

—Dr. Joel Fleishman, protagonist, *Northern Exposure*

I'm not a hillbilly. I was born in the Bronx.

—Max Bialystock, protagonist, *The Producers*

Along with the [feminist science] fiction there has arisen a body of feminist commentary on it, increasingly informed by feminist theory, as pioneered by Marleen S. Barr.

—Ellen Peel, *Politics, Persuasion, and Pragmatism: A Rhetoric of Feminist Utopian Fiction*

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Oy Pioneer!



Plastic

Some people live in condominiums. I am, at the moment, residing in a condom. This is not a complaint. I am not male. I am Sondra Lear, associate professor of English and women's studies at the State University of Virginia at Blackhole, feminist theorist by day and husband hunter by night. Although I am a rather attractive thirty-eight-year-old, the hunt has not been easy. I don't think I will ever find a man who wants to live with a feminist science fiction expert. When dates ask about my field, truth requires that I answer, "Lesbian planets." Although this response never peaks male ardor, the hunt must go on: I have a Jewish mother.

This point has not been lost on little Gail, my life-long friend Carol's toddler. Carol and I ask Gail, "What does the cow say?"



“Moo, moo,” she answers.

“And what does the sheep say?”

“Baa, baa.”

“And what does Sondra’s mother say?”

“Get married. Get married.” Because Gail possibly would be exposed to suffocation, our conversation never transpires in my parents’ apartment. My mother is the one who changed a Forest Hills, Queens, condominium into a condom. She and my father reside in something analogous to a Christo project: all their furniture—and even their carpet—is covered with plastic. I am now staying with them before departing from Kennedy Airport to embark upon my second Fulbright to Germany.

Europe is a better husband-hunting ground than Blackhole, that is, Goyimville. (Blackhole’s neighboring town is really called Christiansburg.) I remember the reference Norman Holland, my trusty dissertation director, wrote for my first Fulbright application. To convince the committee that I could successfully undertake a cross-cultural encounter, he said, “This charming young woman from Queens has learned to live with cows.” I have yet to locate myself in a place that affords some compromise between the extremes of Blackhole and Berlin.

My mother (who is the sort of Jewish mother who can neither light an oven nor make coffee) is, presently, trying to convince me to cook dinner for her friends Shirley and Irving. Irving served with my father during



World War II. He likes to discuss the photo of the two of them, aged twenty-two, proudly wearing their army jackets adorned with China-Burma-India patches. My father's army jacket is now part of my wardrobe. I often and appropriately wear it to attend Blackhole English department meetings. These meetings are theaters of war involving continuing battles between Us and Them: the feminists and the conservatives. Although the conservatives have lately named themselves the National Association of Scholars, I always call them geezers.

Shirley, who was madly attracted to my father and wanted a daughter, married Irving and had five sons. She is smart, talented, and ordinary looking. My mother, a buxom knockout in her day, has one claim to fame: she was Lauren Bacall's classmate at Julia Richman High School. I've often heard the story about how Betty Bacall and my mother cut classes to go to the movies. "One day that will be me up there," my mother reports Betty said. And then there is the 1943 conversation mother had with the woman whose hat blocked her view of *Oklahoma* during the musical's opening night. "Would you please remove your hat?"

"Why certainly," said the Duchess of Windsor. My mother and I had very different young lives. She attended *Oklahoma* and spoke to bejeweled royalty. I attended SUNY-Buffalo and carried my clothes to the Laundromat through blizzards. I wrote a dissertation and received a Buffalo Ph.D.; she wrote to Tyrone



Power and received many answers. I suspect that she slept with him. But I will never know. What is certain is that the competition between Shirley and my mother for my father's affections was no contest. He made the biggest mistake of his life when he rejected Shirley. All is not lost, though. She treats me like a daughter. My mother tolerates this attention because she hopes that Irving will introduce me to one of his fellow Jewish doctors.

Hence, she wants me to prepare dinner. I have no choice other than to comply with her designs. Despite my tenure, my publications, and my feminism, when I enter my mother's plastic-covered apartment, it seems like I have never graduated from it. The plastic cannot shield me from deviating from Derrida and speaking in terms of *différance* from myself. So, I converse with my mother about Shirley and Irving, very sophisticated people who buy exquisite art to grace their sumptuous Cedarhurst home. "Herbert (because she is so unmotherly, I call my mother Herbert), what should I tell Shirley and Irving? I know that they haven't visited you since 1960 and you're now renewing this friendship. But, people aren't accustomed to socializing in plastic-wrapped apartments. I just can't bring myself to ask guests to sit on dining-room chairs covered with black garbage bags. Should I tell them the chairs are adorned with synthetic mink noire?"

"Just say we have a cat. They'll understand." In Herbert's mind, the plastic is attributable to the clawing



nemesis of sofa and carpet, Norris Compton Lear, my decidedly goyische feline. Unlike me, Norris is a native Virginian.

Herbert approached her next subject. “You go. You can’t go. You go. You can’t go,” she insisted. These orders were too inconsistent—even for Herbert. But she began to make sense when I recalled that it was a dark and stormy night. Herbert, though, was referring to the dark and stormy night in North Carolina, not the one in Forest Hills. Casting aside my professional speech act–theory training and turning to my years of experience as Herbert’s daughter, I realized she was saying “Hugo. You can’t go.” I knew that although Hurricane Hugo threatened only to ravage the North Carolina coast, according to Herbertian logic, I must delay my departure for Germany. I dialed Lufthansa. When in Herbert’s apartment, one must do as Herbert does. This designer of the condom/condominium would never entertain the possibility that, while at Kennedy Airport, a raincoat could function as adequate protection from Hugo.

2

The Long Good-bye

Only after Hugo had blown out to sea off the North Carolina coast did Herbert deem it safe for me to go to the New York airport. Her advice: “Don’t forget to keep your eyes open on the plane. You’ll be spending seven hours enclosed with three hundred people. At least two have to be eligible men. Find them.”

Herbert, Egor, Norris, a laptop computer, and a large suitcase filled with worldly goods packed for a year abroad arrived at the Lufthansa check-in counter. (Egor is my father. His real name is George. I really don’t know why I call him Egor. Even though his parents were Russian Jews, he doesn’t much like the fact that many Russians have moved into his apartment building. Whenever the elevator stops, he announces, “The Russians are coming, the Russians are coming!”



Egor makes his life easier by repeatedly saying “Yes, dear” to Herbert and “Listen to your mother” to me.)

Herbert was eyeing all the men standing in line for first class; Egor was sadly contemplating his about-to-depart daughter; Norris was screeching while trying to claw his way out of his cardboard cat carrier. After completing check-in procedures, I tried to bring Norris, the computer, and a backpack to the security area while Egor, noticing that I had too much to carry, took the computer in hand. “They won’t let you through security without a ticket,” I told him.

“No one stops me,” said Egor.

As we approached the security agent, twelve pounds of screaming feline fury made his move. Norris thrust himself against the cardboard enclosure, felt it give way, and lit out for the territories. He was galloping down the restricted area hallway with Egor and me in hot pursuit. Herbert was left standing outside the security gate. As other passengers joined the chase, I could not help noticing that three of them were attractive men wearing wedding rings. When a bewildered Norris suddenly stopped abruptly in his tracks, one of the men scooped him up and presented him to me with his ringed hand. I kissed him. (I mean Norris, not the man. While doing so, I felt disappointed that Norris is a cat rather than a frog. Norris would never turn into a prince. Too bad. If this sleek, gray, well-traveled lover of gourmet-brand cat food ever became human, he would resemble Cary Grant.) After I contained Norris



in my backpack, Egor and I calmed ourselves and made our way to the boarding lounge.

My flight was called. As I kissed Egor good-bye, a hysterical airport security agent approached us. “Sir, this is a restricted area. You cannot be here. You have broken the law. Come with me immediately.”

“Get on the plane,” Egor insistently told me.

I flew all the way to Germany clutching a backpack containing a pouting cat and worrying that my father, wearing a pale blue leisure suit and sunglasses, would be sent to Rikers Island. I also imagined that Herbert, who had neither a driver’s license nor cash, would spend eternity checking out men in the Lufthansa check-in area. Despite this situation, there was no turning back in the taxiing plane.

Norris pawed at the backpack. “Calm down. Don’t worry. You’ll be okay,” I said to the pack. The entire population of row twenty-two was wondering why a perfectly respectable looking person was addressing a backpack. I suppose they assumed that “all kinds” depart from New York. This assumption failed to suffice when the flight attendant served dinner and I proceeded to feed half my portion to the pack. “What do you have in there?” asked the woman seated next to me. Norris peeked out, blinked his yellow eyes, and meowed hello. Row twenty-two was charmed. The woman offered him some of her microwaved rubber chicken. Norris, who eats almost anything, accepted.



Norris knows all about self-presentation. He is, after all, an official Fulbright feline. I recalled the note I received from Klaus Weiss, chief of the German Fulbright Commission's American Program Unit:

Dear Frau Dr. Lear:

Your reservation on Lufthansa is confirmed. Your cat's reservation on Lufthansa is also confirmed.

Sincerely,

Klaus Weiss

Chief, American Program Unit

At the conclusion of the uneventful flight, I was met by Ulrike Wiener, an assistant professor in the English department at my host university, Universität Rottingen. Before taking me to my apartment, she insisted that I have breakfast in her home. Despite my jet lag, I complied. After securing Norris in Ulrike's bathroom, I attempted to resolve what had troubled me during the flight.

"Ulrike, may I use your phone?" I inquired. "I have to find out if my father is incarcerated on Rikers Island and if my mother has become a bag lady living in a Lufthansa lounge."

All was well in Forest Hills. I reported to Herbert that I had not managed to meet a husband on the plane.

3

The Spy Who Didn't Love Me

Ulrrike drove Norris and me to the apartment that would become our Rottingen home. We managed to move all my possessions from car to curb. A young woman followed by a large German shepherd approached. As the dog barked at the backpack, a scream emerged from within it. When I went to Norris's rescue for the second time in less than twenty-four hours, the dog jumped on me. His head hit my chin. "My dental bridge is broken—and I can't speak German," I thought in panic. Thankfully, my teeth remained intact. I was merely momentarily stunned. The woman introduced herself as Brigitte Therondopolous-Klein.



Brigitte, obviously of Greek and German ancestry, a twenty-one-year-old student, was (along with her parents) my neighbor and would become my friend. Her dog answered to Geronimo.

Ulrike and Brigitte helped me drag my possessions into the apartment. Norris finally had a chance to use the kitty litter. After spending fifteen minutes acclimating to my new home, I devoted attention to Herbert's prime directive: husband hunting. I certainly had world enough and time. Classes at Rottingen did not start for another two weeks. One of my Blackhole colleagues had given me the Heidelberg address of her boyfriend's brother, Mark Slade. She became uncomfortable when I asked her what Mark did in Germany. "I suppose I shouldn't tell you this but, well, he's a spy. How do you feel about going on a blind date with a spy?" she asked. Although Herbert had never told me to marry a spy, I, nonetheless, replied that I would like to meet Mark.

I dialed his number. "Hi. This is Sondra, a colleague of your brother's girlfriend. I was glad when she said you would like to hear from me. Well, I have just arrived in Rottingen, located just down the Neckar River a piece from Heidelberg. Do you want to get together?"

"Sure, Sondra. You're invited to Heidelberg."

"Where should we meet?"

"How about inside the Heidelberg *Bahnhof*?"

"Fine. How will I know you?" How was I to recognize a spy who wished to meet me in a *Bahnhof*? I



thought of suggesting a code word. Any literary-theory term would do. I imagined approaching numerous male strangers in the Heidelberg *Bahnhof* and earnestly and clearly whispering “*jouissance*.” However, because the code-word idea was truly too gauche, I rejected it in favor of an alternative plan.

“Mark, I’ll wear a trench coat and sunglasses. Since few people use sunglasses in October, you will be sure to recognize me. And just to be certain that we do not miss each other, I’ll stand in front of the newspaper store.”

During my stay in Heidelberg, I would have the opportunity happily to entrust Norris to Brigitte and Geronimo. I told Brigitte that if she cat-sat for a year, I would take her to Paris. The trip was not an exorbitant compensation. I planned to make extensive use of the Fulbright funds that enabled grantees to travel to give lectures. For the present, though, I focused upon my rather short train trip to Heidelberg. Upon arrival, I staked out a location with a good view of the newspaper store, unbuttoned my trench coat, and nervously touched my sunglasses. My heart sank when I saw an obese man lingering by the store. “Okay, so the United States government is now employing fat spies. A fat spy could still be a nice person. I can’t stand up my colleague’s boyfriend’s brother,” I muttered. I positioned myself in front of the alleged fat spy. As I tried to understand how he could fail to notice his contact, he merely glanced at me and walked away. Then, I heard a questioning voice. “Sondra?”



The tall, blond, blue-eyed questioner wore tight black jeans, black boots, a shirt with the first three buttons open, a trench coat, and sunglasses. This particular 007 was a ten. I expected a German um-pah band to appear and play appropriate music to signal a Marlboro man's presence.

"The name is Slade. Mark Slade. Lovely to meet you, Sondra. I'm having some friends over. Please join us." I tried to remain calm as we approached his black Jaguar convertible. Was the car an ejection seat-equipped Bond-mobile? Would Goldfinger pursue us? Would I become a dead golden girl? I could just see Blackhole State University administrators solving budget problems after claiming my gold paint-covered dead body. I quickly reassured myself that this event would not happen; I was not the dead-golden-girl type. Goldfinger only involved himself with thin shik-sas. Luckily, I could stand to lose eight and three-fourth pounds.

I engaged Mark in small talk. "I'm so glad you chose to drive along the river. The *Schloss* on the hill is certainly beautiful." Further kibitzing came to the rescue during the trip to his apartment. When I ventured within, men resembling secret-service agents greeted me. Their government jargon was more arcane than literary theory—and they never mentioned their profession. I realized that I was in an apartment filled with spies. This conclusion was perfectly reasonable. My friends are poststructuralists; Mark's friends are spies.



The spies were very cordial, offering such useful information as when in a foreign airport, conceal your American citizenship and always keep all identification cards. Their conversation about combat aircraft and international hot spots bored me, though. I'm interested in Cixous, not the C-15 (or whatever particular letters and numbers designate combat planes); in Kristeva, not the Kremlin; in Irigaray, not Iraq. Mercifully, I was once again seated in the Jaguar.

“It was certainly a lovely afternoon, Mark. I hope you noticed that I never asked what you do for a living. Let's make a deal. If you don't ask me about my profession, I won't ask you about yours.” I didn't want Mark to know that I am a feminist theorist. Despite my discretion, he never called. I had, somehow, blown my cover.

4

Slaughterhouse One

I, as usual, distracted myself from my failed husband hunt by becoming immersed in scholarly work. It was late October and the German term had begun. Ulrike introduced me to my new colleagues. “Frau Dr. Lear, I would like you to meet Herr Professor Dr. Himmler Hundsnort and Herr Dr. Adolf Schweinshank.”

“Lovely to make your acquaintance, Herr Professor Dr. Hundsnort and Herr Dr. Schweinshank.”

“Thank you, Frau Dr. Lear,” they said in unison.

Since I could use the time German academics took to articulate people’s titles to complete a book proposal, I failed to understand how they ever accomplish anything. Productivity is obviously not important in German departments of English. And, as far as I can tell, German universities are paradises for male professors



and restricted territories for women who wish to become professors. Only two women in Germany are full professors of English! Despite this dearth of female professors, German English departments are filled with hordes of feisty female students clamoring to study feminist theory. The men's solution: import transient American faculty. Feminist Fulbright grantees helped to ensure that English departments in German universities would remain male bastions. Such was the politics influencing Hundsnort and Schweinshank's decision to invite me to Rottingen.

These men reminded me of a Laurel and Hardy team. Hundsnort, in his late sixties, was fat and jovial; Schweinshank, in his early forties, was thin and dour. Hundsnort was about to retire as professor and department head; Schweinshank was going to be his successor. (No woman had a chance to fill the position.) This situation did not bode well for me. While Hundsnort was rather fatherly, Schweinshank viewed me, a woman whose *vita* was longer than his, as a threat.

Hundsnort, at least, was merely retiring—not dying. Not so for the person who headed the department where I'd held my first German Fulbright. He expired after purposefully smashing his car into a truck on the autobahn. Although I did aggravate two German department heads to death, their respective literal departures from professional life had nothing to do with me. Norris has killed six sofas; I have not killed



six (I include Blackholeians in this count) department heads.

Even though Hundschnort and Schweinshank were not really prepared to respect a female colleague, they initially tried to be cordial. Perhaps they sensed their similarity to the Native Americans decimated by European microorganisms. Their male milieu precluded acquiring resistance to a savvy American Jewish New York feminist who had survived a tenure battle—a person who never remains silent in the face of sexism.

Hundschnort's first attempt to engage me in conversation was absurd, not sexist. "Frau Dr. Lear," he said, "I am happy to inform you that your office does not face the slaughterhouse." This was certainly not the right thing to say to a Jew in Germany, especially one who does not eat red meat. But I too was on my best behavior. "Slaughterhouse?" I asked calmly and quizzically.

Ulrike, sensing my discomfort, explained that, since a pig slaughterhouse was located behind the English department, pig screams were sometimes audible in the morning. "But don't worry," Ulrike continued to explain. "As Herr Professor Dr. Hundschnort said, your office faces in the opposite direction from the slaughterhouse. The slaughter should not bother you." This information was reassuring enough. So, I was confronted with one slaughterhouse. One slaughterhouse I could live with. Hundschnort and Schweinshank were another matter, however.

5

The Ultimatum; or, Springtime for Hundschnort

The phone in my apartment rang. I picked it up and heard a familiar voice. “Hello. Sondra? This is your mother, Herbert. Is anything new?”

“No.”

“No? Nothing is new?”

“No. Nothing is new.”

This conversation served to inform Herbert that I was still not married. It must by now be obvious that Herbert is no ordinary mother. She is more onerous than the mother who encompasses the entire Manhattan sky in Woody Allen’s *New York Stories*. Allen’s depiction of a monstrous mother is small potatoes



compared to Herbert; her image stretches from Forest Hills to Rottingen. Perhaps, since Geronimo seemed to discern her presence, animals' ability to sense impending earthquakes functions in relation to Herbert, too. Geronimo was playing outside my window while I was talking. I noticed that as soon as I began the conversation he whined, crouched under a bush, and put both his front paws over his head. Norris, who is accustomed to Herbert, did not react similarly.

No matter where I go on Earth, Herbert is only a phone call away. (Even if the University of Mars, recognizing my worth as a science fiction critic, offered me a Fulbright lectureship, I still would not be safe from Herbert. Where there are universities, there are telephones.) I cut Herbert short. "Gotta go. I have an appointment with Hundschnort."

"Hundschnort? Who is Hundschnort? Is Hundschnort a man? Is Hundschnort married? Keep your eyes open on the way to campus. You never know where you can meet someone." I hung up and made my way to the university. Upon arrival, I met the female instructor assigned to be my officemate and the American male instructor who had been given his own office. My feminist antenna detected static, the signal that I was encountering a non-kosher situation. In Germany, a country that glorifies rank and title, I should not be sharing an office with a woman while a man of lower rank enjoys a private office. Having PMS did not enhance my reaction.

While standing in my shared office contemplating



how to respond, I heard voices in the hall and a knock on the door. I opened it and encountered twenty-five riled feminist students. One of them stated the group's concern: "Our course books are not in the bookstore. We want our books. Where are our books?" I knew nothing about ordering books in Germany. And, even if I did, my German was too poor to solve the problem. "I can't help you. Go ask Hundschnort or Schweinshank for help," I said as I closed the door in their faces. When I had PMS, sexism coupled with a group that I would later call the piranha students from hell did not sit well with me.

I decided to confront Hundschnort about the office situation. "Herr Professor Dr. Hundschnort, I have come to discuss an untenable circumstance. I refuse to share an office with a woman while a male of lower rank possesses his own office."

"Frau Dr. Lear, I do not see why this is a problem. I assigned you to an office with a female officemate because women like to chat."

"I did not come to Germany to chat. I am here to teach and to write. I demand to be treated in accordance with my rank."

"I am sorry, Frau Dr. Lear. I still do not understand." Knowing that it was time to get tough, I played my sole card. "Hundschnort, either give me my own office or I will be on the morning's first flight to New York." This was a dangerous move. If Hundschnort called my bluff, because I was on leave without pay



from Blackhole, I would be forced to spend a year living with Herbert and Egor. Further, Norris would never forgive another transatlantic flight so soon. He would insist that cats are not meant to be frequent fliers.

But the deck was stacked in my favor. Hundsnort knew just what the feminist students would do to him if he canceled Universität Rottingen's first Women's Studies course. In addition, he did not want to lose a faculty member whose salary was drawn from Fulbright money—even if she was a feminist. I had won a private office in which to complete my book. I had also irreparably alienated Hundsnort.

6

Garbage

I went to the lobby snack bar in Rottingen's Humanities Building to contemplate, over coffee, the Hundschnort disaster. A kind-looking, attractive man sat next to me. "*Sie scheinen traurig zu sein. Kann ich behilflich sein?*"

"Ich spreche kein Deutsch."

"Parlez-vous français?"

"Très peu. Je suis Sondra Lear, un professeur américain."

"I am Marcel Moulinoux and I teach in the philosophy department. I speak a little English. What is the matter?" Situations like this make me regret studying at SUNY Buffalo—an English Ph.D. program without a foreign language requirement. I can only communicate in my native tongue: fluent, direct New York English.



“Hundschnort hates me and twenty-five piranha students from hell attacked me.”

“Hundschnort? I have been at odds with Hundschnort for years. He always adds to my problems.”

“What are your problems?”

“It is not easy to be a French person employed by a German university. And my department does not value my field.”

“What is your field?”

“Garbage.”

“Garbage?”

“I study the philosophy of how people put garbage to constructive use.” I knew I had found a kindred spirit. For the first time in my career, I encountered someone whose field is more problematic than my own. (Queer theory had yet to attain prominence.) My Blackhole colleagues had never made a secret of their opinion that feminist science fiction is garbage. Marcel’s field is truly garbage. I knew that this man could be a friend, a soul mate, an ally against Hundschnort. In other words, I wanted to sleep with him.

“Sondra,” he began. I was relieved finally not to be called Frau Dr. Lear. “I have some interesting books in my office. The office affords a better atmosphere for conversation than this sterile cafeteria. Why not come and join me there? We can continue to chat.” I immediately agreed. When we arrived at his office, I imagined that he would turn toward me, take me in his



arms, and kiss me passionately. This hoped-for pass did not come to pass. Instead, when he opened his office door, a sight I never expected to encounter within a German university swept me off my feet: a messy office. Huge plants and candles filled the room. Indian scarves hung on the walls. Incense cones lined the desk. A bong rested against the bookshelf. After two months in Germany, the sight of disorder was welcome. “My colleagues do not approve of my office furnishing,” Marcel said.

He truthfully wanted to chat. Instead of kissing me, he described his affair with a female student and his subsequent divorce. Marcel’s wife had also slept with this student. Now, due to Rottingen’s serious housing shortage, the three of them resided together.

So much for my thoughts about passion. Because of Marcel’s complicated domestic life, I decided against becoming further involved. He drove me to my apartment and I thanked him for his kindness. The phone rang. “Is anything new?”

“Yes. I met an attractive French professor who is an expert on garbage. His former wife is sleeping with his female lover. They all live in the same house.”

“This man is not for you. Did you hear from the spy?”

“No.”

“Continue to keep your eyes open.” I hung up on Herbert and thanked God that Hundsnort had not called my bluff.

7

Chickens

I have already mentioned that I do not like red meat. Since Baden-Württemberg is not known for its fish, I was relegated to eating chickens. Before taking Norris to the vet and myself to the doctor, I enjoyed a huge portion of chicken cacciatore at my favorite Rottingen restaurant. (Although the restaurant is located near the English department, like my office, it also does not face the slaughterhouse.) Norris and I needed medical attention. I was suffering from a pollen allergy. The gum above his left fang was inflamed. Aside from this problem, he was getting along well: Brigitte loved him; he had cowed Geronimo; and he routinely hung out with a group of neighborhood *Katzen*.

After lunch I returned home, put Norris in his new—and secure—carrier, boarded the town bus, and



headed for the vet's office. When I tried to calm Norris, the bus passengers wondered why I was speaking English to what appeared to be a satchel. Their gazes were just as quizzical as the ones which greeted me during the flight to Germany. At least this time, Norris did not escape from his carrier. We reached the vet's office without incident.

A woman, who was obviously quite sad, sat in the waiting room. She was clutching a cardboard box. "What do you have in there?" I asked her.

"A chicken. *Mein Huhn ist sehr krank*. He is my favorite chicken. I am so upset. I do not know what to do." While trying to forget how much I had enjoyed chicken cacciatore at lunch, I attempted to be supportive.

"I've heard that this vet is excellent. Surely, veterinary medicine can now do marvelous things for chickens. There must be extraordinary breakthroughs relating to chicken cures." When the vet's receptionist called the woman, she carried the box into the examination room. After what seemed to be a rather long time, she returned, looking even sadder—sans box.

"My chicken is kaput," she said. In a few short hours, I had gone from enjoying cacciatore to authoring a requiem for a heavy weight (the box was large) kaput chicken. The woman, just before she left the office, thanked me for being sympathetic during her bereavement.

When it was Norris's turn to see the vet, I was shocked to discover that she could not speak English.



Even though I am a professor, my ability to communicate Norris's problem was not much better than his. Resorting to pantomime, I pushed his whiskers down (whenever I do so, he automatically raises his upper lip) and pointed to an inflamed fang gum. The vet gave me a bottle of pills. How could I explain that Norris hated pills? He once held a pill in his mouth for ten minutes before spitting it out at me. I began to impersonate a stubborn spitting cat; the vet gave me liquid medicine.

I repeated the bus cat carrier discourse scene, deposited Norris in my apartment, and headed for a doctor who treated allergy-afflicted humans. Since this doctor spoke English, I was spared the necessity of imitating different varieties of German pollen—a role beyond my acting ability. He explained that scratch tests were necessary to discern the cause of my allergic reaction. I stretched out my arm. He wrote numbers on it that reached from my wrist to my elbow.

Although whenever I swam in Germany, I never doubted that the swimming pool showers were real, I was bothered by the sight of a German doctor inscribing numbers on my arm. "This will not hurt a bit, Frau Dr. Lear. There is no reason to be nervous. Just try to retain the numbers for at least three days," he advised. I merely nodded in assent.

The events of this day were not yet over. I had promised to present an evening lecture to the English department's faculty colloquium. Before the lecture, I briefly returned home to lace tuna fish with liquid



antibiotic in order to medicate Norris. (Norris could not, under any circumstance, resist tuna fish.) Tuna-fish mission accomplished, I braved pouring rain while making my way to the department. I was soaked. I had numbers painted on my arm. I had to face Hund-schnort and Schweinshank.

I presented “The Feminist Anglo-American Critical Empire Strikes Back,” one of my typical essays on feminist theory and lesbian planets. The female faculty members, all untenured, could not shield me from the male professors’ hostile reactions.

I reached the portion of the essay that cites Angela Carter’s *Passion of New Eve*. I read: “Feminist fabulators refresh embattled feminists by using language artfully to create power fantasies and to play (sometimes vengefully) with patriarchy. Carter creates one of these power fantasies when she describes a four-breasted lesbian fertility goddess cutting off a man’s genitals: ‘I am the Great Parricide. I am the Castratrix of the Phallocentric Universe’ [says the goddess]. . . . Oh, the dreadful symbolism of that knife! To be castrated with a phallic symbol! . . . She cut off all my genital appendages with a single blow, caught them in her other hand and tossed them to Sophia, who slipped them into the pocket of her shorts.” Hund-schnort, who viewed me as the Castratrix of the Phallocentric Universe, had tears in his eyes. I was later told that he cried because he saw no difference between the description in Carter’s



novel and my beliefs. He saw me as a bitch who had raised the castrating knife to him.

The “boys” expressed their disapproval of feminist theory during the question period. One questioner was adamant in his disagreement with Cixous. As he ranted, it became obvious that he had never read Cixous. I have no respect for someone who publicly attacks a feminist eminence he has not bothered to read. I made short shrift of him. “You are unfamiliar with the text you attack. Furthermore, you should not attack me. I am not responsible for French feminist theory. If you have a complaint, why don’t you just phone H el ene. She, after all, resides in a neighboring country.”

Schweinshank raised his hand. Since he was the only person in the room to do so, I was forced to acknowledge him. His attack was framed in the exact terms of a negative review of my last book. I used the direct approach to unmask his method: “Herr Dr. Schweinshank, your point is taken from a recent review. Surely, you have the ability to state your objection in a more original manner.”

I had managed to remain calm while weathering this unpleasantness. It was not a bad performance for an assertive New York Jew who had been rain-soaked after having had numbers inscribed on her arm. Yet, I was not in good spirits when, at the conclusion of my lecture, I decided to seek refuge in my hard-won, solitary



office. There was a knock on the door. (In German universities, one never keeps an office door open.) A wholesome-looking American woman appeared. She was in her late twenties and sported a terrific Dorothy Hamill haircut. “I’m Susan Straus, an instructor who specializes in business writing. I saw you walking toward your office and I decided to tell you that you handled yourself exceedingly well and I think your paper is super. I really enjoyed the lecture.” Although Susan was what I could never be (Midwestern and sweet), I wanted to become her friend. I invited her to my apartment. She accepted and arrived the following afternoon accompanied by Melissa Johnson, a black Fulbright student who was also from the Midwest. While Melissa and Susan were making a fuss over Norris, the conversation turned to the varieties of American food unavailable in Germany. The numbers that had by now worn off my arm (via a normal shower) thankfully could not serve as a topic of conversation.

“I would give anything for some peanut butter and marshmallows,” said Melissa.

“And Cheerios and Fritos,” added Susan. Although I never eat junk food, I knew that Norris would appreciate Pounce and Tender Vittles. Susan made it possible to grant Norris’s implied wish. She explained that all the American food our hearts could desire was stocked in an army-base supermarket located a mere twenty minutes from Rottingen. Then, becoming crestfallen, she added that, to enter the store, it was necessary to show



government I.D. Her disappointment was short-lived. Even long before meeting them, I had followed the spies' advice about keeping I.D. "I once worked for the State Department as an English speaking language escort for visiting foreign dignitaries. I have government I.D. I'll get it from my wallet." My picture appearing next to a bald eagle impressed Melissa and Susan.

These American women were desperate after having spent months without peanut butter, marshmallows, Cheerios, and Fritos. They formulated a plan. "We'll drive to the army base. Sondra, you flash your I.D. at the supermarket guard," said Susan.

"When you flash, act like you belong in the army," suggested Melissa. "Just be calm. Susan and I will pick you up in our getaway car." I had no choice about whether or not to participate in this plan. Susan and Melissa, who were more than a decade my junior, looked up to me as a feminist, a scholar, and an elder. I could not appear to be a big chicken. And, I did want to give Norris some Pounce to compensate for the antibiotic-soaked tuna fish.

At the army base entrance, a black soldier motioned to Susan to stop the car. "Let me see your passports," he said. Melissa whispered that she had forgotten to bring hers. "Okay, we'll just have to proceed and do our best. We'll get through this," Susan said. While Susan and I dutifully presented our passports, Melissa looked the soldier straight in the eye and said, "Brother, I am certainly not German." He waved us through. Thelma



and Louise were not more triumphant than Melissa, Susan, and Sondra.

Susan and Melissa dropped me off in front of the store, said good-bye, and wished me luck. “Remember, just be cool,” Melissa said. Thinking I was too old to be cool, I instead recited Sydney Carton’s last words, which calmed me as I flashed my I.D., and walked ahead. Success. I was in like Flint. I felt like a contestant on *Supermarket Sweep*—even if I did have to pay for all the items I gathered. It was necessary to do a lot of gathering. Susan and Melissa’s four-item list had multiplied beyond reason. I had ten minutes in which to purchase five grocery bags filled with every type of candy, chip, and ice cream known to American consumers. A passage from Alice Walker’s *Temple of My Familiar* came to mind as I attacked the shelves: “Suwelo . . . had a confusing dream about going to the market to get enough food to last him forever, only to discover when he got there that he had nothing with which to transport the mountain of food he chose. . . . There he stood in the Great Supermarket of Life, cartless.” “Cartlessness” was not my problem. The army base store had enough carts for me to transport my mountainous dieter’s nightmare. Never had a trip to the food store been so exciting. If only Mark Slade were present to witness my identification card subterfuge.

Success, though, quickly eluded me. When I emerged from the store, our getaway car was nowhere in sight. As I waited by the curb with my bundles, a soldier



approached and began to chat. “Ma’am y’all been stationed here long? What does your husband do here?” (I recalled that, soon after my arrival on the Blackhole State campus, the university president’s wife had also asked me the latter question.) I knew I had to be careful. If I aroused suspicion, I could be charged with purchasing onion-garlic-cheese-flavored Doritos under false pretenses. The accusation could lead to public execution for engaging in chemical warfare. Because I was so scared while contemplating how to answer the soldier’s question, the cavalry was the only military unit that entered my mind. Our getaway car, thankfully, was approaching. “Here come my sisters. Gotta go. Bye.” Melissa was the only person in the car. “Floor it,” I said as I panicked because Melissa, of course, did not look like someone who could be my biological sister. I threw the groceries and myself in the back seat.

We picked up Susan, who had ventured away to investigate another store. When asked what I had purchased for my own use, I replied, “Pounce, Tender Vittles, and some chickens.” Melissa and Susan were not impressed. Regardless, they had enough junk food to last for months; Norris and I had vittles. This excursion constituted my first and last army-base break-in.

8

Into the Woods

The details of the army-base foray at once puzzled and fascinated Brigitte. “What is a Fritos?” (She pronounced the brand name “fry-toes.”) What is a marshmallow?”

“You don’t know about Fritos and marshmallows?”

“No.” This situation was worse than when, during my previous Fulbright, I visited Paris at Christmas with a German colleague. (He is an attractive male; he did not marry me.) He had never heard of “Rudolf the Red-Nosed Reindeer.” I sang the entire song as we sat on a Versailles-bound train. Since my companion was not impressed by the shiny nose, the reindeer games, and the sleigh-guiding, I was not about again to fail to communicate excitement for American culture. I wondered if junk food could succeed where Rudolf had failed. I took heart after remembering that during



World War II, GIs distributing chocolate bars—not GIs singing about reindeer—excited young Germans. “Brigitte, I cannot allow you to go through life ignorant vis-à-vis Fritos and marshmallows. I am an educator; I will educate. What are you doing tomorrow evening?”

“I am going out with Antonio, my boyfriend. You know, the waiter my father hates. The one who speaks only Italian. But I can now say about twenty-five Italian words, so the relationship is taking on greater depth. I cannot break this date. But I will meet you in the afternoon.”

“It’s a deal.” I phoned Susan. “Do you have any remaining marshmallows and Fritos?”

“Of course. I have thirty bags of each, and, as you know, we bought them yesterday.”

“Bring some over. I need American junk food to eradicate an international cultural vacuum.” It was time for my scheduled appointment with Brigitte. As soon as she and Geronimo arrived, I extended an open Fritos bag. She came. She saw. She crunched. “These are great. One cannot possibly eat a single Fritos. Now I understand why Americans are so fat.” Geronimo put his ears back and placed his paw on the bag. He too began to crunch. My palm was soon covered with salt and dog saliva. I unfortunately had no camera at hand to record what was probably Germany’s first Frito-eating dog. (Norris, in contrast, expressed no interest in corn chips.) “Must I try these things you call marshmallows? They certainly do not look very interesting,” Brigitte said.



“According to the tradition of my country, marshmallows have to be eaten in the woods. There are some woods across the street. We’re going to do this properly. Let’s go.” Brigitte, Geronimo, a package of kitchen matches, and I went into the woods. “First we have to get two sticks. Then we put the marshmallows on the sticks.”

“Are you making this procedure up?”

“No. I’m not that talented.”

“Now what?”

“We set fire to the marshmallows.” I held match to marshmallow. Brigitte was incredulous. As I looked at the smoking sticks, I thought that the sign emblazoned with the word *verboden* we had just passed referred to marshmallows. I was reminded of the time when I first smoked cigarettes in the Forest Hills High School second-floor girls’ bathroom. I offered the skewered round black char to Brigitte. “You’re supposed to eat this.”

“What? You’re kidding.”

“No, I’m not. I wouldn’t lie. Would I ask you to eat something harmful? It’s normal for Americans to go into the woods and eat this burned stuff.” Because of our female bond, Brigitte believed me. She tasted the blackened marshmallow. “I do not mean to be insulting, but I would much rather eat pastry in a German cafe.” She was right, of course. The first time I saw German pastry in a cafe window, my reaction coincided



with what could be expected if naked men, rather than just desserts, were on display. It seemed that the black marshmallows were no more successful than Rudolph's red nose. "Sondra, I so much enjoyed this walk. I will never forget it. Let's go back home. I want to bring some marshmallows and Fritos to my parents."

"Sounds good. But be sure to watch out for the Frito Bandito. He has been outlawed in America for not being politically correct. But you never can tell. The Frito Bandito could strike in Rottingen."

The phone rang as we entered my apartment. "Oh no. That must be my mother. Please answer the phone and tell her I'm not home."

"Frau Dr. Lear's residence. Brigitte Therondopoulus-Klein, cat-sitter, speaking."

"This is Herbert, Sondra's mother. I'm calling because Oprah is on with mothers who are afraid their daughters will never get married. I want Sondra to hear this discussion. I want her to know that there are other mothers who share my concerns."

"I am very sorry, Frau Herbert, but Sondra is not at home."

"Do you have a tape recorder? I can hold the phone out to the television and you can tape *Oprah*. I know this is an expensive transatlantic call. But Oprah's discussion about marriage is important."

"There is no tape recorder here. But I will give Sondra the message. Ciao." Brigitte turned to me. "Your



mother wanted me to tape *Oprah*. What is *Oprah*? Is *Oprah* better than marshmallows? What are you going to do about your mother?”

“According to the tradition of my country, we take our mothers into the woods . . .”

“I understand your feelings. I am at odds with my father concerning my boyfriend. I really like Antonio—despite the fact that my father believes it is unseemly for the daughter of a German professor to date an Italian waiter. I wish I could move out of my parents’ apartment and be alone with my beloved Antonio. As it is now, I can’t even come home late. Geronimo barks and awakens my parents.”

“I have an idea. I will be doing a lot of lecturing and traveling. You can use my apartment when you are in cat-sitting mode. Norris would enjoy the company. Since I don’t want to give you the only key I have, you and Antonio can climb into my apartment via the back window. Your parents will never know.” I felt like a traitor to my generation. Jasmine Flor, my Blackhole colleague and a best friend, often complained about the exploits of Annie, her daughter who is Brigitte’s age. I had commiserated with Jasmine after Annie’s party guests punched holes in the Flors’ floors. And here I was inviting young lovers who could not even speak to each other to climb through my window. I attribute this situation to my efforts to differ from my mother.

Norris padded into the room. He very obviously knew that I was discussing traveling, an activity he



viewed as abandonment. His tail was perpendicular to his back; a sign was attached to it. “Hugo? Hugo? Hell no. You can’t go. Hell no. You can’t go,” it read.

“Brigitte, Norris is participating in another American custom: picketing.”

9

Heat

Susan phoned to suggest a second excursion. “Now that we’ve recovered from the American army base, let’s go to one of those great German swimming pools.” Although I knew that Germany has many elaborate pools replete with contraptions such as squirting fountains and bubbling hot and cold water, I was not prepared for the particular organic contraptions I would encounter at this pool.

I could easily accept women and men sharing the same locker room. After all, I had previously witnessed naked people strolling through the English Garden in Munich. I remember noticing a particular stroller, a naked man who carried a shoulder bag. Seeing one walking naked person is much worse than seeing a



naked group. I was glad to learn that, at the S-Bahn-station located nearest to the English Garden, nudity is verboten. Maybe my relief was somehow attributable to my Jewish Puritan ancestors—or, to my contemporary American upbringing. When I accompany Herbert and Egor to their Atlantic Beach beach club on Long Island, they never fail to chastise me for wearing revealing bathing suits. I respond by describing the nudity in Munich. “You are not in Munich anymore,” they always say.

And now I was in a *Schwimmbad* located near Rottingen. I was nervous because I really did not want anyone I knew (especially male colleagues and students) to see me attired in a bathing suit. I hesitantly followed Susan into the sauna.

“I don’t know what you are going to think about this,” said Susan.

“Why not?” My question was immediately answered when she opened the sauna door. All the sauna users were naked.

“Sondra, we have to take off our bathing suits. It would be weird not to. If we’re not naked, we’ll seem like voyeurs.”

“Okay, I suppose you’re right,” I said as I removed my suit. I was almost numb. I had never seen so many penises in my entire life. The sight of wall-to-wall penises was strange. I was not sure that I was enjoying the view. Nonetheless, I followed Susan into the sauna. We sat with a group of naked men.



“I can’t believe this. I just can’t. I’m not used to seeing so many penises. I think I’m suffering from penis overload,” I whispered.

“Shhh. These people all speak English. Sondra, please.”

“I won’t say anything else. But what does one do in here if one meets a person one knows?”

“I’m not sure. I need some air. It’s too hot. I’m going out for a few minutes.” I was left alone with the German penises.

The sauna door abruptly opened. A stricken-looking Susan entered. “Someone we know *is* coming. Since you can’t take cover, brace yourself.” The owners of the German penises chuckled. They were eager to see what a Puritanical American woman would do when publicly and directly confronted with a penis attached to a familiar person. A sauna offers nowhere to run and nowhere to hide. Susan clutched my hand and closed her eyes. The door opened. Hundschnort entered—naked. “Lovely to see you, Frau Dr. Lear.”

“Likewise, Himmler.” I saw no need to use formal titles and surnames—to acknowledge phallic power—when confronted with a penis. I somehow remained unruffled. I could just see my next reference from Norman Holland: “This charming young woman from Queens has learned to live with German penises.” (Norm’s reference *vis-à-vis* penises carries more weight than his aforementioned one about cows. Norm, a



Manhattan-born psychoanalytic critic, knows more about penises than about cows.) I was not so composed when I returned home. I reached for the phone. “Herbert, I was with Hundsnort, and we were both naked. Susan too.”

10

Surprise, Disguise

I was praying for a German telephone-company strike. Herbert was in rare form. “Hello, Sondra. I just called the Hundschnort residence in Rottingen. Hundschnort is married. I know because, before I hung up, a female voice answered and said, ‘*Hier, Frau Hundschnort.*’ Don’t waste your time with Hundschnort. Look for someone else.” Herbert could not understand that, even if Hundschnort became the last man on Earth, I could never be romantically interested in him. According to Herbert’s worldview, men fall into one of two categories: available and unavailable. Herbert aside, the now-retired Hundschnort no longer played a part in my life. Schweinshank was the present department head. He and I were not, to say the least, enjoying one another’s company. He knocked on my office door.



“Frau Dr. Lear. This is Herr Dr. Schweinshank. Are you in there?”

“No. I’m not in here. I’m out.”

“Open up. Or I will huff and puff and blow the door down.” I let the little pig in and imagined him joining his fellows in the slaughterhouse behind the English department. (A psychoanalytic interpretative approach to fairy tales is not necessary here. The obvious meaning of my wish: I do not suffer patriarchal-pig big bad wolves gladly.) “Frau Dr. Lear, I want you to administer a *Zwischenpruefung* and I want you to teach a seminar with two other members of the department.”

“I am not familiar enough with your system to administer an exam leading to a terminal degree. Nor do I know enough German to read the exam. And, since the seminar you want me to team-teach will be offered in German, I certainly cannot contribute to it. Obviously, you are asking me to direct the exam because you lack a German-speaking feminist who can accomplish this duty. Because senior faculty members must teach your department’s seminars, you are trying to use me. Your attempt is a travesty that adversely affects students. Under no circumstance will I participate in this unprofessional undertaking. You will just have to hire a senior German feminist.”

“If you fail to comply, you are no longer welcome to teach in this department. I will cancel all your classes.”

“I will not comply.” I phoned Klaus Weiss at the Fulbright Commission and explained the situation.



The Commission administrators ruled that I was absolutely right. They changed my teaching grant into a research grant. Schweinshank's evil intentions became an unexpected boon. While I was free of him, he had to contend with the outraged students who daily appeared at his office to protest the loss of their feminist classes. They incessantly phoned his home, picketed outside his office, and hung protest signs printed on sheets in the Humanities Building lobby. I was almost beginning to feel sorry for Schweinshank. My sympathy became short-lived when I received a call from Susan.

"I heard that Schweinshank is going to the first meeting of your former large feminist-theory lecture class tomorrow. He plans to tell the students that the class will be canceled because you simply quit and that you don't care about them."

"What? This is terrible. What should I do? What do you suggest?"

"I'm not really sure what to say. I don't see what you can do—short of appearing in a disguise and telling the truth." Although Susan was joking, I took her suggestion seriously. I approached my closet with an eye toward creating a disguise. I noticed a black outfit consisting of pants, shirt, and a long dramatic flowing jacket. The perfect costume came to mind when I saw a pink sequined scarf. I would go to my lecture class dressed as a Turkish woman.



The next day I donned the black outfit, wrapped the scarf around my head and neck, and wore sunglasses. The reflection I saw in the mirror looked nothing like me. As I walked to campus, the Turkish women I encountered smiled in sisterhood. I saw Brigitte sitting on the steps outside the Humanities Building. I stood in front of her. She showed no sign of recognition.

“It’s me. Sondra.”

“Oh my God! I can’t believe it’s you. Why are you dressed like that?”

“I’m off to fight Schweinshank.”

“Do you need me and Geronimo to help?”

“No. I have to settle this score myself. But wish me luck.”

Next, I tested Susan’s response to the disguise. I knocked on her classroom door and entered. She was standing at the blackboard explaining how to write a memo. She looked at me questioningly, but without recognition. “Oh, I’m sorry. I must have entered the wrong room,” I said. When she recognized my New York accent, her jaw dropped, she put her hand over her face, and she turned her back to the class. I closed the door quietly, made my way to the lecture hall filled with my former students, and took a seat in the middle of the room. The audience was nervous because their teacher was ten minutes late. “*Wo ist Frau Dr. Lear?*” the female student seated next to me asked.



Putting my finger to my lips, I replied, "I am Frau Dr. Lear." The surprised student smiled. Schweinshank entered and approached the lectern. He began to explain that Frau Dr. Lear, because she had no concern for her students, refused to teach. The Turkish grim reaper made her move when a black-clad figure rose from her seat. "*Entschuldigung, ich bin Frau Dr. Lear.*" All eyes focused on me. Schweinshank turned pale and clutched his chest. Although I will never know for sure, I believe an audience of German feminists witnessed a male German English-department head involuntarily engaging in a necessary, and usually private, bodily act. I continued: "It is time for you to tell these students the truth, Schweinshank."

Attempting to regain his composure, Schweinshank said, "Class dismissed." The students began to bang their fists on the desks while chanting, "We want the truth. We want the truth."

"People are making their wishes clear, Schweinshank. We will remain here until they are satisfied." Lacking a means to escape gracefully, Schweinshank had to comply.

"I will agree to speak with you. But, first, will you please take off those sunglasses?"

"Fair enough," I answered while removing the glasses and dramatically unfurling my hair from beneath the scarf. I proceeded to tell the students about Schweinshank's abuse of my position and how he did not intend to hire a senior German feminist. The students



hissed at Schweinshank and applauded me. When I was satisfied that I had won the debate, I said, “Class is *now* dismissed.” Schweinshank had learned the consequences of messing with a Jewish feminist from New York.

My public interchange with Schweinshank served to transform the Rottingen English department. The students felt empowered to voice feminist demands, and they resolved not to desist until their demands were met. For the remainder of my time in Rottingen, when I went about my business in town, students recognized me and expressed their appreciation. Being a feminist pioneer could sometimes be very satisfying. I, however, did not include a description of this particular success in my final report to the Fulbright Commission.

I now had to resort to deception on another front. I picked up the phone and dialed the familiar Forest Hills number. “Herbert, I want you to know that the United States embassy in Bonn has asked me to participate in a government-sponsored experiment. Do you know how scientists monitor people who are deprived of sleep or who are placed in underwater tanks? Well, the government wants to learn what happens when feminist Fulbright professors teaching in German universities are denied opportunities to speak to their mothers. I have to refrain from talking with you and write a report about my feelings.”

“This is what they are using my tax money for? This is an outrage. I’m your mother. I know what’s best for



you. This is ridiculous. How will you get along without my advice?”

“It will be very difficult. But I must serve my country. I cannot say no to an embassy. Please understand that my great sacrifice involves helping America. Bye, now.” When I hung up, I became a proud member of the mother resistance. Free at last. Free at last.

My house phone buzzed. I pressed the response button and heard, “This is Frau Schweinshank. May I please come in?” I let her in.

“In light of all the events that have transpired between you and my husband, you have no reason to view me as a friend or even to trust me. But I just have to tell you what has occurred. When I heard about how you stood up to Adolf, I became inspired. I knew that I must act in kind. After years of unhappiness, using your approach as an example, I decided that I have had enough. In summary: I have filed for divorce. I’m taking the children and returning to my native Holland. You have changed my life. How can I thank you?”

“Well, there is one thing you can do.”

“Name it.”

“Phone my mother and tell her that marriage does not always result in happiness.”



Surprise, Reprise

I watched *Dallas* reruns to combat homesickness. Although “*Guten Tag, Miss Ellie*” and “*Guten Tag, J.R.*” sounded a tad inauthentic, at least I could look at Dallas skyscrapers. *The Golden Girls* fares worse in translation than *Dallas*. Blanche’s southern accent has no German counterpart. Still, I would often watch *The Golden Girls* and think about my Blackhole “family,” my colleagues Jasmine Flor and Rhonda Sorrento. Rhonda conforms to the stable, teacherly Dorothy role; Jasmine, an Arkansas native, certainly acts like the colorful and spunky Blanche. Although I always beg to differ, Rhonda and Jasmine often compare me to Rose. Whenever I begin a story about either my husband hunt or Herbert, Rhonda and Jasmine roll their eyes. (Herbert is always quick to remind me that Sophia is a more neurotic mother than she is.)



Brigitte is now the eye-roller. I often tell her about the similarities between the Therondopolous-Kleins and the Flors. In both families, parents contend with a rebellious daughter, two cats, and a large dog. My stories end with the point that no other friends could ever assume Jasmine and Rhonda's place in my heart.

I was thinking about them when I went to the English department to clear my office. Hundschnort had a similar agenda. Relieved to see him fully clothed, I nodded toward him in the hall. I then heard my office phone and hurried to answer it. I felt ecstatic when I recognized Jasmine's unmistakable Arkansas accent. "I've got news," she said.

"Great. Will I like this news?"

"I'm not sure."

"Well, what is it?"

"Are you sitting down?"

"Yes."

"Are you sure you're sitting down?"

"Yes. Jasmine, please, this is a very long distance call. And I care about your bill."

"Robert and I are getting a divorce." I could not believe what I heard. Jasmine and Robert had a wonderful marriage. I had never detected any trouble between them. Jasmine was the envy of her female students. They coveted her brilliance, her beauty, her wit—and her family. "It's difficult for me to believe that you're getting divorced. But I'm sure that you're doing what's



right for you. Well, as I said, this is an expensive call. It was great to hear from you. Bye.”

“Wait.”

“Wait?”

“Yes. I have more news. I am a lesbian.” I felt as if a boulder had hit my head. Lesbianism, of course, was not problematic for me. I was merely shocked by the radical change in my friend’s life. Although I had conversed with Jasmine on the average of two hours a day for seven years, I had no inkling of this change. I took a deep breath. “Again, I’m sure you’re doing what’s right for you. I wish you well with your decision. Remember the phone bill.”

“There’s more.”

“I can’t take any more. What more can there be?”

“Rhonda is my lover.” I lost control.

“What? Rhonda! For seven years, the three of us spent most of our professional and personal time together. I never noticed any indication that you and Rhonda were in love. When I left Blackhole, you two were having a tiff. And now you are a lesbian couple? How can this be? As I said these words, I recalled the circumstance Rhonda and I had named “the tea-bag incident.” This occurred soon after I returned from my first Fulbright. While I was dunking a tea bag, Rhonda blurted out that, while I was away, she had realized she was a lesbian. When I heard this news, the tea bag abruptly fell from my hand and created a big



splash. I often thought that my absence from Blackhole had contributed to Rhonda's decision. History was repeating itself. The thought crossed my mind that I could never, under any circumstance, accept a third Fulbright. If I did, what would Rhonda and Jasmine do for an encore?

Jasmine's voice interrupted my thoughts. "I had been aware of my attraction to Rhonda for a long time. One day, I looked at Robert, announced my feelings, terminated my twenty-year marriage, and walked out of our house. I walked into Rhonda's house."

"I'm in shock. I need an adjustment period. I don't know what to say. I can't cope with this information in one phone call. I need to sit down. I am sitting down. I need to take a walk. I can't keep you on the phone while sputtering like this."

"Wait. Don't hang up. There's more."

"Two 'mores' ago I told you that I couldn't take any more."

"Rhonda and I are leaving Blackhole and moving to the University of Montana." Short, piercing screams emanated from my throat. Hundschnort and Schweinshank were concerned. Schweinshank, in some version of colloquial German, asked Hundschnort, "Why is Frau Dr. Lear screaming in her office?"

"I don't know. But, luckily, this does not involve us and we are not in there with her. Let's send Ulrike into Sondra's office on a fact-finding mission. This mission calls for a woman. Fortunately, we hired a junior one."



I brushed past Ulrike, stood in the middle of the hall, and shouted: “My colleagues are going! My colleagues are going! My best friends have become lesbians with each other and they’re moving to Montana.” Although Hundsnort and Schweinshank themselves had never been deserted by Montana-bound lesbians, they finally understood the reason for one of my reactions.

When I returned to my apartment, I immediately updated Brigitte with the latest news. “Remember when I told you that my friend Jasmine’s family is just like your family? This is no longer the case.”

12

The Land of Milk and Honey—and More

To assuage my shock, I embarked upon a period of frenetic lecturing and traveling. Lecturing and traveling, after all, was the expected agenda of Fulbright scholars. Israel was my first stop. I looked forward to the chance to see familiar American colleagues at the science fiction studies conference being held there.

At the Frankfurt Airport, I encountered armed German soldiers protecting Jewish passengers. Tanks lined the runway. The situation was so tense, I welcomed the presence of the security agent who opened both my suitcase and my diaphragm container. Once on board the plane, I had time to contemplate whether or not it was kosher for me to embark upon my first trip to Israel



on a Lufthansa flight loaded with Germans. When I went to the Tel Aviv airport bank to change my marks into shekels, I felt compelled to tell the clerk that I was Jewish.

I made my way to the kibbutz where the conference participants were directed to gather. Rachel Safir, the Tel Aviv University English professor who had organized this particular conference, was a lovely person who at once exuded ironclad professionalism and motherly charm. “You will present your paper at noon sharp. Not a moment later. Take twenty minutes. Not a minute more,” she informed me. Then, she reached into her briefcase and removed a pair of adorable miniature striped pants made from tee-shirt material. “These are for my little granddaughter. What do you think of them?” As I looked at a picture of Rachel’s beautiful granddaughter, I knew I had started a friendship with a formidable and knowledgeable woman. One could never have too many friendships with formidable and knowledgeable women.

Rachel stood in front of the assembled conference participants and gave directions. Each person was going to spend the night with a kibbutznik. I was assigned to Yetta Goldfarb, a single woman who had immigrated to Israel from New York. (Obviously, Rachel had no difficulty matching me to a person with whom I shared something in common.) Yetta, to be hospitable, offered me coffee and wine. Since I drink neither, I asked for water. This request proved to be a big mistake.



At about two o'clock in the morning, I felt like dying. I was poisoned by Israeli water—not by Blackholeian geezers or Rottingen patriarchs. Regardless of how ill I felt, I had to respond in the morning when Rachel, speaking into a megaphone, ordered, “Everyone on the bus—now.” Later in the day, when I presented my paper about Joanna Russ’s latest lesbian-planet story, it was me—not the men in the audience—who turned green with nausea.

My presentation concluded, like a Victorian heroine lying prostrate with vapors, I collapsed on a couch located outside the lecture room. As my audience filed past the couch, they felt sorry for me and offered to supply all the stomach medication they had at hand. More specifically, a group of men, arguing about the effectiveness of various diarrhea remedies, had gathered around my deflated body. One of the diarrhea debaters was quite attractive.

“I’m Gary Levine. I wish I could make you feel better.” His wish came before an hour had elapsed. One word led to another. Kibbitzing resulted in my opportunity to have sex on a kibbutz. (The difference between kibbutz sex and any other kind: Gary and I hummed the *Exodus* theme and munched dried apricots after reaching orgasm.) Gary was intelligent, handsome, passionate, witty—and married to wife number two. Wife number one, a women’s studies director, had become a lesbian. We were on common ground when discussing how it felt to be abandoned by lesbians we loved. Even



though Gary was not suitable husband-hunting quarry, he was very useful. He cared for me while I was ill. He listened when I had to tell someone that my trip to Lake Tiberias was ruined because, due to illness, I could not stand the sight of water.

Gary's attention was psychologically as well as physically welcome. Thurston Howell (who, appropriately, shared his name with a *Gilligan's Island* character), my former lover and present nemesis (this is not to say that I was not attracted to Thurston), was attending the conference. (He was the only man present who had not offered me diarrhea medication.) My love/hate relationship with Thurston spanned years. This tall, bearded WASP, a patriarchal presence with a booming voice, was as different from me as someone could possibly be. Our entire relationship attested to the fact that a cold New England WASP simply could not find happiness with an overdramatic Jew from Forest Hills.

I recalled the trip to Nice we had taken five years previously. Thurston, while wearing a tweed jacket and reading the *International Herald Tribune*, spent most of his time on our hotel room's balcony, which overlooked the Mediterranean. Occasionally, still dressed in tweed and carrying the *Tribune*, he took walks. I, in contrast, headed for the beach attired in bathing suit, sweat pants, and open sweat jacket. When entering our opulent hotel, we resembled a female and male version of Neil Simon's odd couple. While my hair was "frizzed out" perpendicular to my head and my sweat pants were



saturated with salt water, Thurston—who towers over me—had every hair in place, tweed jacket buttoned, and pants perfectly pleated. This difference did not escape the doorman. “*Bonjour, monsieur—et madame?*” he said, obviously thinking that I did not belong in the “madame” category. Even though the Mediterranean Sea dripping from my clothes was beginning to form a puddle in the lobby, surely I deserved some respect.

As soon as we entered our antiques-appointed room, I kicked off my clogs and curled up on the imposing king-sized bed. Since Thurston never responded to my sexual overtures in the afternoon, I was in bed with *The Dynamics of Literary Response*. My reading was interrupted when I heard Thurston scream. “It’s your wretched clogs! I always stub my toes on them. Why do you lace the room with these infernal clog traps?” Thurston bandaged his damaged toe and we dressed for dinner.

Dining with Thurston was never a simple undertaking. He had an uncanny knack for never failing to locate the best and most expensive restaurant in every city we visited. Soon tiring of spending hours eating huge dinners, I escaped to Wendy’s salad bars. Thurston’s response was predictable: “Oh, gawd.”

He was not always reserved. Germans express their pent up emotions during *Oktoberfest*; Thurston expresses his during sex. His orgasms are always accompanied by an ear splitting crescendo. In order to preserve my hearing, I must keep earmuffs at hand. When I



sleep with Thurston, I am not fully protected until I have diaphragm and earmuffs in place.

Due to the noise level and its intense vibrations, I find it difficult to believe that the hotels Thurston and I frequented are still standing. When we emerged from our room, fellow hotel occupants would look at us strangely—and with interest. Thurston would point to me and say, “It was her.”

I think his wry humor and never-ending witty sarcasm drew me to him. His decency, trustworthiness, and support for his female colleagues were also definite pluses. Nonetheless, we were not made for each other. We fought with intensity while eating our way through European capitals. It was often hard to discern the difference between Thurston’s orgasmic ecstasy and his verbal attacks upon my Jewish cultural proclivities. So, it was not without some satisfaction that I now found myself squaring off against this WASP incarnate on my ancestral home ground—the Jewish state. Thurston’s constant “Oh, gawd” refrain would be of no help to him in Israel.

Thurston had to remain silent when gentile colleagues asked me to explain kibbutz meals. Even if his life depended upon it, he would not know how to say, “This is *tsimmes*, *kreplach*, and potato *kugel*.” In the middle of one of these gastronomic explanations, I noticed that a hunk had joined the conference.

During the next morning’s excursion to Jerusalem’s Old City, Rachel (megaphone in hand) shouted,



“Thirty minutes at the Dome of the Rock—our next paper session starts at fifteen twenty-two, *sharp*.” Although I was not happy about having to leave my clogs on a shoe rack located outside the Dome, because I wanted to find the hunk, I complied and entered. I had never before husband hunted for a hunk in a mosque. (I have hunted while not wearing shoes, though. Luckily, I have never gotten pregnant while barefoot—that is, sans clogs.) The object of my quest was not within. Dejected, clogs back on feet, I shuffled off to the next sight. I cast aside my dejected attitude the moment I saw my quarry’s tee-shirted, jean-clad, sneakered figure standing by the Wailing Wall. When he expressed the desire to find a McDonald’s in Jerusalem, I knew that he differed markedly from Thurston. Over lunch in a simple falafel restaurant, he introduced himself as David Razi, the son of concentration-camp survivors who had immigrated to Australia. The recipient of a fellowship to Hebrew University’s physics department, David was my age—and single. He was perfect. My prayers seemed to have been answered at the Wailing Wall. We decided to miss some conference sessions to devote the afternoon to sightseeing. At midnight, I found myself still in his company as we strolled down Ben Yehuda Street. After pointing out that Jerusalem had the fewest sexy lingerie shops in the world, he took me in his arms.

While attending the next evening’s conference dinner, I felt confused. I did not know what to do about



Gary Levine, David Razi, and Thurston Howell. It was highly unusual for me to enjoy three men's attention—even if Thurston's consisted of projecting negativity. I sat by myself at a corner table to think. I was not alone for long; Gary sat at my right and David sat at my left. Since all the other tables were occupied, Thurston was forced to join us. I was surrounded, cast adrift in a rough sea. I recalled that if it were not for the courage of the fearless crew the *Minnow* would be lost, the *Minnow* would be lost. Although I was not Ginger the movie star, I acted the role of a calm person well. As I at once sneered at Thurston, looked appreciatively at Gary, and lusted after David, I raised my wine glass and uttered, "*L'chaim.*" What else could I say?

When dinner ended, I made a point to say good-bye to my three male companions. Although this was the last time that I would encounter Gary, I was fated to see more of David. As we both left the table, David asked me to join him for a walk. I could not believe my response to his subsequent request to sleep with me. "I'm sorry, but it's midnight. Tomorrow I have to present a paper at Ben Gurion University of the Negev. I have to catch a six o'clock bus bound for the desert. I care about you. If we are going to have sex, we should do it properly. I tell you what. Since I live in Germany and it's on this side of the world, I'll return to Israel to sleep with you."

"You're right. Do come back. We can have sex then. I'll look forward to it," David responded. Having settled



the sex issue, I returned to my room and set the alarm for five. I soon found myself on a bus bound for the Negev Desert. I disembarked at the appropriate stop and looked straight ahead. Seeing nothing but sand, I panicked. This was the limit. Instead of waking up in Jerusalem after a pleasant sexual experience, I was alone and lost in a desert. Why? Why did I always place my profession before my personal life? I had tenure; why was I lost in a desert? I tried to remain calm and think my situation through. I was at a bus stop. A bus stop could not be located in an uncharted desert. What to do? I had an idea. I turned my head and looked at the other side of the street. I saw Ben Gurion University of the Negev. I was saved.

13

More

Two weeks after returning to Germany, I picked up the phone. “David, this is Sondra. You remember, the woman who wants to fly to Israel to have sex with you. When will it be convenient for me to arrive?”

“Next week would be super. Phone again and tell me your arrival date and time. I’ll pick you up at the airport. What is that noise? Is there static in our connection?”

“That’s just my cat snarling. I’ll call back with the details and I’ll see you soon.”

This trip was going to require some preparation. I went to the neighborhood *Apotheke* and purchased seven boxes of condoms. That evening Brigitte “popped over” (as she was fond of saying) to my apartment.



“Why on Earth did you ever buy so many condoms?” she asked with great interest.

“How do you know about the condoms?”

“You remember that my father is a professor in the zoology department? Well, the druggist is a friend of his colleague’s wife. Both of these women know Frau Hundschnort. My father’s colleague told him about your purchase. And my father told me. I am sure that by now the entire English department knows that you bought every condom in Rottingen. Even I am curious. What do you plan to do with a lifetime supply of condoms?”

“I haven’t had much sex in a long time. I’m going to the promised land to fulfill a promise to have sex.” I again found myself flying to Israel. At least, for once, my agenda had nothing to do with professionalism. The attractive businessman seated next to me tried to make conversation. “So, why are you going to Israel?” I answered in my best nonprofessional tone.

“I met this really far-out guy in Jerusalem. We didn’t have enough time to do it. So, I’m going back, natch.”

“What originally brought you to Jerusalem?”

“An academic conference.”

“Honey, what were you doing at an academic conference?”

“I’m a feminist theorist. But now I’m worried. I hope this person shows up at the airport. If he doesn’t, I will be very perturbed.”

“Take it from me—he’ll be there.”



The businessman was right. I immediately found David waiting behind the customs area. We went directly to his apartment. We did nothing for three days but have sex and cook. David was very domestic; every morning, he served me freshly squeezed orange juice in bed. Okay, I know that I am not going into detail about the sex scenes. Sex with David was simply not very erotic. We merely had a great deal of genital contact. But hold your horses. An erotic sex scene will happen soon.

Near the end of my visit, David had to touch base at the physics department. I was left home alone. I felt the sharp and familiar pain that only a bladder infection could cause. I knew from experience that without treatment, the pain would become excruciating. I did not know how to reach David. I could not speak Hebrew. I panicked. Then I heard the phone ring. A voice emanated from the answering machine: "This is the British Fulbright Commission returning Professor Sondra Lear's call. As you mentioned, we need to discuss your upcoming lectures in England."

"Help! This is Sondra. I'm in pain. Help! I do not know how to reach a doctor. What should I do?"

"Call the Israeli Fulbright Commission."

"Good idea. Thanks." As I hung up, I heard David place his key in the door lock. "I have a bladder infection. I'm in terrible pain. It's getting worse. I need a doctor."

"Never fear. I, David Razi, nice Jewish boy incarnate, am here. Do I have a doctor for you!" He held my



hand as we walked the five blocks to the doctor's office. Finally, after what seemed to be an interminable wait, I was called into the examination room. "I am Dr. Milton Hadomi. What is your problem?"

"Sex. I have a bladder infection. The pain is getting worse. I'm very frightened." The doctor smiled at David and me. Although he mentioned nothing, we knew that he knew about our sex marathon. "Don't worry, young woman. This nice Jewish boy has brought you to a nice Jewish doctor—married of course. I have treated some of your fellow Americans. Whenever Rosalynn and Jimmy Carter are in Jerusalem, they come to me. Rosalynn, however, never has had your particular problem. I'll give you a prescription for an antibiotic and a painkiller and you will be fine. (Sister readers, he prescribed Norfloxacin. It works.) But there is one difficulty. The only drugstore open at this time of night is located in Jerusalem's Arab section. Going there could be exceedingly dangerous."

Bolstered by the knowledge that I had already vanquished evil Blackholeians and Germans—not to mention Thurston—I was prepared to face potentially dangerous Arabs. "I must get the medication." David, adhering to article five, section two of the Nice Jewish Boy Honor Code, did not hesitate to accompany me. (Article five, section two reads as follows: threatening Arabs aside, if you give a woman a bladder infection, do not fail to accompany her to a drugstore.) We



reached the Arab drugstore without incident and filled the prescription.

My health improved markedly by the time I was scheduled to leave Israel. David and I said our good-byes. “This has really been fun. Sondra. But I don’t love you.” Aaaargh! God, obviously, had not answered my prayers at the Wailing Wall. I should not have had those critical thoughts about the Wall’s division into separate women’s and men’s sections. God was punishing me. The perfect nice Jewish boy did not love me.

“Why? Why don’t you love me?” I asked, even though I didn’t love him, either.

“I don’t know.” I knew the answer. David was intimidated by my professional success and independence. He did not define the world’s expert on lesbian planets as the perfect Jewish wife. Past experience indicated that I had to chalk this one up and be grateful for the encounter’s positive aspects. Things could be worse. The antibiotics were working, and I was certainly sexually satisfied. When David brought me to the airport bus, I took a deep breath, contained my disappointment, and resolved to look ahead.

Upon arrival at the airport, El-Al security agents thwarted my resolve to board my plane quickly. During my first trip to Israel to attend the conference where I initially met David, answering the agents’ questions and proving that my answers were true posed no problem. I had merely presented faculty I.D. and



the conference program. Presently, however, I had to face the agents' questions when sex had been my trip's sole agenda. Was I now expected to replace the formerly appropriate evidence by substituting my I.D. and program with empty condom wrappers and an IUD? (Although I do not use an IUD, this birth control method seems to go with the textual flow here.) Professionalism is so much easier than passion. I faced my questioner. "What was the purpose of your trip?" she asked.

"I'm a tourist."

"What did you see while you were here?" The truth was that I had seen only David's apartment, the doctor's office, and the Arab drugstore.

"Not very much. I became ill and spent time in a friend's apartment."

"Where is the apartment located?" Since I had never asked David to tell me his address, I could not answer the question.

"I don't know."

"Describe the neighborhood where you resided."

"I can't." The agent glared at me as she called her colleague, a tall tanned man wearing sunglasses. I was confronted by a Jewish version of Mark Slade, a Hebrew 007; an *efes efes shevah*. But this was no spy game such as the one I enacted with Mark. I was really in trouble with government agents. The male agent spoke. "Your answers are suspicious. What is your destination?"



“Germany. But I’m a Jew, a Jew from Forest Hills, U.S.A. I would never do anything to hurt Israel.”

“Tell us the truth.” I had no choice.

“I’m a professor. I attended a conference in Israel a month ago. I met an attractive man. He wanted to have sex with me. I said no because it was after midnight and I had to get up early to give a lecture in the Negev Desert. I returned to Israel to have sex. I did not do any sightseeing.”

“Why didn’t this man accompany you to the airport?” asked the female agent. Again, I had to tell the truth.

“He thought that his own schedule was more important than me.” Having no difficulty believing this explanation, she smiled.

“How did you spend your time here?” she asked.

“I had sex. I had sex and I contracted a bladder infection.” I suddenly knew how to prove my story. I reached into my purse.

“Here. This is Norfloxacin, a bladder-infection antibiotic.”

“Proceed ahead to your flight.” On the one hand, David did not love me. On the other, the agents did not prosecute me. I had to be happy for small things.

| 4

Someone Is Sleeping in My Bed

Even though my bladder infection recurred, I decided to honor my commitment to lecture in Britain at the University of Edinburgh and, a week later, at the University of Southampton. Armed with a new bottle of Norfloxacin, I boarded my British Airways flight.

My host in Edinburgh, Professor Clive Clive, a well-known film critic who often writes for the *Village Voice*, did not meet me at the airport. Hence, though I was still ill, it was necessary for me to negotiate the public transportation system in order to reach the university. When I arrived, he informed me that, since he was busy, I should “occupy myself” for two hours. He would then drive me to his home. Because of my



bladder infection, I was pissed enough to complain. “I am sick. I am unable to occupy myself. You must immediately, if not sooner, take me to a place where I can rest.” Clive grabbed his coat.

When we reached his home, he showed me to a bedroom. It took me a second to discern that he meant for me to sleep in the master bedroom—to sleep in his bed. But I must say that the atmosphere in the bedroom was more functional than seductive. While Clive and I were making the bed, he critiqued my attempt to create hospital corners. He then explained that, since he was spending the coming week visiting his wife in her London home, I was welcome to stay in his house until it was time to go to Southampton. Because Clive was departing early in the morning, he said good-bye, told me how to reach the university via public transportation, and wished me luck with my lecture. I thought that this arrangement was at once strange and generous. All I could do was to employ the “when in Rome” adage.

When I entered the kitchen to prepare breakfast, I was greeted by a young woman wearing a bathrobe. Was Clive having an affair while a feminist theorist slept in his bed? Because I was so puzzled and curious, I resorted to the direct approach. “I’m Sondra Lear, a guest lecturer. I know that you’re not Clive’s wife. Forgive me for asking, but exactly who are you?”

“Amy Saunders. I’m from Los Angeles and I’m doing my Ph.D. with Clive. I’m his lodger. Please



understand, I do mean lodger. We don't have a personal relationship. I need a place to live; he needs rent money."

I continued to suffer from the bladder infection during the week I spent in Clive's house. And, to make matters worse, it rained daily. I was constantly wet, cold, tired, and sick. Amy offered encouragement and pleasant conversation. I advised her that it was not a good idea, under any circumstance, to live with one's dissertation director. She assured me that she would seek a new home. We assisted each other and became friends. This was one positive result of sleeping in a man's bed.

15

Chicken Redux

I am sure that by now Norris felt more like Norris Therondopolous-Klein than Norris Compton Lear. At least he would be in good hands when I ventured to the University of Vienna. I had been invited by Frau University Professor Dr. Marie Schirer, one of the few women full professors in Austria. This occasion called for a haircut. I could not appear disheveled when meeting a *Frau* university professor doctor.

Since I was unable to communicate with the cutters, haircuts were no easy undertaking in Germany. The procedure was more onerous than department politics; I had no defense against a potential unkindest cut of all. Luckily, Susan was willing to accompany me and translate. In light of our experience in the sauna, she viewed this favor as a piece of cake. But not cheese-cake. When receiving haircuts, Germans always keep all their clothes on.



The haircut did not comprise my sole effort to impress Frau University Professor Dr. Marie Schirer. The trip from Rottingen to Vienna, of course, involved spending hours on a train. Because Schirer was going to meet me at the Vienna station, I planned to enter the train car's toilet cubicle to change from comfortable travel clothes to more professional attire. Like the haircut, this plan was not easily accomplished. The toilet area was filthy. I switched clothes as fast as I could. When I emerged from the toilet cubicle, all male eyes in the car stared at me. Something was terribly wrong. (After all, I was not in Italy. When Austrian men stare at women, I expect them to be more subdued than Italian men.) I quickly went back to the toilet area and looked in the mirror. I saw my mistake. My blouse was sheer; in my haste, I had forgotten my camisole. I corrected my error and seated myself in another car. Professor Schirer would never know that I had blown it in regard to wearing something sheer.

I looked my best when I met her. (I even went so far as to relegate my clogs to my suitcase and wear normal shoes. At the moment, I was into Arche, a very comfortable—and very expensive—French brand. I also packed the green boots I bought in Bally of Switzerland. True to my Forest Hills upbringing, I was probably the world's only serious intellectual who embarked upon a Fulbright to earn enough foreign currency to shop until I dropped.) I immediately liked Schirer, a brilliant fifty-year-old who knew and respected my



work on feminist science fiction. She invited me to have dinner in her lovely home with members of her department. One of the guests had made the short list for the Rottingen English department headship. He was far from happy about Schweinshank's successful candidacy. Because I trusted Schirer and her colleagues, I crossed the bounds of discretion. The group was not bored by my story about disguising myself to thwart Schweinshank. It was necessary for me to insist that the surprise disguise actually did occur. I suppose such behavior does not conform to usual Austrian cultural codes.

After the guests departed, Schirer and I began to discuss our pets. Her version of Norris had feathers. Schirer was enraptured by her parrot, Tweetie. I soon knew all about Tweetie's habits and talents. Schirer's home was replete with books and antiques garnered from her world travels. Despite the appeal of these objects, however, she insisted that I immediately meet the bird. She asked me to follow her into the kitchen. After I did so, she proudly pointed and said, "There he is. There is my Tweetie." I looked in the direction she indicated. A bird turning on a rotisserie met my gaze. "Marie, that's not a parrot, that's a chicken," I exclaimed. I was horrified—until I noticed the bird cage perched on the shelf above the broiler. "For a moment, I was convinced you were going to say that Tweetie is tomorrow's lunch."

"I have recently returned from China where I suspected that cats and dogs figured prominently in my



dinners. Happily, here in Austria, people do not eat their pets. Tomorrow's lunch will consist of chicken, not parrot." I thought that the bereaved former chicken owner I had encountered in the vet's office would not be glad to hear this news.

At the conclusion of my visit with Schirer, I was convinced that if more women were like her, members of my sex would not automatically be miscast as chickens. She kissed me good-bye when she left me at the train station—a gesture much more meaningful than my entire sex marathon with David.

Regardless of this realization, I still had not abandoned my husband hunt. I noticed that the train station platform was empty—except for the attractive man seated on a bench near to where I stood. I sat next to him and began to edit a manuscript. He started a conversation. "I see that you're reading English. Do you speak English well?"

"Yes, very well." "I'm going to Munich. Do I take the train which just arrived?"

No. It's a slow train. You need the express intercity train." Obviously, this guy, who could not tell a *Persozug* from a *Schnellzug*, was not an experienced traveler.

"Where in America are you from?" He asked, unable to discern that an echo of his own New York accent was a particular regional locution.

"New York City."

"Me too? Where?"

"Forest Hills."



“Me too.” It turned out that he had graduated from Forest Hills High School and that his parents presently lived in Forest Hills directly across the street from my parents. Furthermore, he was a single Jewish doctor. I imagined that Herbert was, at this moment, ecstatic. But her feeling would have to be short-lived. When this man asked me to accompany him to Munich, because of my desire to prioritize professional commitment, I declined.

I was scheduled to lecture at the German Fulbright Alumni Association meeting in Bonn. I could not run off to Munich with a stranger—even if he was a single Jewish doctor from Forest Hills. The train arrived at Munich. He exited. I never saw him again. And, I never told Herbert about this unconsummated close encounter with what she would have considered a prized potential marriage catch. If I did, she would buy an apartment in the building across the street from her own dwelling place—just to have a chance “accidentally” to engage her potential new *machitonim* (the Yiddish word for “in-laws” she always used). I thought that one plastic-encased Forest Hills condominium in the family would suffice.

16

Ejection Seat

I welcomed the opportunity to spend a weekend in Bonn with the German Fulbrighters, a group of very talented people who had lived in America. While listening to a Dresdner Bank representative lecture about finances, I was attracted to a man seated across the room. I stared at his jet-black hair and luminous blue eyes. I told myself that I would die if I didn't meet him. He returned my stare and smiled. "First contact," I thought, borrowing from science fiction jargon. During the intermission between the lecture and discussion period, I approached him. "Hi. I'm Sondra Lear. I noticed that your full attention was not directed to the lecture. Perhaps, like me, you do not find a discussion about finances to be enthralling."

"Certainly not. I'm Gebhard Kutner. The lecture is extremely boring. And things are not about to get better.



The next speaker is discussing Common Market corn-crop consumption. Perhaps you would like to join me for a drive?" Trusting that a Fulbrighter would not be an insane sex offender or a kidnapper, I accepted. My mission to meet this gorgeous man now accomplished, I felt ecstatic to be seated next to him. I was ready to marry him and move to Germany forever. Even if Schweinshank would never hire me, I could always work something out. Gebhard interrupted my fantasy when he suggested that we stop and have a drink. We headed for a café.

I got out of his car, glanced at the back seat, and saw *it*. My heart began to beat rapidly and beads of sweat erupted on my forehead. Words emanated from my parched throat and my arm stretched out in a pointing gesture. "What's that?"

"A child seat," Gebhard calmly answered.

"A child seat! Does this mean that you have a ch-child?"

"Yes."

"And do you have a wife as well as a child?"

"Yes."

"Oh, how lovely for you." At that moment, I felt that I had much in common with the German department head who died after purposefully hitting a truck on the autobahn. We entered the café. The giant strudel I ordered failed to make me happy. I told Gebhard how I really felt. "I'm very disappointed to learn that you're married. You're extremely attractive."



“Thank you for the compliment. I am honored,” he said as he kissed my hand. “Please don’t feel badly. Why don’t you come back to my hotel with me. I’ll introduce you to my sister, Cornelia. She’s a graduate student in literature. You’ll like her.” Cornelia was thrilled to meet an American feminist theorist. (Knowing that she would be less than thrilled if she knew that I had the hots for her brother, I didn’t share this information.) Her enthusiasm for literature made me feel somewhat better.

Later in the evening, Gebhard encountered me on the hotel staircase. He said nothing, kissed me, and continued up the stairs to join his wife.

The conclusion of the conference did not coincide with the conclusion of my encounter with Gebhard. He phoned me a few days later. “I would like to invite you to my parents’ home for Christmas. Cornelia will be there. She would love to see you. My parents would love to have you. And, my wife will be in the hospital having our second child. I would love to have you too. Please tell me that you will agree to visit us.”

“I need a little time to see how my schedule and workload shape up. I appreciate the invitation. Let me get back to you.” I was appalled. This invitation constituted the limit of male presumption. Did Gebhard really imagine that I would have sex with him in his parents’ house at Christmas while his wife was in labor? Even though he was gorgeous—even though I do not believe in Christmas—I could not bring myself



to participate in this travesty. The usually liberal Brigitte wanted to throw up when I described the situation to her.

Brigitte and I exercised false judgment. I agreed to attend the Kutner family Christmas when Cornelia herself phoned to invite me. My visit was thoroughly enjoyable. I stayed with Cornelia and her parents; Gebhard stayed in his own house. I ended up presenting a lecture at the high school where Gebhard taught. And I enjoyed some good discussions with Cornelia about feminist theory. Gebhard had, temporarily, renewed my faith in men.

17

La (Un)Dolce Vita

Men acted according to their usual sexually predatory fashion when I attended a science fiction conference in Italy. Italy is a very sexy country. My public behavior upon arrival overtly reflected this fact. Because I dread death by pickpocket, I always secure a pouch containing my passport and plane ticket within my underwear. Hence, when I registered at my hotel, in order to give the desk clerk my passport, I had to begin to undress in the reception area.

During my flight from Germany to Rome, I appreciated my last moments of comfortable, unstuffed underpants. Italian American honeymooners occupied the seats next to me. I think that Herbert employs a cadre of agents: by the end of the flight, the newly married couple was motivating me to find a husband



to experience my own version of their happiness. This scenario would not play out during the science fiction conference. The conference was a rerun. I met not one, but two, married men. One was British; the other was a Forest Hills High School graduate. (I refer to Gerald Wellington and Bernie Cohen. But more about them later.) Even if each Forest Hills High School graduating class does contain more than a thousand people, would I really have to go to Jupiter to avoid meeting men from Forest Hills? I know; I know. The school turns out the world's best Jewish husbands. So, I failed to bag one when I was there. But did my life have to emphasize my failure? This repetition might explain why I choose to live with a goyische cat who could never appropriately be named Murray Goldfarb.

The conference rerun situation was even further exacerbated: Thurston was attending. Women provided the only fresh programming. I came away with a deeper friendship with my Israeli colleague Rachel Safir and a new Blackholeian feminist ally.

After unzipping and reziping my pants for the benefit of the hotel desk clerk (a fuckless zip?), I entered my room and threw myself on the bed. The room's other bed contained my sleeping conference roommate, Lubinka Cherneva, a full professor of engineering at Blackhole who is interested in science fiction. Although I had never met Lubinka, I knew that she was an Hungarian émigré who qualified for the tough-cookie, strong, competent woman award. (I planned to



change the fact that only two women at Blackhole had managed to become full professors. If successful, I would share the full-professor rank with Lubinka and a roach reproduction expert.) Lubinka awoke and noticed me across the space separating our beds. (She was a divorcee and not a lesbian.) “This is an international conference. Do you come from Hungary or Czechoslovakia? Is your English good?” she asked in her distinctive accent.

“No to the first question and definitely yes to the second. You will be very surprised to learn where I come from. I will break the news to you slowly.” I then proceeded to name Blackhole’s buildings and sexist male senior administrators. (Since all the senior administrators are sexist males, recalling the list did not tax my memory.) Lubinka almost fell out of bed. “*What?* You are from Blackhole?”

“Yes ma’am, I reckon so.” Blackhole’s most formidable remaining feminists met each other in galaxy far, far away from Virginia: in Rome, one mile from Termini train station to be exact. Remembering the birds-of-a-feather adage, I was grateful that women who are not chickens do manage to flock together. Since Jasmine and Rhonda had flown the coop, I was in need of a new ally to help me fricassee sexist male Blackholeians.

Lubinka began to tell me about herself. “When the Communists assumed power in Hungary, I escaped by hiding on a boat. I landed in Paris. I was penniless and I lived on the streets with gypsies. I experienced hunger



and privation.” I came up with my counterpart to Lubinka’s story.

“I fought a tenure battle at Blackhole.”

“*Vhat?* The Parisian sewers are nothing in comparison to encountering the human slime in the Blackhole administration building. My story, it is no match for your story.” Lubinka was my kind of woman.

She became impatient when I told her more about myself. “You don’t ingest sugar, fat, or caffeine. You don’t drink or smoke. You have so many rules about how to live, Hitler and Stalin together could not oppress you more than you oppress yourself. You should design your own new rules—especially rules, in relation to men, which transcend established structures,” Lubinka insisted

“There is one area in which I do not abide by the rules.” Her notion that I was referring to sex was confirmed as she listened to my complaints about Thurston, an acquaintance of hers.

I had to consult my newfound colleague Cherneva about her role as survivor of hostile regimes. This consultation was necessary because the Blackhole English department, not the Fulbright program, was covering my transportation costs to Italy. The desire to send me far, far away could not account for the department’s generosity; I was already far away. Did my department head hire a Calabrian hit-man to do me in? Dismissing this idea as ridiculous, I thought of a more probable reason: the Blackholeians had learned that my paper,



called “A Male Postmodernist and the Nature of Feminist Science Fiction,” was about Salman Rushdie. They had contacted the Ayatollah.

Or, perhaps they relished subjecting me to this conference’s particular version of pleasure combined with pain. It was necessary for the participants to spend ten days traveling from Rome, to Cassino, to Reggio Calabria. Upon arrival at each destination, the Americans were expected to listen to untranslated Italian papers—a fate worse than tenure denial. Italian academics, who almost always make no attempt to engage their audience, deliver interminably long papers. Although the conference was supposed to provide an opportunity for Italians and Americans to interact, this was not the case. All the money spent to transport fifty American scholars to Italy could not compensate for the Italians’ inability to speak English and the Americans’ inability to speak Italian. The Americans, always polite, tried to appear interested while listening to a foreign language and choking in the cigarette smoke-filled lecture rooms. This academic conference was analogous to a Fellini film about an academic conference.

Only the routine of eating and choking interrupted the routine of listening and choking. The courses comprising Italian lunches and dinners were as endless as the Italian conference papers. To my mind, at meal times, an Alka-Seltzer commercial interrupted a Fellini film. Pasta begat soup, which begat more pasta, which



begat the first main dish, which begat the second main dish, which begat the salad, which begat the fruit, which begat the cheese, which begat the dessert, which begat the cappuccino. I imagined that I would have to charter my own 747 to transport the fat hulk I expected to become.

Even though I could not bring myself to stop eating, I could put an end to the humorless dirge of academic discourse—the monotonous Italian paper-delivery mode that the Americans had, by now, adopted. On the day I was scheduled to deliver my paper, before the morning sessions started, the conference visited the Montevirgine Monastery perched on a high mountain overlooking Cassino. After spending one minute inside this monument to religion, patriarchy, and oppression, I fled to the parked bus. Lubinka Cherneva had already arrived.

The visit to the monastery enabled me to give credence to the feminist argument I wanted to present to the conference. “Let me begin by rewriting a familiar patriarchal story,” I told my audience at the day’s first conference paper session. “This morning, I went up to the mountain. I was given this paper on feminist science fiction, postmodernism, and Salman Rushdie. I have just come down from the mountain. I am ready to share the paper with you.” Who could argue with this approach? The audience was interested in my comments about Rushdie. I was relieved to reach my conclusion without



being assassinated. Perhaps I had been too harsh when I accused the Blackholeians of Ayatollah-alerting.

As ever, my professional life was proceeding well while my personal life was awry. Bernie Cohen, the Forest Hills High School graduate seated next to me during the thirteen-hour conference bus trip from Casino to Reggio Calabria, began (during hour four) to notice me. After minute three, I learned that Bernie was a high school classmate of Simon and Garfunkel. As I have said, I never manage to escape my origins. Bernie very obviously wanted to have an affair. I, however, elected not to become involved with a male clone of myself who had a wife and an infant. Meeting this perfect Jewish husband who wanted to commit adultery made me feel grateful that I had not dedicated myself to wifehood. During my entire life, I had met only two men who were faithful to their wives: Egor Lear and Norman Holland.

While I was in the process of deciding not to have any further conversation with Bernie, I had the distinct impression that the man who was directing bad vibrations toward me from the back of the bus was certainly not a Forest Hills High School graduate. Thurston's six-foot presence loomed over the conference. We were not getting along well. This man who had sex with me on two continents (I would have liked to raise this number to three continents to include Israel—Israel, if I have my continents right, is on a different one from Europe and America) now chose to ignore me. Worst



of all, instead of providing a sense of an ending, he left me dangling. I, as could be expected, let him know my feelings: “I value our friendship. I care about you. I want to have sex with you. The grand hotel in Reggio should be able to survive the sound of Thurston-gasms. I think it has already withstood an earthquake.”

“I don’t know if I want to have sex with you. I’m not sure. If we have sex than we do, and if we don’t, we don’t. That’s just how life is.” Despite his declaration of ambivalence, Thurston’s actions made his true feelings quite apparent: whenever I came within ten feet of him, he looked as if he needed to vomit. I was more hurt than angry. How could he find his male colleagues more interesting than both the professional and personal versions of me? All I could do was, according to Melissa’s terminology, try to be cool.

The situation caused me to experience stress and sexual tension. Unfortunately, although I recognized that Thurston was an arrogant snob who insulted many conference participants by engaging solely with his male “mafia” inner circle, I was still extremely attracted to him. His sophistication and sarcastic wit were unmatched by that of any man I had ever encountered. I suppose our nine-year history also drew me to him. He was the person who had taught me how to read a European train schedule when I was a fledgling scholar on her first trip abroad. And, maybe he had correctly insisted that four-star restaurants are superior to Wendy’s. I do not know everything; during



one conference dinner an aristocratic Dutchman kindly informed me that one does not hold a wine glass at its widest point. Rather, one—in order to hear the clearest clink while toasting—holds the glass by the stem. I didn't know from this wine glass rule. Herbert and Egor never told me about clinks.

Despite my musings, sexual tension was beginning to make me ill. I was at the point of wanting to have sex with the phallic shampoo bottles the hotel provided. I was so desperate that in order to attract Thurston's attention, I broke one of my prime directives for conference behavior: never dress like a slut. (So much for Lubinka's comment about Hitler and Stalin and self-inflicted oppression.)

I entered the dining room of Reggio Calabria's grand hotel attired in a long, slinky black skirt and a tight, low-cut blouse. When I passed Bernie while he was in a phone booth speaking to his wife, he stared at me and dropped the phone. Thurston's reaction differed from Bernie's; he focused upon his wine and calamari hors d'oeuvres. Here I was appearing half-naked at a dinner for science fiction scholars and Thurston, instead of noticing me, was enamored of fried squid. Casting aside my fear of urban devastation caused by Thurston-gasm, I was angry enough to cast myself in my mind's eye as a giant squid who would devastate Reggio. Defeated, I made my way to the end of the long table at which everyone was seated. At least I would have the opportunity to sit beside the friend I



met at the Israeli conference, Rachel Safir. And I would have the opportunity to compensate for the unobservant actions that had previously caused me to fear I was lost in the Negev Desert.

Although it had taken me five minutes to look across the street and notice the location of Ben Gurion University, I now immediately looked across the wide dinner table and instantly noticed a drop-dead gorgeous conference newcomer. Rachel noticed that I had noticed. She and I wordlessly glanced at each other to acknowledge our appreciation of this man's appeal. "He is probably the married father of three," I said.

"Of course," Rachel responded. I stared back when I saw him staring at my bare shoulders and cleavage. During the time it took dinner course one to become dinner course twelve, we exchanged torrid gazes. This man obviously found me more appetizing than the squid appetizer. When the cappuccino cups arrived, the person seated next to him vacated her place. "All ashore that's goin' ashore" I said to Rachel as I rose to walk around the table to sit beside him. Although the seas were getting rough and the tiny ship had been tossed, because of the courage of the fearless crew the *Minnow* was not lost, the *Minnow* was not lost. For once, I did not play the professor. One minute after sitting down, I asked the crucial question: "Do you have a family?"

"Yes. I have a wife and three children." I gave my stock answer, the one I had articulated to Gebhard



when I had encountered the child safety seat during our trip to the café.

“What a surprise. How nice for you.” I went on to gather further intelligence. “What’s your name? Where do you live?”

“Gerald Wellington. I’m British, from Nottingham.” I immediately decided to rob the rich and give to the poor. Poor me would seduce Gerald, steal from the married, the sexually wealthy. I imagined myself attired in a kelly-green outfit for my new role as Maid Sondra, a wench who (temporarily) made marryin’ secondary. While I wondered whether or not Jewish wenches existed, I did not doubt the viability of shooting an arrow into Thurston’s heart. I planned not to shoot straight; better to enable a crookedly flying arrow to announce, “screw yourself.”

After dinner (“after dinner,” in Italy means after a very long time) as Gerald and I walked through Reggio, I discovered that he was a very nice person. Our walk concluded, we headed back to the hotel and entered the elevator. When we reached his floor, he took my hand, gazed into my eyes, and said that he looked forward to seeing me the next day.

When he sat next to me during the morning session, I was aroused by his presence. As the voice of the Italian lecturer droned on, I expended sexual energy by furiously writing my novel. I reached the part where my protagonist travels to Israel to engage in an activity that causes bladder infections. “What are you writing?” Gerald asked.



“A novel.”

“May I read it?” I handed the text over, curious about Gerald’s reaction to the protagonist’s interaction with her cat and her pet penises. (The protagonist habitually takes her pet penises for walks on leashes. She explains that she views them as miniature dachshunds and she provides a good home for them. Thinking that the penises are vermin, her cat stalks them. She tells the cat that there is a difference between mice and men.) Since Gerald read more pages than politeness required, he was obviously deriving pleasure from my text. “So, what do you think? I made up the pet penises. But I do have a real cat, and his name is Norris.”

“Very engaging. But your sex scenes are not erotic enough.” Gerald wanted erotic; I would give him erotic. I put pen to paper and wrote: “Dear Gerald, I want to sleep with you. It is not easy for me to write my desire. I will gracefully accept if your answer is no. Here goes. I am placing this note in your hand. I am in croak mode.” I flicked my wrist. He took the note. He read the note. He answered the note. “I would have made love to you on the spot last night.” I was thrilled. One afternoon of interminable Italian lectures and a multi-course Italian dinner (where was Wendy’s when I needed her?) stood between me and sex at last. Throughout the afternoon’s unintelligible verbal outpouring, we literally smoldered and slept together in the smoke-filled auditorium. At the conclusion of the final paper, we applauded because the session was at last over.



We ventured into the heavy rain toward the conference bus, which would return us to our hotel. Since the bus had not yet arrived, we took shelter in a phone booth. I was standing in a phone booth with a super man. The phone rang. “To hell with the American embassy and its mother deprivation experiment. This is your mother, Herbert. Don’t you dare sleep with him.” This really did happen: remember—I am a science fiction critic. I hung up.

“Who was that?” Gerald asked.

“A wrong number.”

We boarded the bus and made our plans. Gerald insisted upon discretion. “We won’t sit together at dinner. But then what?” he inquired.

“Elementary, my dear Gerald. Come to my room. Knock on my door. Use a code word. I’ll open the door. We can take it from there.”

“What’s the code?”

“Morris Zap. See you later. Enjoy dinner.”

I ate pasta, squid (I like squid), and salmon mousse while turning my head surreptitiously to glance at Gerald. Thurston was seated at the table located in front of mine. I no longer cared. I said good night to my dinner companions and walked to my room. With dirty clothes hidden in the closet, diaphragm in, and condoms out I was ready, willing, and waiting. Would I hear “Morris Zap?” Would my handwritten text yield sex in this hotel room? (There is never sex in my classroom; I could lose tenure.) Is there a sex text in



this novel? Yes, Virginia there is. Gerald knocked and zapped. “Come in Nor——, I mean Morris.” (I took a course from the real Morris Zap. I shared a dormitory suite with the young woman he slept with when he dumped his middle-aged wife. But never fear. Immediately following this aside meant for English professors, the sex scene is here!)

Gerald sat down on the bed, slid his hands under my blue silk robe, and touched my breasts. We kissed each other gently. During the countless times that I had thought about this scene during the previous twenty-four hours, I imagined a quick, energetic coupling. This was not the case. In no rush to remove my robe, Gerald slowly ran his hands over my body. “I like the affection part best,” he whispered before placing his lips on my breast. We suddenly stopped and looked at each other. “This is so strange. I’m in a dream. I don’t know you. You are a stranger,” he said while I unbuttoned his shirt. I felt the hair on his tanned chest brush against my cheek. I settled closer to him as he pushed my knees apart and gently placed his finger inside me. He had to put his other hand over my mouth to muffle my cries of pleasure. (I hoped that he and Thurston would never become gay and encounter each other. My cries were whispers in comparison to the verbal emanations Thurston routinely generated.) “We could know the people next door. We mustn’t make noise,” he said. I heard his voice emanating from some other realm.



He stood up from the bed and lowered his zipper. As his pants fell, I enjoyed seeing his body clad only in black bikini underpants. I too stood up from the bed, placed my breasts against his chest, and inserted my thumbs between his warm skin and the elastic of his black underwear. His underwear joined his pants. We stood naked, faced each other, embraced, and allowed gravity to push us toward the bed. But, even at this stage, events did not progress rapidly. I touched the place between his erect penis and his thigh as we continued to caress each other. His hand brushed against my pubic hair. As I was aching with desire—this present ache was stronger than two previous aches: (1) the ache I felt while sitting next to him all day and (2) the ache I felt when contemplating resorting to sex with the hotel shampoo bottle—he asked a technical question. “Where’s the condom?”

“On the night table.” He looked at the table and saw a pile consisting of approximately twenty condoms.

“Quite a lot of condoms you have there. I’m forty-three years old. It has been a long day. I don’t think I can live up to all these condoms.”

“They’re German condoms. I have had them for a long time.” I was silent about the fact that an entire German English department knew about these particular condoms. But enough of this digression. Back to the future encased penis.

Being near a condom-covered penis that is about to



enter you is much more exciting than entering a plastic-covered apartment. It seems I am still digressing. Please understand that I am relaying these details while sitting in a lecture hall listening to Gerald present his paper. It is hard to concentrate. Gerald is, at the moment, citing “Professor Lear’s opinion of a particular source of a definition of science fiction.” Thurston is hearing him mention my name. Thurston knows me well; I hope he knows. Back to novel-writing.

Gerald kneeled in the middle of the bed and rolled the condom over his penis. He approached me, placed himself against me, encountered some involuntary resistance, and thrust harder. It was again necessary for him to put his hand over my mouth. I felt him throbbing inside me as he uttered his cry of pleasure. I tensed and untensed my vaginal muscles. He withdrew and cradled me in his arms. The audience applauded. (Note: although this applause appropriately represents my response to Gerald’s sexual performance, I refer to the audience’s reaction to his lecture.)

Gerald kissed my forehead, gave me his e-mail address, and left my hotel room. We decided to be together again. Since I believe in equality, I agreed to meet him this time in his room. We tailored the code to suit me. I knocked on his door. “Knock knock,” I said.

“Who’s there?”

“Morrisa Zapa.”

“Morrisa Zapa who?”



“I don’t know. Some Jewish Italian. Let me in.” As soon as I saw him, I knew he was despondent. “What’s the matter?”

“Life is so complicated. I have a terrible problem.”

“What is it? You can tell me.” I took his hand.

“It’s Vita Conti. She’s after me.”

“Vita Conti? Oh no, not Vita Conti.” Vita Conti was the most powerful science fiction critic in Italy. She was so formidable, I could hardly speak in her presence. She was a presence. One could not miss her bleached-blond hair, blue eye shadow that reached to her eyebrows, incessantly jangling gold jewelry, and too-tight and too-short skirts.

“Vita made it clear that she wants to sleep with me. She knows my wife. She knows all my colleagues. She could destroy my life.”

“Don’t worry. You have unproblematic me to listen to you. . . .” There was a knock on the door which was no part of our code. Gerald panicked.

“It’s Vita. The door isn’t locked,” he said hoarsely. I jumped into the closet. (Unlike me, Gerald, thankfully, had not thrown dirty clothes into his closet.) Vita entered the room. Rhonda and Jasmine were lesbians who had no part of the metaphorical closet; I was literally in the closet waiting to hear what a married woman would say to the married man who was, at the moment, my lover.

“Gerald, darling, I love you, I must have you. I cannot wait a moment longer,” said Vita while her jewelry



jangled. Her perfume permeated the closet. I stifled a cough.

“You are here at last, my darling. But, although passion is searing my loins, I must exercise forbearance. I cannot do this to my wife. She’s your friend. If we become lovers, could you ever face Faith again? And then there are the children. Could you see me jeopardizing the sanctity of the only home little Constance, Chastity, and Prudence know?”

“Well, now that you put it this way, I could not act against Constance, Prudence, Chastity, *and* Faith. Not to mention the fact that if my husband found out he would shoot you. Ciao.” Vita left the room. I came out of the closet.

“You handled that situation very well. Now, are you up to handling me? You don’t have to feel intimidated. I only brought two condoms this time.”

“Come here,” Gerald said. Now this was the kind of rerun I like. Our time together was a retold tale of our experience the night before. Progressing from touch to touch was just as gentle, passionate, and slow. It took us two hours to remove our clothes. But we did not have world enough and time. “Would you like to make love?” Gerald asked? Would I like to make love? Was the Pope Catholic?”

“Yes.”

Coming Out of the Closet

During the noon meal at the Italian conference, I felt like kissing the ground because the conference was nearly over. I had nowhere to sit. Thurston was at one table. I would be sick to my stomach if I sat there. Gerald was at another table. I could not sit there either. If I did so, people would discern my palpable attraction to him and I would be branded the slut of the conference. (I did not care where Bernie sat; he no longer interested me.) I chose the third and last alternative: the Italian language table.

The only available seat was located next to Connessa Flavia Salvaggio, an art history professor at the University of Florence who was directly descended from the Venetian painter Tintoretto. She started to speak French. Here I was conversing in French with an



Italian contessa—and this was my fifth-grade French yet. Well, at least I now knew where correctly to hold my wine glass. Flavia said that it was not necessary to call her Senora Contessa Professoressa Salvaggio. Since she was not German, plain Flavia would do. When the last course arrived, Flavia invited me to spend a few days with her in Florence.

This was no ordinary invitation. Flavia lived in a palace, located in the middle of the city, which had a superb view of the Duomo. On the first day of my stay, she cheerfully announced that she was cleaning her closet and asked for my assistance. How could I say no? How many people from Forest Hills have the opportunity to help a contessa clean her palace closet? As she took each item out, she discussed its history and asked my advice about whether or not to discard it. I was thrilled to receive a beautiful antique dress.

After I returned to Germany, I wrote to Flavia to thank her for her hospitality: “Dear Contessa Salvaggio, Thank you very much for inviting me to your palace.”

19

Sexual Harassment

I was off to attend the Fulbright meeting in Berlin, an annual week-long gathering consisting of American Fulbright grantees who resided throughout Europe as well as within Germany. Since the Berlin Wall had recently fallen, this year's meeting promised to be especially interesting. I was anxious to visit the newly unified city and to meet more American colleagues. Upon arrival in Berlin, I immediately went to the city's central square and picked up three Berlin Wall chunks. Yes, these were important—but cement does make one's briefcase heavy. My load became lighter as I imagined myself throwing the Berlin Wall at the Blackhole department head's head.

Wall pieces successfully schlepped back to my hotel room, I dressed for the opening reception taking place



at the Berlin America House and made my way there. I wanted to make friends with two fellow meeting attendees. The more conservative looking of the two, Jane Weintraub, was also a Jew from Queens—Rockaway to be exact. She was a well-published, intense Harvard graduate in social history. Jane was in the middle of telling me about her impending divorce and recently acquired German boyfriend when the second woman approached us. “Hi. I’m Veronique Wanderlust. What’s your sign? Last night I had this incredible multiple orgasm.” Jane turned pale, excused herself, and joined another group.

Although Veronique later told me that, according to her first impression, I was a cold bitch, I immediately knew that I would like her. She brought out my nonprofessional side. “The woman across the room, Jane, was just telling me about her divorce. I’m divorced too,” I explained.

“Sharing experiences is like having orgasms. Tell me more. What’s your former husband doing now?”

“I never had a husband. I might as well have been married to Rhonda, the director of women’s studies at my home university. We lived in adjacent garden apartment buildings, were constant companions, and shared the same cat. We never had sex with each other, though. But she became a lesbian with Jasmine, our married best friend. Things will never be the same between Rhonda, Jasmine, and me. I’m divorced from two women.”



“This doesn’t sound so bad. You can now sleep with Jasmine’s husband. And if that doesn’t work, I’ll introduce you to my friend, Woodhurst Berman. You’ll like Woodhurst. I’ve slept with him. He’s great—really sexy. Once, while we were having dinner, he licked spaghetti sauce off my nipple. We were eating naked. It was summer. Professors are so sexy. I have had sex in MLA bedroom beds while interviews were going on in the adjoining room. That is how I met my current boyfriend, Malcolm. When Malcolm was interviewing me in the New York Hilton, I couldn’t take my mind off the bed. Interview *shminterview*. I was alone in a bedroom with an attractive man. So I just stood up and took off my clothes. What else was I supposed to do? Malcolm and I have been going out for the last two years. He’s black. I just love black men’s bodies. They are so much more beautiful than white men’s bodies. And I just love to eat black penis. I don’t like the dark meat on turkeys, though. Maybe this is why my field is nineteenth-century American literature. I enjoy reading *Moby-Dick* while dreaming about giant white penises.”

Veronique became a friend who had a lasting impact upon me. During the Anita Hill / Clarence Thomas hearings, for example, I stood in front of my State University of New York at Greenwich Village class, taught *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, and thought about Veronique. History would differ if she, rather than Anita Hill, had worked for Clarence Thomas. Veronique would have harassed him. Not one to stop at a Coke can, she saw



pubic hairs on everything. But back to the beginning of our friendship. And more about SUNY–Greenwich Village later.

Jane, Veronique, and I spent time together during the Fulbright group's planned excursion to Berlin's Olympic Stadium. I was clearly positioned as the middle ground between these women. (When I am the middle ground, then we know we are in trouble.) They loathed each other and liked me. I tried to direct the conversation toward safe terrain as the three of us lined up in front of the stadium to use the toilet. "I think I still have the last vestiges of a bladder infection," I said.

"That's strange. I have a bladder infection too. I got it from my new boyfriend," Jane responded.

"And I have one too," interjected Veronique. I caught it from my officemate at Bremen. We often have sex during office hours. He is cute and nice and he likes me. His dirty penis is the only problem." Three women scholars—Fulbright professors with diverse personalities—were standing outside Berlin's Olympic Stadium discussing their bladder infections. What could this conversation mean? Perhaps it meant that being a female professor who searches for love requires an Olympic athlete's dedication and often causes pain.

After the visit to the stadium, Jane, again losing patience with Veronique, excused herself when Veronique and I went to have a drink near our hotel. Klaus Weiss, the extremely attractive chief of the Fulbright American Program Unit, entered the café and asked to join



us. I remembered how, during my first Fulbright to Germany, all the female grantees swooned in response to Klaus. The present crop of Fulbright women continued the swooning tradition. Veronique Wanderlust was no exception. I could not avoid noticing that, as soon as she saw Klaus, her mouth and legs simultaneously opened. Immediately after he excused himself to go to the toilet, she hinted at her feelings. “I want his body. I have to have it.”

“But Veronique, he’s married. And more importantly, he’s the person in charge of rescuing you. You should leave him alone.”

“You really think so?”

“Yes.” Klaus returned to the table. Veronique, who by this time had had too much to drink, stared at him—provocatively. Visibly alarmed, he looked to me to diffuse the situation. I was called upon to rescue the professional grantee rescuer from a grantee whose urge to fuck was running amok. “Perhaps we should all go back to the hotel,” I suggested. Veronique and Klaus agreed.

The three of us entered the elevator. “The forward motion of the elevator reminds me of an engorged penis’s approach.” I now pose a question that resembles quizzes which ask students to match quote to author: Guess which elevator occupant made this comment about the engorged penis? When the elevator stopped at the floor where Veronique’s room and my room were located, I assertively and loudly said, “Klaus, this is



where Veronique and I get off. See you tomorrow.” I then proceeded to push Veronique out of the elevator.

“This is where I get off, too,” he said with trepidation. Veronique was jubilant.

“Great, because I want to get off—with you, Klaus. I don’t want to see you tomorrow. I want to see all of you—now.” Klaus grabbed his key and jabbed it into his room door’s key hole. The door opened. He entered. Veronique, in hot pursuit, was about to enter too. I grasped her arm, pulled her back, and slammed Klaus’s door. I was firm.

“Veronique, down. Sit. Heal. Stay.” I led her to her room. Get in there and remain in there.”

“Okay, but I’m only listening to you because I have to catch an early flight to Montreal. I’m going to a conference. Malcolm will be there. At this time tomorrow I will be eating him. But I want to eat Klaus now.”

“If you feel the urge to seduce Klaus, call me and I’ll call room service. I’ll order a *Weisswurst* for you. You can eat that. But leave Klaus alone.”

Klaus saw me the next morning at the hotel breakfast buffet table. “Oh, good morning, Sondra.” I could not afford to allow Klaus to avoid the obvious issue so easily. I would need him in the event that either Hundschnort or Schweinshank erupted again.

“You owe me one, Klaus. And don’t you forget it.”

“I never will.”

20

Big-Mouthed Bigfoot Escapes

Throughout the bus ride that took the Fulbright meeting attendees to Potsdam, Veronique and I discussed our experiences with men. Upon arrival, we noticed that the man who had been seated behind us was extremely pale. Perhaps we had talked too loud and he had become excited by our conversation. This man was a survivor of Veronique's discourse. Even her whispered stories could cause a man to suffer a heart attack and expire.

Veronique and I are, unexpectedly, really of the same ilk. She is a very competent scholar who is obsessed with sex; I am a very competent lover who is obsessed with scholarship. Since I want a husband and she wants a secure place in the profession, we have a lot to learn



from each other. I could teach her about how discipline yields numerous publications and she could teach me about how overt flirtatiousness yields men's attention. Recognizing this mutual benefit, she began to explain how to be more flirtatious; I began to tell her about the prime directive: nothing is more important than tenure. We must be excellent teachers; Veronique and I later noticed that we had switched roles. This is how we sounded two years later:

SONDRA, addressing Veronique's answering machine:
"Are you there? Are you having sex?"

VERONIQUE, answering the phone: "No. But I have seven articles in circulation. I am also finishing a second book proposal. And how are you?"

SONDRA: "I have responses to fifty men's *New York Magazine* personal ads circulating and I have published my own ad in the *New York Review of Books*. You should have seen the ad that appeared in *Lingua Franca*: 'Beautiful, tenured English professor announces position for husband. Any applicants?' All of these guys are now mailing their vitas to me. Answering personal ads is like reader-response criticism. I'm Norman Holland's student; I can handle personal ads. I'm still in the process of using all those German condoms I bought. Well, after last night, five more condoms have bitten the dust. Veronique, you're so right. I love sex."

VERONIQUE: "I'm glad that you're having fun. But I don't think you really want to get married. I'm so tired. I was up to four in the morning writing two articles at once. Gotta go. Gotta polish them. Bye."



Presently, though, Veronique and I were not teaching each other anything. Instead, we were putting thick woolen shields over our shoes in order not to scratch a Potsdam *Schloss*'s wooden floors. Veronique was not happy. "I don't like these shoe things. Having to use condoms is bad enough. But I do not see why I have to put protective covers over my shoes." Veronique's mother very obviously does not wrap her apartment in plastic.

"We'll just clomp around in here for a few minutes. It won't be that bad," I tried to say cheerfully. I was wrong. We were imprisoned in a boring East German-guided *Schloss* tour. Whenever the Fulbright group entered a room, the guide locked the door behind the assembled people. She then proceeded to drone on about details no one wanted to hear. East German institutions still had not gotten the knack of freedom so soon after the Berlin Wall's demise. The door-locking must be a remnant of the Communist regime's desire to separate various tourist groups. Veronique and I felt trapped. And, concerning the shoe covers, we were not ones to suffer bound feet gladly. Two female Fulbrighters planned their escape from East German oppression. "We gotta get out of this place, if it's the last thing we ever do," Veronique said to me.

"Boy, there's a better life for me and you. I agree. I can't stand this tour. Follow me." We clomped over to the guide, a frumpy woman who immediately disliked us. "We wish to leave."

"I'm sorry, but leaving is strictly verboten. You will



proceed with the tour. You will remain locked in each room while I speak. You will not leave the room until I unlock it.” Veronique took over.

“We have to go to the toilet.” Both of us crossed our arms, crossed our bound feet, and looked defiantly uncomfortable.

“You do recall the concern for the floors,” I added. Knowing when she was defeated, the guide unlocked the door. Veronique and I triumphantly stood in the hall.

“We’re free,” she said. “But do you know the way out?”

“No. I think we’re lost. But if we clomp around in here long enough, we’re sure to find the front entrance. I don’t think we should take these shoe-cover things off. Picture us, two American female scholars fleeing Communist oppression by shuffling through an East German aristocratic abode.” Although Veronique and I encountered many locked doors and made many wrong turns, we did, eventually, find the way out. After removing the shoe covers and placing them with their piled fellows, we bolted for freedom. We congratulated ourselves while enjoying the fresh air in the lovely park surrounding the building.

Our happiness was short-lived. The bus was not in its expected parking space. After unsuccessfully investigating two other alternative potential bus locations, we became very nervous. Or, more accurately, I became nervous and Veronique lost control.



“We’re stranded in East Germany. Terrible things happen to people here. This is really serious. And you remember that I rescheduled my trip to Montreal. My plane leaves early in the morning. Now I will miss it. I have to have sex with Malcolm. If he and his penis are in Montreal and I’m stuck here alone and penisless I will die.” I tried to cheer Veronique.

“Maybe Klaus will rescue us. Rescuing us is his job, after all. We can’t be the first Fulbrighters to get into trouble in East Germany during the Berlin Meeting.”

“If Klaus arrived, there would be nowhere to have sex with him. I wouldn’t be caught dead in that creepy *Schloss* again. And those shoe covers are so unromantic. I want to be with my Malcolm.” Veronique began to sob. I put my arms around her.

“We have to be calm. We have to think. All will be lost if we’re hysterical. Do you trust me?”

“Yes. You are so authoritative and masculine.”

“If you trust me, listen to me. Please stop crying.”

“Okay,” she sniffed.

“You speak fluent German. We need to find an official. When we do, I’ll place you in front of her/him. Once you find yourself positioned thusly, speak German. This is our only hope.” It was rapidly becoming darker and colder. We found no official. When we approached a phone booth, we discovered that we did not have enough change. I looked at the phone and wished that the British Fulbright Commission would call. I



was so desperate, I would even welcome a call from Herbert. No one phoned.

Finally, we located the salesperson in the *Schloss* gift shop. “Speak German, Veronique,” I said. She mustered enough energy to do so. The salesperson pointed to the left. We saw the bus. Our fellow Fulbrighters cheered as we embarked. The frumpy East German guide glared.

No men’s lives were endangered during our bus ride back to Berlin’s western sector; Veronique and I were too exhausted to talk about sex. And we were preoccupied with thinking about the price of nonconformity.

21

Welcome to the Hotel California

After all of my travels, I looked forward to spending time in Rottingen focusing upon my research. Two days after my return from Berlin, I was ready to begin work. Norris was settled comfortably on my desk. I picked up my pen. The phone rang. “Hi, this is Jane Weintraub. I have some library work to do in Rottingen next week. My boyfriend, Wulf, offered to drive me there from Erlangen. Would you mind if we stayed with you for four days or so? I would love to see you. Wulf wants to meet you.”

“Consider yourself welcome. Come whenever you want and stay as long as you like.”

Norris stretched and yawned. I picked up a pen



again. The phone rang again. I heard a familiar New England patrician twang. “We did not get along very well in Israel and Italy. I want to make up for this unpleasantness. I have to give a lecture in Stuttgart. I want to visit you after the lecture.”

“Okay Thurston. My apartment has thick walls. The building is very solid. You can certainly come here.” As soon as I put the receiver down, the phone rang yet again. It was Letitia Levy, a contemporary American literature scholar whom I’d known since my MA days. Letitia was a Fulbright grantee in France. Soon after my arrival in Rottingen, I had persuaded Hundsnort to invite her to give a lecture. Even though the invitation had been approved by both the French and German Fulbright Commissions, another American feminist was the last thing Schweinshank desired to encounter. Despite the animosity existing between Schweinshank and me, I did not want students to miss the opportunity to hear Letitia. Also, I could not allow Schweinshank to silence another feminist. I explained the entire situation to Letitia. Although she found what I had to say extraordinary, she agreed to follow through with her planned visit to Rottingen. “But I will not dress up in costumes,” she stipulated. “Costumes are not my style. Oh, and another thing, may I bring Sammy?”

“I didn’t know that you were living with someone. Bring Sammy. I would like to meet him.”

“He is rather large.”



“Surely your boyfriend can’t be too fat to fit into an apartment.”

“Sammy is a sheepdog. I couldn’t stand to be away from him during the entire Fulbright year. So I brought him to France. I hope that you don’t think my behavior is weird.”

“I would be the last person to arrive at that conclusion. My cat, Norris Compton Lear, is here at my side. Sammy is welcome. I’m sure he and Norris will get along fine. I look forward to seeing you and Sammy soon.” Brilliant female professors who bring animals on Fulbrights seemed to be a hot trend. I just was not certain about this trend’s full implication, though. Nor was I sure about the consequences of all the invitations I had issued. I just knew that Sammy had better not mistake Norris for a sheep. Norris was not one to suffer sheepdogs who wished to herd him gladly. One false move from Sammy, and Norris would turn him into dead meat. I had the same potential fate in mind for Thurston.

Thurston was the first guest to arrive. “Thurston Howell, I would like you to meet Norris Compton Lear,” I said as I had the feeling my apartment had been transformed into Goyimville. Norris padded over, looked at Thurston, and sank his fangs into his leg.

“Oh, gawd, just as my toes were recovering from your infernal clog traps, now I am exposed to a vicious stock. That is exactly what Norris is—a stock. But I like cats. And I suppose that if I didn’t like you, I



wouldn't be here. So, you and the stock and I can just settle down and try to get along."

"I don't think this will be the case. We're going to have company." The bell rang. Jane and her boyfriend entered. "Thurston, this is Jane Weintraub and—please forgive me—Jane, I don't remember your boyfriend's full name." Thurston's eyes widened with trepidation when he saw that Jane was wearing clogs.

"Wulf, Wulf Rohr." Wulf nodded at Thurston and me. "Wulf doesn't talk much. He's from northern Germany, close to the Scandinavian border. People from up there are the hardy silent type." Wulf nodded in agreement. Wulf was tall and round and hairy and good-natured looking. His long, fluffy gray hair fell in his eyes. Jane, then, was part of the same category as Letitia and I. She was another female Fulbrighter accompanied by a pet. One particular literary character bluntly describes the blurred boundaries between men and canines: "Men are dogs," said Miss Lissie dispassionately, stirring the black pot of gumbo with a wooden spoon [in Alice Walker's *Temple of My Familiar*]. Wulf continued to say nothing. Thurston followed suit. I, however, knew what he was thinking: "Oh, gawd."

Norris came to investigate the new arrivals. He spat at Thurston and sniffed Wulf. Wulf got down on his hands and knees and patted Norris. Norris licked Wulf's face. The door bell rang. Letitia and Sammy entered. She looked at the group and smiled. Referring to



Wulf she said, “How thoughtful of you, Sondra. You found another sheepdog for Sammy to play with.” Letitia, one of the nicest people I know, intended no sarcasm. Since she was so accustomed to Sammy, when she glanced at Wulf positioned on the floor on all fours, she naturally thought she was seeing a sheepdog. Jane intuited that Letitia meant no harm.

“Wulf is my boyfriend, not a sheepdog. Speak, Wulf.” He smiled awkwardly.

And this is Sammy. Sammy, obviously, is a dog and not a boyfriend. Give Wulf your paw, Sammy,” said Letitia. While Wulf and Sammy were shaking paws, I introduced Thurston.

“Thurston is neither a boyfriend nor a dog.” Thurston clarified his exact category.

“I am a New England WASP. I am very reserved.”

“Yes, since Thurston is so quiet, it doesn’t really matter which species category he most closely fits into.” I, of course, was lying. I could never have sex with Thurston when my friends were located in the same apartment with us. Doing so would not only be embarrassing, it would also be unsafe. After only one unprotected exposure to the sound of a Thurston-gasm, my guests would need to use hearing aids for life. Since it was April and they had not packed ear muffs, it was my responsibility to protect them. I had to make sure that no Thurston-gasms would occur. “I have a good idea, everyone. Since we’re such a large group, why don’t we have a good old slumber party. The



women can sleep in my bedroom, and the men can sleep in the living room. The animals, and I am not being rigid about this category, can roam at will.” Everyone agreed with this arrangement. Then, the door bell rang.

“Hi, Sondra. Since you seem to be having a party, Geronimo and I popped over to join the fun. May I speak to you alone in the kitchen?” asked Brigitte. I nodded affirmatively as I watched Geronimo, Sammy, and Wulf chase each other while barking at the top of their lungs. But I did not regret the slumber party scenario I had set in motion. Thurston, meanwhile, had garnered a new ally. He was sitting in a corner with Norris curled up in his arms. Being fellow WASPs, Thurston and Norris were both miserable—that is, they were both in “oh, gawd” mode. Brigitte and I walked into the kitchen. “I’ll be with you in a minute, Brigitte.” I just want to make a phone call. Relying upon the more-the-merrier theory, I called Susan and Melissa and asked them to come over and to bring their boyfriends, Gottfried and Siegfried. (Melissa must be the world’s only black woman from the Midwest who has a German boyfriend named Siegfried.) Though their Fritos supply had been reduced to a mere twenty-five bags (king size), the ever helpful Susan and Melissa offered to bring some munchies.

“What is it you would like to discuss, Brigitte?”

“I know our agreement was that I would only use the ‘Antonio back-window-to-your-apartment plan’



when you were away lecturing. But this is an emergency. My father is getting stricter, and I must be with my Antonio. I've learned fifty Italian words. The relationship is getting really exciting. Do you think your guests would notice if Antonio and I tried to be alone in your crowded apartment?" Knowing that Brigitte was desperate and lovesick, I decided to help her.

"My friends are very understanding people. I'm sure that if we explained the situation to them, they would cooperate. I went into the living room, banged a spoon on a lamp to attract attention, and announced an amendment to the slumber party scenario. "Sit, Sammy. Sit, Geronimo. Sit, Wulf. I have a new plan. Everyone, please meet my neighbor and friend Brigitte. She needs to use the apartment to have sex. She and her boyfriend will come through the back window at about three in the morning. So, I think that we should all sleep in the living room and let them have my bedroom. I hope y'all will stay. This will be fun."

All the guests agreed—except Thurston. "Is there a four-star hotel in Rottingen? I want to check in. Then, of course, I want to have an elegant dinner."

"Sorry, no four-star hotel. And all the town's hotels are being used to house East Germans. As far as dinner is concerned, Rottingen has a McDonald's. I'll go and get some hamburgers for you all." Revenge is sweet. The sound of a crowd gathering outside the apartment building distracted Thurston from contemplating how to kill me. I looked out the window and saw a school of



my piranha students. Twenty-five irate women soon joined my guests.

“Frau Dr. Lear, you do remember that I am the head of the Feminist Forum? We have heard that Schweinshank wishes to prevent Letitia Levy from presenting a lecture. We will not allow this atrocity to happen. First, we have collected money to provide Letitia with an honorarium. Second, we are mounting a protest rally. We have come here to consult with you about what slogans to paint on our signs. We have the bed sheets that will serve as the signs we will hang on the walls of the lobby in the Humanities Building. Because time is of the essence, we would like to begin to paint them now,” said a piranha.

Before I could respond, the apartment was filled with feminists painting slogans on paw-print covered sheets. The feminists painted; the dogs romped; Brigitte anticipated; Jane and Letitia chatted; Thurston and Norris sulked; I croaked. Brigitte expressed her gratitude. “What a great opportunity to get to know more Rottingen feminists. And it is fun to spend time with all of these nice Americans. I really like that American song about the welcome to the Hotel California. I have never been to California. But it seems that your apartment resembles the Hotel California. I’m so glad you are my neighbor. You are so much more exciting than the German family that used to live here.”

While Brigitte was happy, I was unnerved. I was used to living alone. Now, I was surrounded by my



own rendition of “lions, and tigers, and bears, oh my”: dogs, and piranhas, and Thurston—oy! Such a tumult you shouldn’t know from. I barely heard the ringing phone. “This is your mother, Herbert. I know that I have never flown in my life. But your father and I miss you. We want to visit you. We can be there in Germany tomorrow. What is that noise? I hear barking. Are you living with dogs? Don’t think that you’re going to inflict dogs on me. But you can meet a husband while dog-walking. I’ll look away. Who are all those women I hear? Why don’t you spend your time on essentials?”

“Mother dear, I don’t think that now is a good time for you and Egor to visit. Things are a little hectic around here. Gotta go. Can’t violate the government study on mother deprivation. Bye.” There was nothing to do but try to be a good hostess. I congratulated the feminists about their efforts on Letitia’s behalf. I told Thurston that he would not die if he ate a hamburger. I threw balls to Sammy, Wulf, and Geronimo. Norris, who was hiding under my bed, did not need attention. Neither did Letitia and Jane, who were obviously quite interested in each other. I hoped their interest wouldn’t intensify; my apartment would not be large enough to provide them with privacy—even if Susan and Melissa failed to arrive and I did put Wulf, Sammy, and Geronimo in the backyard. Although Brigitte would not mind if Letitia and Jane joined her and Antonio, this sleeping arrangement would result in my being alone



with Thurston. Faced with impending Thurston-gasms, I panicked. Vacating the apartment was the only thing to do. But where to stay? Schweinshank had room. He had a big house; his wife had recently moved out. Although he really was not bad looking, I entertained this possibility for only one second. I had an infinitely less problematic idea. I quietly abandoned the assembly in my apartment and walked across the hall. “Hello Frau Therondopolous-Klein. May I please lie down on Brigitte’s bed, put her pillow over my head, and close the door to her room?”

22

I Don't Want to Suck Your Blood

Two days after the hordes vacated my apartment, things were returning to normal. Somehow, I had managed to scrub painted dog paw prints off the floor and extricate squashed Fritos from between sofa cushions. I settled down to enjoy a good night's sleep. I smelled smoke. Just my luck. After I had saved the apartment building from Thurston-gasm-induced collapse, it was now fated to deconstruct via flame. Always a survivor, I thought about how to save myself, Norris, and my stamp collection. My refrigerated book manuscript was not in much danger. I kept the manuscript in the fridge to protect it from fire. Since German refrigerators are small, safeguarding manuscripts while in



Germany requires special sacrifice. (Manuscripts occupy space chicken could fill.) Perhaps this situation explains why I'm not married. Picture a husband who opens the fridge, anticipating something satisfying and refreshing. Instead, he encounters chilled feminist theory topped with lesbian planets on the rocks. What husband would tolerate this substitution?

A sharp pain accompanied by a very pleasant sensation distracted me from smoke sniffing and survival strategies. Focusing upon the pain, I knew it could be derived from only one source: fang puncture. Norris was at it again. If I had told him once I had told him a thousand times—I hated having my big toe bitten while I was sleeping. Perhaps Thurston had put him up to this tactic as revenge for the clog traps. The puncturing of my toe continued as I felt a cold, wet cat nose press against my cheek. Norris, then, was not toe puncturing. As the smoke cleared, the culprit came into view.

A figure wearing a tuxedo, a monocle, and a black cape with bright red lining was sucking my toe. A diamond-studded walking stick lay next to my bed. Even though I was becoming short of breath and feeling very pleasant contractions, I struggled to ask the obvious question. “Who are you, and why are you biting my toe?”

“I am a literary theorist.”

“You haven't answered my question fully. Fellow critics routinely direct biting comments at me. But not



one of them has ever sucked my toe and punctured it. At least not a stranger.”

“I’m not a stranger. I’m a science fiction critic. I like your work. I wanted to meet you. I had to do some research in Stuttgart. So I flew over to Rottingen.”

I have, throughout my career, encountered many literary theorists in diverse situations. A theorist who defies reality has materialized in my bedroom? Yawn. During my tenure battle at Blackhole, two entire committees defied reality. I won that one. Whoever this man was and whatever he wanted, his hidden agenda could not be worse than my tenure battle. Hence, it was easy for me to remain calm.

“Rottingen is a forty-minute train trip from Stuttgart. Flying is certainly not necessary.”

“I do not fly in the usual manner. I just tap my walking stick and arrive instantaneously. My flying works like e-mail. The smoke is the only problem. Sorry about that. It is beginning to dissipate now.”

Even though this man was sophisticated, intelligent, and elegant, his marital status was not the first thing on my mind. “All the literary theorists I know use computers to e-mail. And, although I do not wish to harp on technicalities, they send words, not themselves.”

“The last part of your statement is open to argument. But, before I argue, allow me to introduce myself. I am Count Ilya Lugosi, the man from T.R.A.N.S.Y.L.V.A.N.I.A.—that is, Theorists, Researchers, Authors, Nudnik Scholars, Yahoos, Librarians, Vampires, Announcing New Interpretations and



Analyses. Although I fit many categories which define this group, I am most active in the Vampire Caucus. Stanley Fish is absolutely right when he defines professionalism. There are so many cottage industries springing up to keep the profession going. But I like scholarly villages; they provide a good environment for me. Sondra, I hope you won't hold the fact that I am an immortal vampire against me."

"No problem. I'm a Jewish New Yorker. I embrace multiculturalism. You seem to be a little nicer than most of the vampire theorists I've encountered. So, tell me more about yourself."

"My interest in science fiction focuses upon changing vampires' cultural codes. My biology is not my destiny. I don't drink blood. I just move blood around; excite blood; agitate blood. As you were becoming aware, my bites create orgasms—not death. But I do not always engage in this *vumon*, the critical term I coined to denote inception. This new sexual *vumon*, this new sexuality, is a great birth-control method. (No ovums are involved in this particular sexual *vumon*.) I also enjoy having sex in the more routine way." Ilya paused momentarily to kiss my hand. "I like sex; I like women; I like you. At conferences, I have gazed at you longingly and often. When I listened to you speak about feminist science fiction protagonists who kill men, I could not wait to meet you. I knew that you would accept my particular ethnic background and my unorthodox ways. I knew that a person who has the courage to pioneer feminist science fiction would remain calm



when a male supernatural creature transports himself—uninvited—into her bedroom. I would like to have usual, garden-variety, bourgeois sex with you. And may I bite your neck? I would love to bite your neck.”

Although meeting a vampire critic in one’s field is safer than meeting a blind date from a personal ad, a woman cannot be too careful. I used my usual direct approach to state what was on my mind. (My approach cannot be otherwise. Norman Holland says that my identity theme revolves around directness.) “How do I know I can trust you? What if your orgasm vumon is just a line? What if you’re a male vampire of the usual type?”

“I was your outside tenure reader. Your life has been in my hands. Surely, you will not deny my desire to run my hands over your curvaceous and compelling body.” Ilya began to caress my breasts; I did not stop him. I now trusted him. This author of my positive outside tenure review could be nothing other than trustworthy. It would be fun to have sex with an endearing and benevolent vampire. A person who had been around for so long must know a lot of interesting sexual positions. I certainly view his longevity as a plus. In light of my lack of foreign language training in graduate school at SUNY–Buffalo, his ability to speak every human language is also a plus. I considered that since I was such a failure at controlling typical—that is, mortal—men, I would certainly be powerless against a supernatural, immortal one. Even H.D.P. (Herbert Daughter Power, the strength inherited from generations of female Jewish



ancestors) would be ineffective against Ilya. Even Herbert herself could not nudge an immortal to death.

“You helped me when I was vulnerable and untenured. I owe you one. Yes, you can bite my neck. You can do anything you want with any part of me—with one stipulation: vumon or no vumon, you have to use a condom.”

“I hate condoms. I have hated condoms since they first invented them in Egypt. Queen Hatshepsut (even in those days, I liked assertive women) made me use a condom. As if having sex in those itchy reeds wasn’t bad enough.” I reached for my condom stash acquired from the local *Apotheke*.

“Hatshepsut or no Hatshepsut, put this on,” I insisted while handing Ilya a condom.

“I am immortal and disease-free. We do not need to use these things. You are in error.”

“But I can die. And I have to live to see my book published. I do not judge having sex with a vampire to be a procedural irregularity vis-à-vis condom use. My decision stands. You have no recourse.” I guess that I had spent too much time discussing my tenure case with the Blackhole provost. I have, it seems, mastered a foreign language after all. I speak fluent WASP male administrative discourse. As soon as Ilya opened the condom package, I knew that, unlike his penis, his decision about condoms did not stand. He snapped his fingers. His cape and tuxedo disappeared. He snapped his fingers again. A condom appeared on his penis.



“Wait. I have to make a phone call. I have to call America.

“I can’t wait. My sexuality is like a washing machine. Once my cycle is turned on, I have to follow through. If my cycle is interrupted, I become very agitated. You can’t turn me off before I arrive at my spin cycle.”

“I’m sorry, But I absolutely must consult a feminist colleague.” I dialed Montana. “Hello, Rhonda? Hi. Just a quick question. Did you ever have sex with Endora? No? Oh well. Guess you can’t be of help. Gotta go. I have some laundry in the machine. Regards to Jasmine.” I returned to the bed. Ilya began to suck my toe. “Wait. I have to get diet cranberry juice. I get bladder infections. I can’t have sex without drinking cranberry juice.” I went to the refrigerator and found a quart cranberry juice jar stored under chapter five of my book manuscript.

“Can I have some of your thirst-quenching red liquid?”

“Sure. But don’t drink much. I’m in dire need of this stuff. I trust that I won’t die from you sucking my blood. But if you drink all my cranberry juice and I get a bladder infection, my death might be imminent.”

“I just want a sip. Maybe we should go to sleep. I’m very tired. We can have sex in the morning.”

“Fine with me. I’m tired too.”

“I can’t sleep. This bed is too soft.”



“You’re a vampire, not the princess in *Once upon a Mattress*.”

“This bed is untenable. I need a plank to put under my mattress to support it. You must find a plank.”

“I don’t have a plank. But I have a broom. I can give you a broom. So that we can go to sleep in peace, can’t you make believe that you are the Wizard of Oz and the broom belongs to the Wicked Witch of the West?”

“Absolutely not. The bed is too soft. I repeat: I must have a plank.”

“I’ve read Angela Carter’s *Bloody Chamber* and Jack Zipes’s *Don’t Bet on the Prince*. I know that fairy tales can be retold. But you don’t look like Goldilocks. If you did look like Goldilocks, you would not be sleeping in my bed—even if some of my best friends are lesbians.”

“My back hurts. Please find me a plank.”

“I’ll try my best.” I phoned Susan. “Sorry about it being three o’clock in the morning. But who else am I gonna call? Ghostbusters are not exactly what I need now. You always know how to accomplish things. Where can I acquire a plank?”

“Why?”

“Don’t ask.”

“Remember all the German cousins I have? Well, one of them keeps a plank in her garage. She lives close by. In Plankingen. They have lots of planks there. But how are you going to get to Plankingen at this time of night?”



“Don’t ask. Just give me the address.”

“Eschenweg 1.” “Thanks Susan. You’re a lifesaver.” I again focused my attention upon Ilya.

“I’ve located a plank in a neighboring town. Can you fly over and get it?”

“No. My back is too sore. I can’t fly with a sore back. You’ll have to fly there yourself and get the plank for me. Please give me my magic walking stick. What is the address where this plank is located?” He put the stick in front of my mouth.

“In addition to demanding condom use, I will not engage in any form of unsafe sex. Is this magic walking stick going to turn into your penis?”

“No. Just tell it the pertinent address.”

“Eschenweg 1. Plankingen. Deutschland.”

“Good. Now, when you are dressed and ready to go, knock the stick against the floor three times.” I dressed and knocked. Nothing happened.

“The magic walking stick isn’t working.”

“Sometimes women require special procedures.” Try clicking your clogs together. When you’re ready to fly back, press this diamond located on top of the stick. The diamond acts like the computer command key that sends e-mail.

“I followed Ilya’s directions and found myself at Eschenweg 1, Plankingen. No one was home, and the garage was locked. After investigating, I located an open window. In the same boat as Brigitte and Antonio, I climbed inside. Plank successfully in hand, I



pressed the diamond, clicked the clogs, and arrived in my bedroom.”

“I have the plank.”

“Thank you, dearest S.,” said Ilya as he went to sleep. Ilya, it seemed, was extremely demanding. I did not doubt, however, that knowing him would more than compensate for this difficulty. Dealing with a cantankerous vampire could be no worse than dealing with Herbert.

As soon as he awoke, Ilya announced that he had to write. “I’m so overworked. I have to author fifty thousand more books and a million more articles and I only have all eternity in which to accomplish my work. Time is so short. The light is bad in here. Do you have a desk lamp?”

“No.”

“This apartment is very sparsely supplied. Your knives are dull. I can’t find a blood-orange juicer. Why?”

“I’m not very domestic.”

“Get dressed. We’re going to the store.” Before I could protest, I found myself flying to Zinser, the largest department store in Rottingen. A male theorist, the creator of the orgasm vumon, was buying small appliances for me. Ilya’s generosity confirmed my impression that he meant well.

Soon after we flew home, Ilya asked, “What’s for lunch?”

See what you can find in the fridge. A forlorn-looking Ilya returned from his fridge foray holding my



sixth book chapter and a frozen chicken. “What do I do with this particular chicken?”

“I’m not sure. Although I have lately had some interesting encounters with chickens and alleged chickens, I don’t know what to do with this chicken any more than you do. As I said, I’m not domestic. Do you mean to tell me that you have been around since the Egyptians invented condoms and you still are unsure about what to do with a frozen chicken?”

“Women always seem to know such things.”

“This particular woman is absolutely not a more proficient chicken cook than you are. If you want lunch, you’ll just have to prepare it yourself.”

“Do you like smoked chicken?” Ilya asked as he knocked his diamond-studded walking stick. Smoke appeared under the chicken. It was cooked. Norris ran under the sofa. If, instead of a cat, I possessed a pet goose, Ilya could cook my goose too. Lunch finished, Ilya announced the next item on his agenda. “I have to give a lecture in Sardinia tomorrow. I want you to accompany me.”

“In addition to not being domestic, I do not ‘accompany’ men. (I put my second trip to Israel—my sex excursion—in the back of my mind.) I can’t just drop everything and go to Sardinia. I have to take my neighbor to Paris and lecture in Aix-en-Provence as well as in Switzerland.”

“No problem. I can suspend time.”



“Then why do you complain about being overworked?” “All high-powered male theorists complain about being overworked. Complaining makes me feel like one of the boys. It is now 14:06. If you agree to come to Sardinia, when you return it will still be 14:06. Please say that you will agree.” I had never been to Sardinia. This was an offer I couldn’t refuse.

“All right. I’ll do it.”

“Good. Phone Alitalia.”

“Alitalia? Why? I assumed that we could just use magic-walking-stick mode.”

“Sorry. Magic-walking-stick mode won’t fly. Remember the recession. There’s a tight vampire travel budget—especially for academic vampires in the humanities. So, no magic flying. We’ll just have to fly first-class in a plane. Isaac Asimov always calls me ‘mach 9.’ Budget cuts have now slowed me down to mach 6.”

We arrived in Sardinia and checked into a hotel. Our stay was very short.

“The beds are too soft. I don’t like this hotel. We are moving to a different one.” We moved. “Ah, the beds here are just right. Try out this bed with me. You know, theoretically, because I can stop time, I can give you multiple orgasms that last forever.” I gulped down a huge swig of diet cranberry juice.

“No way. I would have to spend eternity on Norfloxacin—and even I would run out of condoms. Mach-9 sex is too much for me. Let’s pipe down to



mach 6.” Ilya, who was at the moment enjoying his own orgasm, would agree to anything.

“Okay. Mach-6 sex coming up.” We were flying around the room entwined.

“Does flying in tandem function like outer space? I mean, do we still have gravity up here? If not, how can I tell when I’m on top? I like to be on top,” I said.

“You baby-boomer feminists are the most difficult women I have ever encountered. I admit that women have not been easy during any time period. Sappho rejected me. And trying to seduce Queen Victoria was no easy task. Catherine the Great was unstable.”

“Please stop telling me about all your old girlfriends. Who am I next to Catherine the Great? Sondra the Mediocre?”

“Certainly not. You’re so good for me. I love having sex with you. To hell with the vampire travel budget. I’m in such a great mood, I feel like splurging. We won’t fly back via Alitalia’s mundane first class. Fly me, Sondra. Come to Transylvania.”

“I have time if you keep suspending time. Before you take me home, though, I have to ask one question. You are obviously not Jewish. Are you married?”

“Yes.” So, there would never be a tabloid headline announcing “Feminist Weds Vampire.” What could I do? Herbert would not approve of this marriage anyway. I articulated my by-now-clichéd classic line.

“How nice for you. But won’t your wife mind if you show up at home with me?”



“She got over such petit bourgeois notions soon after Columbus discovered America. And, besides, she is away on vacation.” Ilya knocked his magic stick. I clicked my clogs.

“I don’t think we are in Sardinia anymore,” I said when I saw Ilya’s home. The huge hilltop castle surrounded by bats was exactly the sort of domicile I expected Ilya to inhabit. His castle contained endless shelves filled with science fiction novels. I suppose that people truly are what they read.

I don’t know exactly how long I spent living in the castle with Ilya. But, true to his word, it was 14:06 when I returned to Rottingen. Norris didn’t even have a chance to get hungry. Good thing that Brigitte did not depend upon cat-sitting for a living; Ilya could make her services obsolete. Ilya, who was still in fiscal splurging mode, arranged for me to return by flying sans plane. He said that—even though he was married and consumed with work—he would routinely show up in my life. As a parting-gift conciliation prize, he gave me a way to contact him in a dire emergency. “Here are red clogs. If you tap them together three times while saying ‘vumon,’ I’ll appear. But don’t abuse the privilege.”

“What if I do? I come from generations of noodges.”

“I’ll turn you into a frog.”

“And what do I do if I want you to vanish?”

“Act like a Jewish princess and say ‘condom.’ Bye, dearest S.” Perhaps my relationship with Ilya represented the new behavioral paradigm Lubinka Cherneva



had discussed. Admittedly, it is rather extraordinary to be the feminist mistress of a temperamental, egocentric vampire. But, as I keep saying, this pioneer stuff is not easy. Oy pioneer! Not everyone can be a feminist professorial pioneer involved with science fiction. And that is a very good thing. If too many women traveled with magic vampires, even more airlines would become bankrupt.

23

Back to the Salt Mine

It was 14:07. There was a knock on the door. “Ready to go to Paris?” Brigitte asked.

I need a minute to pack. Things have been a little hectic lately. Just let me gather some stuff appropriate for Paris, Aix, and Switzerland. I think that I by now have packing down to a science.”

“I smell smoke.”

“It’s nothing. The washing machine is malfunctioning. I’m malfunctioning, too. Must be some sort of jet lag.”

“Jet lag? I know we had a wild party. But even it could not cause jet lag. Why are you wearing red clogs? Red clogs are not your style.”

“I’m packed. Let’s save our conversation for the train ride. Pop Norris over to your mother, and then we’ll hustle to make the train.”



“Hustle? Isn’t that what whores do? Spending all this time around you is causing me to speak American English.”

“There are worse things.”

“Not in Universität Rottingen English language classes.” Brigitte paid dearly for this comment when I metamorphosed from friend into professor. Throughout our train trip, I lectured about cultural imperialism—and threw in doses of feminist theory. She was relieved when the train reached Paris.

“Onward to the hotel one of your old boyfriends mentioned,” I said. I had only agreed to follow his suggestion because I did not want to argue with Brigitte during her cat-sitting reward excursion. This decision proved to be a big mistake. “Our hotel is a warehouse. I can’t stay here. The bed is too soft. I can’t sleep here. We’re moving.” I guess that I really was part of the older, established generation. We moved. Once we settled in a proper hotel, Brigitte moved me.

“I was thinking about what you had to say about feminism. You are right, of course. But some feminine things are fun. Femininity is an integral part of my European upbringing. American women just cannot get femininity right. I’ll be glad to share some of my knowledge with you. Why don’t you have an open mind?”

“I’m open.” I neglected to tell Brigitte that I had written a book called *Estranged from Femininity*.

“I did not expect you to say that.” My openness led to spending the afternoon visiting Parisian lingerie



shops with Brigitte. Our initial arrival at the hotel/whorehouse portended well for this excursion. Under Brigitte's direction, I was now the owner of underwear that could make Frederick's of Hollywood resemble the dull lingerie stores David and I had seen in Jerusalem. Brigitte motivated me—a.k.a. the slut of the Italian science fiction conference—to dress as the Whore of Babylon. This observation made me paranoid. What if Brigitte was a Herbertian agent, a double agent who infiltrates and attacks from within? Unlike marrying a vampire, dating a spy, or sleeping with married men, purchasing lingerie would receive Herbert's seal of approval. Lingerie would help me conform to the image Herbert described whenever she watched television programs featuring Vanna White, Susan Lucci, or Linda Evans. Such programs never failed to inspire this conversation:

HERBERT: "Why? Why can't you look like them?"

SONDRA: "Vanna White, Susan Lucci, and Linda Evans do not project an image to which most feminist theorists aspire."

HERBERT: "Why don't you do something with yourself? Wear makeup. Bleach your hair. Why can't you look like Kathy Lee Gifford? She's your age. Look at all the things she does. And she is a wife and mother. What is it that you do? All you do is go from the library to computer to the library."

SONDRA: "I am, at the moment, writing a scholarly book."

HERBERT: "Will that take long? Wear makeup."



I could imagine Herbert appearing on *Oprah* to discuss a topic never before aired on any talk show: “Mothers Who Suffer Because Their Daughters Are Scholars Instead of Bimbos.” Herbert just could not accept the impossibility of changing a poststructuralist feminist with a nine-page vita into Bill Clinton’s “friend” Gennifer Flowers. At the moment, Brigitte was acting as a Dr. Frankenstein trying to alter human life forms. She looked at the pile of silk and lace strewn on her bed. “I’m going to pop over to visit my old boyfriend. Why don’t you use this time to do things you want to do. You know, your version of “touristy” things. The stuff that you told me makes you so happy: trying to glimpse Guttari; sighting Cixous; eyeing Irigaray; visiting the spot where Barthes was hit by a laundry truck; undertaking a pilgrimage to Lacan’s birth place. You do your thing and I’ll do mine. And when we come back, you can try on lingerie.”

When Brigitte returned, I was wearing a strapless red underwire bra, red bikini panties, a black garter belt, and red clogs. I felt like a neon sign.

“Sondra, this lingerie just isn’t you. And what’s wrong with your nails?”

“I’m not very practiced at applying red nail polish.”

“Take it off. Take all the polish off. You can not go out with your nails looking like that. It looks like a bad paint job—for a house. This lingerie idea is a disaster. I give up. I’ll stop trying to change you.”

“Good.”



“Thank you so much for this lovely trip. I’m going home to climb through your back window. Have fun in Aix and Switzerland. Bye.”

I flew in a plane (although I had removed the red nail polish and the red lingerie, I still retained my red clogs—and decided not to use them) to a venue in which I was the only American participating in a French-language French theory conference. It was time to present my feminist science fiction paper. I sat on stage, accompanied by the person designated to introduce me, and stared at the fashionable francophone audience. If my life depended upon it, even after my lessons from Brigitte, I could never acquire the “look” of French women. But I was not intimidated. Not one of them could possibly be wearing underwear more outrageous than what I had on beneath my German Mondri pants suit. (For this special French occasion, I was also wearing my Arche shoes.)

I looked straight at the audience. “In order for me exactly to convey every nuance of my paper, I choose to speak English rather than French.” While I obviously could not look like a French woman, this audience would never know that I could not speak French like one. I finished reading. The audience applauded. Then, a man who appeared as if he could intimidate Derrida raised his hand. My guise of being a fluent French speaker was all over; his French diatribe placed me in deep academic doo-doo. He shouted and gestured wildly for fifteen minutes while the audience gasped. I



gaspd too—even though I could not understand a word he said. His antifeminist diatribe (antifeminist diatribe is a universal patriarchal linguistic mode that needs no translation) concluded, he glared and awaited my response. I said the only thing I could say: “Non.” The audience, interpreting this short retort as purposeful biting sarcasm, applauded enthusiastically. Uttering the only other two French words I had the ability to say—“Merci, merci beaucoup”—I smiled and exited stage right.

I exited France and entered Switzerland to attend a contemporary-fiction conference held in Estavayer-le-Lac, a charming resort town. The participants were housed in a grand hotel/health spa equipped with thermal baths and mineral springs. Guests moved from hotel to bath to spring attired in white robes the hotel provided. How convenient: upon encountering an attractive man, I could try to seduce him in the lobby while attired in my bathrobe. So much for all the lingerie I now possessed. Luckily, in Switzerland (unlike in Italy), it is not necessary to keep one’s passport in one’s underwear. But, to my mind, Switzerland’s pristine environment can be problematic. My period came during the flight from Paris to Geneva. I stood in my elegant hotel room holding blood-stained black lace bikini panties. What to do? One cannot hang wet lingerie from a Swiss grand hotel balcony. As I ran the bathroom’s hair-dryer nozzle over my wet panties, I thought of a scene from Yvonne Rainier’s *Man Who Envied*



Women. The film's dialogue is abruptly interrupted when a woman enters the picture, looks at the audience, and asks all menstruating women to leave the theater. I imagined little microphone-equipped Swiss trucks rolling through Estavayer-le-Lac streets announcing that all menstruating women should leave Switzerland.

It seemed logical to me that orgasms, as well as menstruation, were *défendu, prohibito, verboten* in Switzerland. But I was not going to play by this imagined rule—even in public. I had long ago discovered that, as far as orgasms are concerned, shower massagers are better than men and that swimming-pool water jets are better than shower massagers. Close encounters with pool water jets always result in super orgasms. (This information even shocked Veronique. Soon after our return to the States, she phoned one Saturday night to say that she was so bored, she was going to the drug-store because panty shields were on sale. “Oh, gawd,” she said when I told her about the pool-gasms. When my female friends echo Thurston, I know that I'm in trouble. “How long does it take to reach orgasm that way?” she asked. I explained that it depends upon the intensity of the water.)

I dived into this particular Swiss pool with the intention of making myself very happy. It is not easy to keep a straight public face while having orgasms. The swimming Swiss might have thought that my bathing cap was too tight. As soon as I was satisfied and happily



floating in the warm water, a swimming Swiss swam up to me. He was a distinguished-looking sixty-something man who stared at my breasts outlined in my bathing suit and said the sentence I most wanted to hear: “I want to marry you.” I immediately answered this man who could afford to stay in a grand hotel: “Yes. Yes. Yes. I will marry you.” The man knew that I was absolutely serious. He swam away—underwater. “Easy come, easy go,” I said to myself as I began to do breast-stroke laps.

When I picked up my head between strokes, I heard a familiar English-speaking voice. The speaker was Hilbert Squires-Eastman, the lover of the South African postmodernist critic Kwami Narumba. As far as I knew, Kwami and Hilbert had not changed very much. Hilbert still devoted himself to Kwami; Kwami still devoted himself to himself—and to his mistresses. A gorgeous Québécoise named Babette is his most recent sexual interest. Kwami had informed me via e-mail that he was trying to go on a sexual diet, to give up Babette’s feast. I doggie-paddled over to Hilbert.

“Hi, Hilbert.”

“Sondra? How nice to see you. Kwami and I were looking forward to catching up with you. We got in late last night. We were going to call your room this morning. But the alarm clock didn’t go off. Kwami can never wake up without an alarm clock.”

“I know.” Immediately realizing that I had said the wrong thing, I coughed and dived under water while hoping that Hilbert had not heard. It is certainly convenient to be in a swimming pool when you mistakenly



let a man know that you have slept with his lover. When I surfaced, Hilbert was still smiling.

“Well, enough swimming. I’ll tell Kwami that I saw you. Maybe we’ll have a chance to chat further tomorrow during the swamp excursion.”

It was easy to notice that Kwami and Hilbert were enacting some sort of new-found devotion scenario. They kissed during paper sessions and held hands while walking with the conference group. I was resentful. Due to Hilbert’s presence and what had transpired between Kwami and me, guilt prevented him from being friendly. I felt left out in the cold.

I tried not to show my feelings during the trip to the swamp which constituted Switzerland’s only nature preserve. This area equals the distance from Blackhole’s Dogpatch Hall, to Darryl Hall, to Darryl Hall. (Just as Larry, Darryl, and Darryl are different hillbillies portrayed on *Newhart*, the two Darryl Halls at Blackhole are different campus buildings.) Since the Swiss swamp is no Yellowstone National Park, it was impossible for me to avoid Kwami. He tried to stay on a safe subject when he encountered me. “Look at all of those neat-looking frogs,” he said.

“If I kissed one, he would croak before telling me he is a married frog.” Literary critics can be counted upon to detect double entendre. Kwami, about to croak himself, walked over to Hilbert and kissed him.

I climbed to the top of an exceedingly high observation tower. No, I did not want to jump. Men do not cause feminist theorists to jump off towers. I merely



wanted to see the pretty view—and to be positioned atop something phallic. One of the conference participants climbed after me. Standing high above the swamp, he introduced himself. “Hi. I’m Cedric Raymond, from York, England. I came up here because I think you’re very attractive. But I can’t sleep with you. I’m married. I love my wife. Can we exchange e-mail addresses? I promise to write to you every day.” I almost fell off the tower. The impossible had happened—twice in rapid succession. First, a man had proposed marriage to me. And now a man was being loyal to his wife. Would wonders never cease? I was perched above a swamp with a man who was not a slime.

“Do you belong to T.R.A.N.S.Y.L.V.A.N.I.A.?”

“No. Why?”

“Just checking. Just trying to see if it is possible to fly off the tower instead of climbing down. Meeting you seems to be a little supernatural. I mean, you materialize just at the moment when I need a sympathetic man.”

“Supercalifragilisticexpialidocious.” Cedric jumped up and down. Nothing happened. “I think climbing is in order. May I accomplish something mundane to make you happy?”

“Would you hang out with me during this conference? I feel a little abandoned.”

“It would be a pleasure. Oh, lady in distress on a high pedestal, think of me as an English knight at your



service.” As we descended, I made a big effort not to tell Cedric that I was writing an essay on the Madonna-Whore Complex.

True to his word, Cedric did not leave my side. I particularly enjoyed his company during the excursion to Arc-et-Senans, the location of an eighteenth-century salt mine. (The conference organizer has strange interests. Obviously, he likes Swiss swamps and French salt mines.) “Cedric, you are the type to know about such things. Tell me about this place.”

“The actual salt mine is a few miles away, at Salines. Salt water was carried for miles, along wooden pipes. Upon arrival, the salt was extracted from the water through an arduous process involving drying tubes.”

“Sounds like husband hunting to me.”

Cedric and I would spend the next year thrashing out this idea via our York–New York e-mail correspondence. We sometimes mentioned Kwami. Cedric was editing the conference proceedings. I made it clear that I wanted him to position my paper in the volume directly above Kwami’s paper. Cedric, as ever, complied. “It’s true that I have never slept with you. But I did meet you in a tower. I know that you like to be on top,” he typed.

Kwami, scheduled to catch a plane after seeing the salt mine, came to say good-bye and to let me know that he looked forward to hearing from me via e-mail. (May I never get my e-mail signals mixed.) I said the only thing I could say: “Au revoir.”

24

How the West Was Lost

I was satisfied that I had done my work well while abroad. Now, after vanquishing evil professors, making good friends, and having great sex, it was time to say good-bye to Germany. Departure provided an opportunity to add another accomplishment to my list: successfully cleaning my Rottingen apartment according to German housekeeping standards. I was set to leave. So was Norris. I prepared him for his second transatlantic flight by explaining that flying west is easier than flying east.

In truth, I could not have met German housekeeping standards without Susan and Melissa's help. They located a lawn mower (perhaps they found one in Lawnmoweringen) and attacked the waist-high grass separated by the trail Brigitte and Antonio had blazed en route to my window. (I do not know from mowing.)



Mowing completed, Susan offered to drive Norris and me to the airport.

There was no place to park near the terminal. Since I could not carry both Norris and my suitcases, I asked Susan to watch him while I checked baggage. She agreed and promised not to move her car. I carried my suitcases into the terminal and looked in vain for an elevator. When I said “elevator” to the ticket counter personnel, they looked at me blankly. “Elevator, elevator,” I continued to say frantically. Knowing that I would miss my plane if I failed to make myself understood, I concentrated hard. Recalling Brigitte’s negative attitude toward my American English enabled me to solve my problem. “Lift,” I said. All the personnel pointed. I moved the suitcases to the lift, went down, and faced a big line. I flagged a woman who looked like a supervisor. “*Hilfe. Ich brauche Hilfe.* My flight is departing soon. My cat is in a car.” Taking my luggage in hand, she instructed me to retrieve my cat. I ran out of the terminal. Susan’s car was nowhere in sight. This situation was worse than the army-base foray. Although I was going home without a husband, under no circumstance would I leave without Norris. I heard a honk. I saw Susan’s car. I dashed over to it. I heard a meow. I took the cat carrier. I kissed Susan good-bye. I ran into the terminal and retrieved my luggage. I arrived at my gate.

When the flight attendant called for people boarding with children or facing special difficulty, I pre-boarded with Norris. Feeling like Moses parting the



Red Sea, I created a path in the crowded departure lounge by announcing, “Let me through. I’m carrying a live animal.” My year in Germany had taught me to wield a voice of authority. (I am, however, not in need of assertiveness training.) The last vestige of this year made itself known as I flew over Newfoundland. I could not believe that Lufthansa’s “Welcome to Kennedy Airport” film portrayed New York–arrival tumult as an orderly procedure. Lufthansa even depicted Manhattan as being clean and organized. This German image of America was challenged as I stood in the customs line and heard an inspector say, in a stronger version of my own New York accent, “Hey lady, move it. I don’t have all day.”

“I guess I’m not in Germany any more,” I thought. How true. Even though I had marked “yes” to answer the customs form’s question about whether I was carrying animals, birds, plants or seeds, the inspector did not inspect Norris. I could have been importing killer German tse-tse flies, which would decimate all American crops. I could be a crop-warfare terrorist. Maybe the inspector did not care because there are no crops in Queens. Regardless, I failed to understand how the customs system could overlook a cat and notice French abortion pills.

Except for the evening when I nearly broke my leg while tripping over plastic-covered carpet, life in my parents’ condom/condominium settled down to normal—or, more specifically, to what passed for normal



there. I planned to spend a few days at my computer working on my book before flying to Montana to meet, at Veronique's suggestion, Woodhurst Berman, her former lover. Because Herbert had recently heard the term "computer virus" for the first time, she was not comfortable with the computer's presence. "There's a big scare about computer viruses. What if I catch one? That's just what I need, to catch a computer virus. Don't I have enough trouble?"

"You can't catch a computer virus."

"But the computer smells. It gives off fumes. I can't stand computer fumes. Can't you be considerate? Can't you understand that I am susceptible to computer viruses and sensitive to computer fumes? Can't you cover the computer with plastic? That's the least you can do." Herbert never threw out antiquated appliances. Hence, she owned a thirty-something black-and-white television set. (I remember watching the Kennedy assassination on that set.) She would go to television stores, sniff all the televisions on the sales floor, complain about their noxious odor, and return home to watch soap operas in black and white. The televised picture was so poor, electronic snow accompanied July weather reports.

"No. I can't type on a plastic-covered keyboard or read a plastic-covered screen. Plastic retards my writing sensations."

"Stop hiding behind that computer and go out and look for a husband." Herbert said this while spraying the computer and me with Lysol.



“It’s very difficult to write a feminist scholarly book while my mother sprays me and tells me to get married. I’m working on James Tiptree’s ‘The Screwfly Solution’; I am not a character in ‘The Screwfly Solution.’ I will try to find a husband tomorrow. Really. A friend set me up with someone named Woodhurst. He invited me to his cabin in Montana.”

“Who is this Woodhurst?”

“He teaches English at Hunter and lives on the upper West Side. Since I have never met him, I don’t have any more information. But, if I don’t like Woodhurst, at least I will be able to visit Jasmine and Rhonda.”

“Where did I go wrong? My daughter is going to Montana to visit lesbians and to live in an igloo with a man she has never met.”

“Not an igloo, a cabin.”

“What’s the difference? Normal people live in condominiums. You’re going to live in the woods? Did I bring up my daughter to live with men in woods? What if you get trampled by moose? Don’t tell me about it. Your father and I are too old to run to Montana to claim your moose-trampled remains. Why do you have to expose yourself to moose; you’re no *meeskite*.”

“Woodhurst is Jewish.”

“Have a nice trip.”

During the flight from La Guardia to Montana I devoted myself to contemplating prospective Woodhurst trauma. But, armed with confidence derived



from surviving flying from Germany to Israel to have sex, I really was not all that traumatized. I had nothing to fear; Veronique approved of Woodhurst. There is no higher authority on sex than Veronique. Woodhurst said that he would be wearing a red cap when he met my plane. I expected to be satisfied with and by an as-yet-unknown red-capped man.

As soon as I entered the arrival lounge, I knew that the rendezvous plan had hit a snag. All the men in the lounge wore red caps. Maybe it was hunting season. What nerve. How dare hunting season thwart my husband hunting methods? I soon saw a man who resembled a Jewish George Washington. This individual who looked so out of place wearing a red cap in the Horowitzburg, Montana, airport had to be Woodhurst. And he was. He smiled, hugged me warmly, and directed me toward his Land Rover.

“It’s very nice to meet you, Sondra. I’ve been thinking about you all summer. I trust Veronique—and she’s right. I’m very attracted to you. Would you mind if I do some shopping? I’m out of formaldehyde.”

“Why do you need formaldehyde?”

“For my toilet.”

“Oh, how silly of me. I should have known.”

This excursion was certainly different. No man had ever taken me toilet chemical shopping. Woodhurst’s unusual seduction method was working. I was charmed by this huggable, charismatic Jewish intellectual who spent his summer enacting a macho goyische manhood



fantasy. Woodhurst's toilet chemical discourse excited my body chemistry.

Upon entering the cabin, Woodhurst immediately dropped the formaldehyde container and put his hands on me. Soon, he wore nothing other than his red cap. He took off my clothes, picked me up, and carried me to his bed. More specifically, he carried me to a mattress surrounded by clothes, tires, bricks, and tools. Woodhurst was a grown-up Huck Finn escaping civilization. I picked up a screwdriver. "Guess what's on my mind?" I asked. Woodhurst removed his red hat with a flourish. "Glad to oblige ma'am. It gets lonely in these here parts. I'm so glad—as are all of my body parts—to meet up with a cute little filly like you."

"Western mode or no western mode, I'm still a Jewish New Yorker. I can deal with toilet chemicals. I can deal with a bedroom furnished in early-American hardware-store clearance sale. But please, even in jest, do not *ever* call me a horse. I've just spent a year in Germany, and I ate only one pastry."

"I'm not complaining," Woodhurst said as he entered me. I took a final swig of diet cranberry juice and abandoned myself to the proceedings.

"Veronique was certainly right. Is the bathroom located behind the tires?"

"Yes. But I didn't have time to put in the toilet chemical. You'll have to use the outhouse."

"Where's the outhouse?"

"It's out."



Where? Where were my European grand hotels? I told myself that if I survived this trip, I would never again complain about Thurston.

“Looks like I have to put on some clothes and go out.” I reached into my suitcase filled with German designer clothes, removed a black jumpsuit, and jumped into it. I noticed that the Cartoon brand label was sticking out. This situation was a cartoon. Why should I care that my label was showing while I was en route to an outhouse?

“I think I brought the wrong clothes. I have a whole suitcase filled with elegant outfits I acquired in Europe.”

“You can wear my things. Montana is really not the place for European designer fashions.” Woodhurst was right, of course. I deserved to receive criticism in the wilderness. I removed my jumpsuit, put on Woodhurst’s much-too-large flannel shirt and jeans, and proceeded out to the outhouse. Although I am a feminist pioneer, I definitely am not the outhouse type. I instructed Woodhurst to search for me if I failed to return from the outhouse in ten minutes. I left the cabin. I was chilled. I tripped over rocks. I wanted snake repellent. I turned to my professional training. “Out, out, brief outhouse,” I said. Quotations were not going to extricate me from this situation. God was punishing me for embarking on a Fulbright to acquire local currency for clothes shopping. After successfully completing the outhouse procedure, I made my way back to



the cabin and settled down next to Woodhurst's warm, bearlike body, which took up most of the mattress. We embraced.

First thing in the morning, Woodhurst said that he would like to take me to an Indian reservation. "Sure. An Indian reservation will provide a nice change from Europe. I've become very accustomed to Europe, though. Maybe I've turned into a snob. I don't like looking at strip malls. Europe has all this culture. Except for New York, what does America have? America has rocks out west. But going to an Indian reservation sounds like fun. I've never seen an Indian."

"Maybe these Indians have never seen a Jew."

"I don't think Indians and Jews are so different. The reservation reminds me of the Hasidic section of Jerusalem. Indian ceremonial dances look like the *hora*. Maybe we should dance the *hora* for the Indians.

"They might enjoy it. But we shouldn't interfere with an alien culture. You know, the *Star Trek* prime directive. Don't change anything. What if the Indians adopt our dance and our tribe finds out. Can you imagine Indians hired to perform the *hora* in Long Island bar mitzvah palaces? Leave well enough alone, Sondra. Okay, enough reservation. I'm hungry. We can have lunch in my favorite restaurant, Pizza Hut. And then we can go to my favorite store, Wal-Mart." I was certainly not in Europe anymore. And I was certainly not with Thurston any more. Bolstering myself with the idea that variety is the spice of life, I agreed to go to



Pizza Hut and Wal-Mart. Actually, I enjoy Pizza Hut salad bars. Like Norris, I will eat almost anything. And I put Wal-Mart to practical use.

I left Woodhurst while he was having multiple orgasms in the Wal-Mart hardware department. (These orgasms had nothing to do with me. Hardware turned Woodhurst on. Hardware made him hard.) I had my own agenda. "I'll be in the plumbing department. Meet you at the check-out."

He joined me and looked at my purchase. "What do you intend to do with that plastic j-pipe?" he asked. I laughed hysterically. The cashier glared at me. I guess that I just don't look like the j-pipe-purchasing type. Once outside the store, Woodhurst felt more free to speak. "Does this j-pipe have anything to do with me and my mattress? Do you want me to do anything to you with it? It is bigger than I am. Did you buy it to hint that you find me inadequate?" He looked crestfallen.

"Certainly not. I bought the pipe to compensate for my body's inadequacy in regard to outhouses. I want to use it to pee in the woods. I purchased a penis, not a phallus. This pipe does not concern castrating you or attributing phallic power to myself." (See, being a feminist literary critic is useful. How else could I communicate why I wanted to use a j-pipe as a penis?) Woodhurst was relieved. But I could tell that he thought I was more difficult than Veronique. And the most difficult part of my visit had not yet happened.



“Two of my best friends live in Montana. I haven’t seen them for over a year. Would you like to visit them with me?”

“Sure. I like to meet new people.”

“My friends are lesbians.”

“No problem. I took you to Indians. You’ll take me to lesbians. That’s fair. The Land Rover is revved up. Hop in. Let’s go.”

My reunion with Jasmine and Rhonda thrilled me. But something was different. Their combined furniture looked strange. Their combined lives looked even stranger. I realized that, although I was welcome to visit them, my life would never again be linked with theirs. I tried to forget my sadness and attend to the social requirements at hand. “Jasmine and Rhonda, I would like you to meet my new friend, Woodhurst.”

“I would like to see you in the kitchen,” said Jasmine.

“You never told me about a Woodhurst. How long have you known this Woodhurst?”

“A week. I flew out here to go on a blind date with him.”

“That’s crazy.”

“You divorced Robert and married Rhonda. I don’t think you can afford to talk about craziness.”

“True. We should join Rhonda and Woodhurst.” They were both standing on the roof. Rhonda knew me well enough to be aware that I was very puzzled by their location. She clarified the situation by shouting: “I’m up here fixing the clogged air-conditioning vent.



Woodhurst came to help me. Only I can't find the vent. Jasmine, you know where it is. Get up here and show it to us." Jasmine climbed. When she reached the roof, she accidentally kicked over the ladder. My lesbian friends and male lover were stuck on the roof. What could this situation mean? I would consult a text to find out. Which one? A member of my dissertation committee came to mind: Leslie Fiedler. He was a Jew who had lived in Montana and survived to tell the tale. Maybe he could provide an answer. Jasmine's southern accent yelled at me from the roof. "Move your ass and give us that ladder."

"In a few minutes. I'm going into your study to read *Fiedler on the Roof*. I'll be back when I find a certain answer." I needed time alone to ponder the fact that my two best friends had married each other and I had embarked on a blind date that entailed flying from New York to Montana. At least my red clogs were in Forest Hills. The last thing I needed was for Ilya Lugosi to show up. I could see it now. He would teach Jasmine, Rhonda, and Woodhurst to fly—and free them from the roof. I could not survive an afternoon with Jasmine, Rhonda, Woodhurst, *and* Ilya. This imagined afternoon would be more problematic than trying to write a scholarly book while Herbert was spraying me with Lysol and telling me to get married.

25

The Homecoming

Returning to Blackhole without Rhonda and Jasmine was an even worse fate. I pondered this as I heard Jasmine's voice. "If you don't get us down from this roof immediately if not sooner I'm going to kill you." Knowing better than to mess with Jasmine, I granted her and her roof-mates ladder access. Happy to have their feet back on Earth, Jasmine, Rhonda, and Woodhurst climbed down the ladder; sad to leave my home planet, I stopped off at La Guardia Airport to pick up Norris in Forest Hills and then flew on to Blackhole. During the flight, I glanced at an offprint given to me by a friend who studies science fiction film. His inscription: "To Sondra, who goes where no woman has gone before." I was returning to Blackhole, a place where no Forest Hills Jew, nor any Jew



from any locality, had gone before. How can someone who grew up on Ninety-ninth Street live with colleagues who own plantations? Plantations with slave cabins, yet. And these colleagues do not even realize that slaves are free and women are no longer defined as property. As a Jewish pioneer residing in Virginia, I have a tougher road to hoe than Fiedler had as a Jewish pioneer residing in Montana. (Sorry, that's row, not road. I'm learning. I now know that farmers do not hoe roads.)

The first item on my Blackhole agenda: checking in with the department secretaries. It would be nice to see good old Tammy Fay, Elly May, Daisy May, and Oy Vey. Tammy Fay spotted me first. "Hi, ma'am."

"You've known me for thirteen years, Tammy Fay. I would be so much more comfortable if you called me Sondra instead of ma'am. New Yorkers respond to the word ma'am as an insult."

"Sorry, ma'am." Elly May and Daisy May smiled as they looked up from their computer terminals. I could never tell the difference between these particular Faulknerian bovine females. My male colleagues call them quarter-wit beef trusts; I call them trustworthy, good-hearted, hard-working women. Something about me was causing them to go into tizzy mode. "What's that you got thar in your hand?" Elly May asked while hysterically pointing at my brown bagel.

"A defrosted, just imported from Forest Hills, pumpernickel bagel. Want some?"



“Hell no. No way I’m eating round brown bread with a hole in the middle. It looks like plastic.”

“Don’t get me started on plastic.” But Elly was not entirely out of bounds. If Kurt Vonnegut’s Salo traveled from Tralfamadore to Forest Hills, he could use a bagel as a little wheel to repair his kaput space ship.

“Share some of my lunch with me.” Elly reached for her Tupperware and opened the lid. “Have some of this real food for real people: mustard greens, grits, possum innards, and jowls. They’ve just come out with some low-fat, no-cholesterol innards and jowls. You’re welcome to have half of my Wonder-Bread and innards sandwich.” Even though I was a Fulbrighter who habitually sought cross-cultural encounters, I declined.

“No thanks, Elly May. Where’s Oy Vey?” Perhaps Herbert would have liked to name me Oy Vey instead of Sondra.

“Oy Vey really didn’t get on with me and Tammy Fay and Daisy May. So I set one of my critters on her. Oy Vey was terminated at her terminal by rattle-snake bite.” I tried to remain pleasant in the face of this fait accompli.

“How are the rest of your critters?”

“They’re just fine. The skunks are mating in the promotion-case file cabinet; the beavers have dammed all the first-floor bathroom urinals; and the buzzards are circling around assistant professors we’re ditchin’ before tenure.”

“Do you still have the bloodhounds?”



“So, you didn’t find a fella over there in Germany, uh?” Daisy May chimed in. “Don’t worry. Elly will be glad to lend you her bloodhounds for your husband hunt—again. But Sondra, them hounds are plumb tuckered out from huntin’ husbands with you. They’re trained to hunt varmints, not husbands.”

“Same difference.” Thankfully, Tammy, Elly, and Daisy are not the sort of Virginians who go on fox hunts. Blackhole has been spared having to witness horses and bugles and red coats and dogs chasing a terrified potential husband through the countryside surrounding the campus. Daisy May tried to console me.

“If the hounds fail again, there’s always Sadie Hawkins Day.”

“It was good to see y’all. But now I have to deal with *tsuris* and *mishigass*.”

“I don’t recall no administrators named Dr. Tsuris and Dr. Mishigass,” said Daisy.

Tammy’s face lit up. “Sondra means she’s heading over to the department head. I remember those two weird words. You taught ’em to us in that staff-development course you offered before you left, “Yid-dish for Y’all. You always began the class by explaining that *tsuris* means trouble and *mishigass* means craziness.”

“Bye y’all.” I walked down the hall and knocked on the door of my department head, Jed Bob Zwiffel. A tall man wearing a tattered broad-brimmed hat and a ratty fringed leather jacket greeted me while he sipped moonshine. “Well, doggie. If it ain’t Sondra. Sit a spell.



Take your shoes off. Y'all's come back, I hear. I'll have to tell Granny. She'll be plumb tickled." I would not, under any circumstance, take off my clogs and face the hazard of stepping in mud and pig dreck while bare-foot. Jed Bob had installed a pig wallow in the middle of his office, just in front of his desk. During office hours he could not tolerate being separated from Arnold, the pet pig he considered his son. Jed Bob wanted the best for Arnold.

But he did not want the best for me. It was Jed Bob and his cronies, not the pig dreck in the pig wallow, that had so often placed me in deep shit. I liked Arnold the pig. Although I could not say the same about his owner, I would never send him to the Rottingen slaughterhouse. I knew that I was no longer in Munich, London, Paris, or Jerusalem when Arnold stepped out of his wallow, shook himself, ambled over to me, squealed in recognition, and nuzzled my clog with his snout. "Hello, Arnold Zwiffel," I said just as Arnold's "brother" entered the office. "Why, if it ain't Bubba Bob Zwiffel," I continued while trying my best to sound just like a typical Blackhole English professor. It was often difficult to discern that, unlike Arnold, Bubba Bob is human—not a pet pig. Jed Bob positioned Bubba Bob as his special pet who receives every professional favor a department head can grant. "Nice to see you Bubba Bob. Can you please leave your rifle outside in your pick up truck's gun rack?"

"Reckon so. Where you been, Sondra? Poe-land? I



always did think you look like one of those little Polish girls—that is until I found out y’all is Jewish. Some of my best friends is Jewish.” Need I say that Bubba Bob, one of those tenured-professors—who-possesses-only-a-master’s-degree types, was not too bright? The day before Bubba was going to vote on my tenure case, I saw him standing in front of Dogpatch Hall with Man Ray, his great dane. (Man Ray, no relation to Oy Vey, is Tammy Fay’s cousin.) I looked at Bubba Bob, and I looked at Man Ray, and I asked the dog if he had tenure too. My question was perfectly sensible; Man Ray is more intelligent than Bubba.

Bubba Bob took my question seriously. “No. Man Ray ain’t no kin of mine. When I’m on the tenure committee, I only vote in favor of kin. If I ever venture beyond Christiansburg, I might change my mind. But that ain’t happened yet, and it ain’t about to.” Was I supposed to be surprised to encounter tenure tsuris at Blackhole? My thoughts were interrupted when associate department head Bob Bob Snopes skulked into Zwiffel’s office. He looked at the leather pants I had bought in Berlin. “Nice outfit. But it is a good thing you got tenure.” He caused the word to rhyme with manure. “Tenureless women can’t afford to come to campus wearing critters. You just don’t look like you belong in Blackhole.”

“What a lovely compliment. Thank you Bob Bob.” Bob Bob was correct, of course. I often wore European clothes in Blackhole. And when I did, I looked as



appropriate as Eva Gabor's gown-clad Lisa Douglas character entering a Hooterville barn. I could just hear the latest department gossip my leather pants generated: two, three, four—tell the people what she wore. Well, although I wore my leather pants for the first time today, I am certainly no itsy-bitsy-yellow-polka-dot-bikini type. (Remember, I ultimately vetoed Brigitte's lingerie suggestion. And I could still stand to lose eight and a third pounds.) Nor was I one to be afraid to come out of my office. Lisa Douglas wears gowns to barns; I wear European fashions to Dogpatch Hall. Dogpatch Hall denizens do not think my clothes are darling.

I am never afraid to confront Jed Bob. "Enough of these conversational pleasantries that mask so much unpleasantness. I want the salary raise and the promotion I deserve. Do you or do you not concur?"

"Well, doggie, I reckon I'm goin' to have to study on this." Nothing between Jed Bob and me had changed—except my approach. I was now armed with my experience as vanquisher of Hundsnort and Schweinshank. (This experience, in turn, is derived from battling Jed Bob and his predecessors. Jed Bob is much more benign than the department head who came before him. Progressing from the former head to Jed Bob is analogous to moving from Stalin to Yeltsin.) I planned to wage this latest battle in my own inimical way. It was again time to dress to protect my vested interests.

26

A Course Taught by a Horse? Of Course, of Course

While contemplating what to wear to the semester's first department meeting, I automatically reached for the black garment that formed the foundation of my Rottingen Turkish woman costume. The Blackholeian situation called for different headgear, though. Hence, before I entered the meeting room, I put the *kaffiyeh* David Razi had bought for me in Jerusalem over my head. A black-robed *kaffiyeh*-clad figure did not escape the department's notice. "I didn't know that we had to hire one of those A-rabs," Bubba Bob whispered to Bob Bob. Jed Bob presided over the



meeting. “Welcome to the new term. And I’d like to extend a special welcome to Sondra who is among us again. Take your head gear off, Sondra. Sit a spell. What’s that headgear called? It’s not native to these here parts.”

“It’s called a *schmata*.” I said.

“And you’re called a Sondra,” he said. “Why in tarnation are y’all coming to a department meeting wearing a *schmata*?”

“Well, being a Jew never helped me to succeed in this department. I’m trying a different approach. But I see that being a female A-rab is as problematic as being a female Jew. In order to be promoted to full professor, I would have to become a male Episcopalian,” I said as I defiantly flung my kaffiyeh over my shoulder. Jed Bob handled this situation as could be expected. He ignored it.

“Next, we turn to personnel matters. Five people applied for our advertised position: Bella Abzug, Gertrude Stein, Heidi Abramowitz, Andrea Dworkin, and Christian Episcopal.” The department sighed with relief when they heard Christian’s name. “Not so fast. We can’t hire Christian. If we hire a man, the administration won’t fund the position. We have to choose either Bella, Gertrude, Andrea, or Heidi. Folks, we can’t manipulate this one. If we don’t hire a man, I reckon that we have to hire a woman. But if one of these here women is our only choice, I reckon we should close the position. I raised my hand to disagree. “I see nothing



wrong with this applicant pool. Why do you object to Abzug, Stein, Dworkin, and Abramowitz?”

“It ain’t fittin’ for no woman to wear hats that big; a big mouth, is a big mouth, is a big mouth; Dworkin’s too radical; and I hear tell Heidi’s a slut.” Suddenly, a loud neigh was audible—and it was no usual dissenting remark. It emanated from the palomino who had just put her head through the meeting room’s open first floor window.

“You don’t have to hire a woman. I’m Ed, a talking gentle horse. You can hire me,” said the palomino. Although Jed Bob was not one to make snap decisions, he would do anything to avoid hiring another Jewish feminist. He looked at Ed. “Our new colleague is a horse? Of course, of course. Ed, you’ve given us the answer we endorse. Not having to hire a female applicant puts us on a steady course. Personnel committee, all in favor of hiring Ed say, ‘aye.’” There were no neighs. “You’re hired. Tammy Fay will immediately provide your letter of employment.”

Jed Bob put the signed letter in Ed’s mouth. Ed placed it on the window and read it—in a different, female voice. “Tenure. A full professorship. Everything seems in order. I will enjoy having tenure and being able to say anything. And this is the first thing I want to say: haste makes waste. The name is Ed., Dr. Ed to you—I have a Ph.D. in Education—but I’m Ms. Ed to my friends. I’m a mare, a feminist mare, your nightmare. You boys will have to curtail further sowing your



wild oats. I never stop talking. You have just tenured a feminist nag. For the rest of your professional lives, you will have to listen whenever I choose to trot out my feminist agenda.” I spoke up.

“This department needs a horse of a different color. Ms. Ed, I welcome you as a colleague and a friend. God knows I need one around here—as well as a jogging partner. I’ll help you get settled in Blackhole State’s roomy barn and verdant grazing areas. I’ll visit you, and we can plot how to stall the geezers and expand our feminist field. It will be just like the good old days with Rhonda and Jasmine. Nothing in the department ever changed, even though Rhonda, Jasmine, and I talked until we were hoarse. Can you imitate an Arkansas accent?” Ms. Ed nodded her head affirmatively. I climbed out the window, placed the kaffiyeh on my head, jumped aboard Ms Ed’s back, and galloped across the campus—a feminist desert. “Peter O’Toole, eat your heart out,” I said, as my kaffiyeh flapped in the wind.

“Thar goes Sondra, off on her high horse again,” said Jed Bob to the department. Little did he know that I was galloping toward reifying my comment about becoming a male Episcopalian.

27

Blackhole(a), Blackhole(a)

After making certain that Ms. Ed was happily installed in her new stall, I phoned the provost's office. "Miss Jane, Professor Lear here. I would like to see Provost Drysdale. Yes, tomorrow would be fine." The next morning, I tied back my hair, put a fedora on my head, and a man's suit on my body. I pinned a large cardboard crucifix to the suit. I walked past Darryl Hall and entered the provost's office in Darryl Hall "Hello, Provost Drysdale. I'm happy to be back on campus."

"Please forgive me, but I don't know you."

"I'm Son Lear."

"Hello Son. Lear? Lear? We have a Lear in the English department but that Lear is a woman—and she's a real pain in the ass. Son, you know how women are."



“Certainly do. I used to be Sondra Lear. But that was before I had a sex change operation in Europe. I have also converted to Episcopalianism. Now that I am a WASP male, I have the qualifications needed to become a full professor.” I said these words while lowering my voice and faking a southern accent.

“This is a unique situation. I have to consult with the board of visitors.” He picked up the phone. “Miss Jane, call the board of visitors and tell them to get over here for an emergency meeting.” The geezers who had once tried to snuff out my academic life assembled and looked me over.

“Humpf. Looks like a good ol’ boy. Sounds like a good ol’ boy. But the question is, Son, are you a good ol’ boy?” said a geezer as he stared at my crotch. I now know how the protagonist of *Europa, Europa* felt whenever he tried to hide his circumcised penis. His penis was politically incorrect; mine was nonexistent. My charade was fated to fail. I had been in the provost’s office for two hours, and I had to urinate. Where was Marilyn French’s women’s room when I needed it? A geezer accompanied me to the men’s room. He announced his findings: “This alleged good ol’ boy has a penis. But it’s plastic, and it’s bent.” He described the j pipe I used in Woodhurst’s woods. The provost came to an immediate decision.

“A plastic penis constitutes a procedural irregularity. Only people with real penises can become full professors. My decision stands. No penis. No promotion.”



I countered by reading from the faculty handbook. “As a land-grant university, Blackhole State University will act to protect the land. This includes the *droit de seigneur*, the law of the lay of the land, the right of all good ol’ boys to screw every female professor every which way they can. Article two: employees of this land-grant university located so close to the Jefferson National Forest are required to preserve animals, especially endangered species. This article will apply to faculty women at the provost’s discretion. The president and the board of visitors will hear all appeals.” I looked up from the handbook. “My case falls under article two. Due to the loss of Professors Flor and Sorrento, I am an endangered species at Blackhole. I am the last feminist on campus; the last of my kind; the last of the Mohicanwitzs. I deserve a special habitat to ensure my survival, a reservation for a New York Jewish feminist: a picture of the Manhattan skyline and a traffic-noise tape. Pandas need bamboo shoots; I need bagels.”

“We are not interested in preserving your kind. At Blackhole, extinction is the final solution to the Jewish feminist question,” said Drysdale and his cohorts in unison.

28

New York Is Where I'd Rather Stay, I Get Allergic Smelling Hay; or, Escape From the Planet of the Goyim

Making the best of things as the semester progressed included inviting Catharine Stimpson to address my women's studies class. I drove to the airport to meet her. "I have never been to Blackhole before. Tell me, who are the minority groups here?" Catharine asked cordially.

"I am the only Jew and the last feminist in my department."

"It must be very dull to live in a place where one



white person constitutes a minority group. Forgive me for asking, but why do you have that huge net attached to a pole stored in your Datsun's hatchback?"

"I originally bought it for crabbing during Nags Head vacations. But now I use it for husband hunting."

"Oh?"

"Blackhole is an unhappy husband hunting ground. For five years, I tried to get a particular Blackholeian, the one I call 'The Goat,' to marry me. One night, I went to his house with this net and chased him around the kitchen. Even though I did manage to place the net over his head, he still wouldn't marry me. You are acquainted with Rhonda Sorrento. Well, Rhonda ordered me to forget this man. After I listened to her, I had to figure out where to find another man to have sex with in Blackhole. I attended a singles function at the Unitarian Church. I dragged myself to this social event even though I have no interest in Unitarianism. I was the only person who showed up. It is really sad if no one is interested in you at a singles event. But to be the single person attending a singles event—well, that is just unspeakable."

"'The Goat?' Is this name analogous to 'The Royal Porcupine' in Margaret Atwood's *Lady Oracle*?"

"No. 'The Goat' is derived from 'old goat.' My parents met this man when they came to Blackhole. Since he is much older than I, they named him 'The Goat.' The name stuck. The Goat is now engaged to a nineteen-year-old."

"I have lectured all over the world. But I must say



that I have never been met at an airport by a feminist who keeps a crab net in her car for husband hunting an old goat. But I do like your work, and I am, of course, open to all types. What is the academic environment like here?”

“You’ll see.” After I barely avoided killing Catharine in a crash on the interstate, we arrived on campus.

“Catharine R. Stimpson, I would like you to meet Jed Bob Zwiffel. Be careful not to fall into the pig wallow, Kate.”

“Pleased to meet you. Some of my best friends are eminent feminist lesbians.”

“Oh, gawd,” said Catharine who, of course, managed to remain composed throughout the remainder of her visit. I drove her back to the airport (without exposing her to death) and thanked her for a wonderful lecture.

Although Stimpson managed not to faint and fall into the pig wallow, the same cannot be said for me. I attribute this statement to two colleagues who are not hillbillies, Morticia Foul and Kiwi Sacajewea. These women—the sworn enemies of Rhonda, Jasmine, and me—are the meanest, the most god-awful, the most unpleasant people east of the Mississippi. Jasmine’s description was more concise: “They’re varmint.”

Kiwi, a well-known Native American essayist, was hired as a full professor to meet affirmative-action requirements. No one listened when Rhonda, Jasmine, and I argued that someone without a Ph.D. should not be a full professor. Kiwi has sought vengeance ever



since she heard that we opposed her. This author of the line “Squaw can you kill, can you kill, can you kill a Jew?” did not sit well with me. Morticia did not share my opinion. Ten minutes after Kiwi’s arrival, the two became lovers. I have never understood how Kiwi manages to tolerate the bats that constantly circle Morticia’s head. Perhaps she is too busy sharpening her verbal arrows to notice them. (I have thought about contacting Ilya Lugosi to let him know where he can purchase some cheap bats for his castle.)

I had to discuss course scheduling with Morticia. Determined to remain polite, I entered her office. It took her two minutes to disagree with me and slam a book on her desk. “Please do not slam objects on a desk in front of my face.”

“It’s my desk, and if I feel like slamming, I’ll slam. I’ll get you, Sondra. I’ll get you and your big cat, too.”

“Even if you are the Wicked Witch of the South, how dare you think that you can get my goat? Okay, The Goat isn’t mine. . . . But you won’t get The Goat, and you won’t get my cat. And, you won’t get my horse either. My mother, though, is up for grabs.” My tone upset the bats’ usual flight path. Morticia reached for her broom and her black hat. I reached for the watering can located on the window sill and pored its contents over Morticia.

“I’m melting! Melting!”

“What did you expect?” The song about the dead wicked witch entered my mind.

Business concerning the course schedule still



unaccomplished, I returned to my office and phoned the director of undergraduate studies, Earl Bob Helms. Although Earl Bob was no friend of mine, I began our conversation in my most polite voice. "Good afternoon, Earl Bob. This is Sondra. I would like to discuss . . ." He screamed and slammed the receiver. After fighting a tenure battle, after enduring years of prejudice, after being thwarted at every turn, something in me snapped when Earl Bob slammed that phone. I ran to Jed Bob's office.

"I've had it. These people are vile. I will not suffer their lack of civility." My anger caused me to hyperventilate uncontrollably. "I'm fainting. Call the paramedics," I said as I fell into the pig wallow.

The next thing I knew, I was in the department hallway creating a mud puddle while lying on a stretcher listening to a familiar song. Jed Bob, Bubba Bob, Earl Bob, and Kiwi were dancing around the stretcher singing, "Ding dong, the Jewish New York feminist is dead, the wicked Jewish New York feminist is dead." Their festive jubilation was short lived.

I picked up my head and said, "I'll die and make you happy over my dead body." I felt satisfied that even Jasmine could not have delivered a more caustic line. And I had more to say: "I've heard that a few years before I came to Blackhole, an unpopular woman professor had a heart attack during a committee meeting. I know that you refused to take action and watched her die. As you are now aware, I'm not dead. Your final solution to the



feminist question is unsuccessful. I am a Jewish survivor.” The paramedics wheeled me out to the ambulance. I thought that if I did die, I would never have to see the Blackhole State University English department again.

Upon arrival in the emergency room, I heard a woman speaking English with a German accent. This accent seemed very normal—until I remembered that I was no longer in Rottingen. I was not hallucinating. The voice belonged to Dr. Brunhilde Kopfhof, the surgeon married to Blackhole chemistry-department professor Milton Kopfhof. Milton was charged with sexually harassing students. He would refuse to begin class until a female student kissed his tie. The students, led by Rhonda, had taken action which generated national media attention. I was now lying prostrate and helpless—and I was in the hands of Milton’s wife.

“*What* seems to be the matter?”

“Tsuris.”

“Can you be more specific?”

“English department tsuris.”

“You are a woman and you are a member of the English department? No wonder you’re here. I’m taking no chances with a woman who has been exposed to that department. Nurse, I require a complete trauma unit. Now, tell me, Sondra—do you know Rhonda? Rhonda was really right. Milton went too far.” I stopped hyperventilating and breathed a sigh of relief.



“Tell me the latest gossip about the department. All the things I hear are so unbelievable. Tell me more about the misogyny. Again, I want the latest,” said Brunhilde.

“How can you ask me about gossip when I am lying on a stretcher with needles in my arms? My presence in this hospital is the latest gossip, and I am here because of the department. If I discuss the English department, it will be beyond the ability of Blackhole County Hospital to save me.” Seeing my point, she placed professionalism before her curiosity and arrived at a diagnosis. “You are hyperventilating because you have too much oxygen in your blood. Hence, you fainted.”

“What should I do?”

“Remove yourself from the department.”

“Sounds good. Thanks for the advice,” I left the hospital, returned to my apartment, and phoned Jed Bob. “This is Sondra.”

“Does this mean you’re not dead?”

“Yes. I want a leave of absence. Bye.” I had no reason to stay in Blackhole. I was no one’s wife. I could say good-bye to country life. Remembering that I was someone’s daughter, I phoned Forest Hills. “Blackhole is no place to be. Farm living is no life for me. You are my parents. Hello, city life. Forest Hills, I am there.” I clacked a certain sitcom tune on my computer keys to accompany these words. Herbert was incredulous.

“You mean you want to move back home? You haven’t lived here since you were seventeen. You always hated it here.”



Egor's reaction was more direct. "No. You can't move back under any circumstance. I won't hear of it. No."

Getting around his response was not difficult. "If I stay in Blackhole, I will never get married."

"Let her come home," said Herbert.

"Yes dear."

My leave was granted. my lease was canceled. I packed. I placed my furniture in storage; Norris was ready to become a New Yorker. Saying good-bye to Ms. Ed was the last item on my to-do list. I approached Ed's stall with clover and carrot in outstretched hand. "What's with the rabbit food? I'm an American horse. I want Fritos and marshmallows."

I patted her soft horse nose and told her I had bad news. "I'm leaving Blackhole."

Tears formed in her big brown eyes. "I can't believe it. I'm shocked," she said.

"There's more."

"I can't take any more."

"I'm moving to Forest Hills to live with my parents."

Ms. Ed rolled over on her back and put her four legs straight out in the air. "Is there more?"

"No."

"Good. This isn't so bad. You can take me with you to Forest Hills. I like forests and hills. We can jog through the forests and the hills while we discuss feminist theory."

"I'm afraid not. There are no forests and no hills in



Forest Hills. Surely, I don't strike you as the forest-and-hill type. I'm going to Queens, to New York City." Ed's tears turned into a torrent.

"You can't leave me here. You can't desert me. I don't want to be left behind with Jed Bob, Bubba Bob, Earl Bob, Bob Bob, and Kiwi. Don't go. You can't understand how bad I feel."

"As a matter of fact, I can. Okay, I'll take you with me. Herbert and Egor were perturbed when I first brought Norris home. Since a cat newly ensconced within their apartment upset them, I don't think they will respond well to a horse. But, we'll work this out somehow." Ms Ed perked up and got back on her feet.

"Yahoo," she said in my New York accent. "Forest Hills or bust."

"At least I can save money on the airport limousine," I said. Luckily, I had learned how to ride and saddle horses during my years at summer camp. (I should have told the tenure committee that, during those years, I had also learned how to shoot rifles and arrows.) When Ms. Ed and I reached my apartment, I tied my computer to her back above her tail, hung the bag containing my book notes and the cat carrier (containing Norris, of course) over the saddle horn, and mounted up. "I know my way to the airport," said Ms. Ed. Since there was no heaping helping of hospitality in the Blackhole locality (Arnold was Jed Bob's only kin who liked me), I loaded up the horse and moved to Forest—Hills that is; no woods, no cows, no hillbillies.



But accomplishing the move wasn't that easy. When the U.S. Air agent saw me arrive with a cat and a horse and too much luggage, she was not in the mood to thank me for kindly droppin' in. "Ma'am, federal regulations state that you can only bring two carry-on items on board. In addition, we only allow one pet in the cabin at a time. You can't bring your cat *and* your horse. You can't bring your bag *and* your computer." I knew how to solve the problem. Some of my best friends have daughters who are Olympic-level riders and own horses. I phoned Jasmine's ex-husband and daughter. "Robert, this is Sondra. May I speak to Annie? Annie. Hi. You're always trying to earn extra money for college. How would you like a job driving Ms. Ed to New York in your horse van? You would? Good. We'll be waiting for you in front of the terminal." Since this was the miniscule Blackhole airport, I did not have to specify which terminal. I went back to the agent. "No more horse. May I have my boarding pass now?"

"No. You still have too much luggage. One piece will have to be stowed in the plane's luggage area."

"But I have my cat, my book notes, and my computer. I can't stow any of them."

"Then I can't give you a boarding pass." I raised my best New York ruckus. Two giant Virginia State Police "mounties" approached me.

"Is there a problem ma'am?"

I knew this was Virginian for "cut the mishigass



immediately if not sooner. Mishigass will get you nowhere.”

“I need to board this plane because my parents and my horse are expecting me in New York. I must bring my cat, my computer, and my book notes on board.”

“No way, ma’am. One item will have to go.” Norris snarled. Since the university’s computer would certainly expire from plane cargo mode, I handed over my irreplaceable book notes. The agent gave me my boarding pass. The mounties smiled. I endured book note-loss trauma throughout the entire flight. But, when I greeted Herbert and Egor at La Guardia, I had Norris, notes, and computer in hand. “All the plastic is in place; the apartment can accommodate Norris. But do we have room for that computer?” asked Herbert.

“We’ll make room. We’ll just have to accommodate each other.” It was too soon to break the horse news. But, when the doorman called via the house phone the next morning, I could no longer avoid the issue. “Mrs. Lear, you have a, um, a package here. The package says it’s for you,” said the doorman.

“Sondra, there’s a talking package in the lobby. Did you order a tape recorder? We don’t have room for a computer and a tape recorder,” Herbert stated.

“No, the package isn’t a tape recorder.”

“Then what is it?”

“Guess.”

“Is it bigger than a bread box?”

“Yes.”



“Animal, vegetable, or mineral?”

“Animal. A talking animal.”

“It’s a husband. Finally. Before I close my eyes forever, I will see your husband. I am calling the entire beach club. Is he Jewish?”

“No. And the animal is not a he.”

“You’ve become a lesbian with a shiksa. I will never be able to set foot in the beach club again. How can your father be silent at a time like this? George, you’re her father. Say something.”

“I have nothing to say,” said Egor.

“Wait. You have jumped to a false conclusion. I have not become a lesbian with a shiksa.”

“Thank God. I was so unnerved. I’m still unnerved. I know. You’re an unwed mother.”

“Not exactly. But we have a new member of the family.” Hooves could be heard leaving the elevator. “I will let her introduce herself.” The doorbell rang. I opened the door. Ms. Ed trotted in. She tripped on the plastic covering the carpet. Regaining her balance, she looked at Herbert and Egor and calmly said, “I am Ms. Ed.”

Herbert was hysterical. “I said husband, husband. I said husband until I was hoarse. Not horse. Why can’t you be normal, Sondra? Take your horse, and take yourself, and go back to Blackhole.” I resorted to the tried-and-true formula.

“Fine. And then I’ll never get married.”

“All right. I’ll look away from the horse. We just



re-covered the apartment in heavy-duty plastic. We'll work something out. But what?" Ms. Ed had an answer.

"I can live on the terrace."

And Egor had another answer. "Your mother and I are going to Florida."

29

Murder in the Apartment (Not in the English Department); or, “H” Is for Homicide

I had forgotten the meaning of some city words. “Mezzanine,” for example. When I encountered a Rockefeller Center sign which directed me to a mezzanine, I could not remember exactly where one was usually located. I attribute this memory lapse to Blackhole’s dearth of mezzanines. Hell, Blackhole even lacks elevators. I was also a little rusty about subway and bus routes. It was strange to stand on Manhattan streets and, in my New York accent, ask for simple directions. But I soon adjusted and settled down to a domestic routine with Norris and Ms. Ed.



She made using subway fare unnecessary when I commuted to my new job as an adjunct professor at SUNY at Greenwich Village. I would ride her along Queens Boulevard, over the Queensborough Bridge, and down Fifth Avenue to Washington Square. While I taught my class, she would hang out in Washington Square Park to schmooze with the police officers' horses. After class, I would ride Ms. Ed back to Forest Hills. But today, upon arrival at home, I knew something was wrong. Fifty-four police cars were parked in front of my apartment building. When the elevator reached my floor, I emerged to see the hallway filled with police. "What happened?" I asked.

"There's been a homicide."

Homicide? I couldn't remember what "homicide" meant. Blackhole has neither mezzanines nor homicides.

"What's a homicide?" The policemen where not asking why I was bringing a horse into the building. I guess that they had seen everything.

"A murder, ma'am." This certainly was no Virginian use of "ma'am." "Your neighbor is dead."

I did not know this neighbor. "Can you give me more information? I'm living alone. I'm very nervous about staying here with a murderer on the loose."

"The murder was drug-related, and the killer is gone. We need a phone. Can the detective use your phone?" Granting this permission would make me feel more secure.



“Yes. Certainly.” Soon after Ms. Ed was unobtrusively chomping some hay on the terrace, a tall, attractive, trench coat-clad man entered my apartment. I thought about life as Mrs. Columbo or Mrs. Kojak. While I was envisioning this man as a potential husband, he viewed the plastic-covered carpet as a potential cover for another dead body.

“You have the right to remain silent. But, why is everything in your apartment covered in plastic?”

“My mother wants to protect her furniture and carpets from cat scratches and mare sweat.”

Deciding to abandon this line of questioning, he went back to the murder at hand. “Just a few more questions. Name?”

“Kate Fansler.” I thought it safe to surmise that this detective had not read Carolyn Heilbrun.

“Occupation?”

“English professor.”

“You’re an English professor, and you don’t know the definition of ‘homicide’? No wonder the Japanese are so far ahead of us. Can you prove that you are an English professor?” Since I did not come to Forest Hills for the sole purpose of having sex, I expected that this explanation would progress as smoothly as my first conversation with the El-Al agents.

“I speak fluent ‘English professor.’”

“Speak.”

“The learning of psychic differentiation from the (m)Other is so painful that Lacan describes the



experience as castration; that is the infant feels incomplete, broken, an *hommelette*. Footnote: Lacan created the word *hommelette* to describe the dual nature of the human ego, broken into two halves like the egg that makes the omelette.”

“Enough! I’m convinced. You’re definitely an English professor, Ms. Fansler.”

“That’s Dr. Fansler, detective.”

“Where’s your phone, Dr. Fansler?” I directed the detective to the phone. He seemed relieved that the phone was made of plastic rather than covered with plastic. “You won’t mind if I make a local call—just to the city morgue.”

“Morgue! No one has ever used this phone to call a morgue.”

“We’re dealing with a corpse. Who ya gonna call? Baskin Robbins?”

“You’re the crime buster. I trust you know what you’re doing. When you call the morgue, tell them it’s not necessary to provide plastic with which to wrap the body. They’re welcome to use the plastic already here.” Before contacting the morgue, the detective had to deal with the phone call from hell.

“What! A man is answering my daughter’s phone? Are you her husband?” asked Herbert.

“No.”

“Then why are you in her apartment?”

“I’m calling the morgue.”

“Sondra’s dead. Now she’ll never get married.”



“She isn’t dead. There’s been a drug-related murder in a neighboring apartment.”

“Was the dead person male and single?”

“Yes.”

“Put my daughter on this phone immediately.” He handed the phone to me. “You never listen. A single man was living right next door. You missed your opportunity. There is now one less single man in the world for you to marry.” I hung up and opened the terrace door. “Ms Ed, can you imitate my voice?”

“No problem.”

“From now on, you are assigned to handle all calls from my mother.” That matter settled, I went back inside to check on the police.

It appeared as if *Hill Street Blues* had come to Forest Hills. Police and detectives were furiously making phone calls, consulting, and shouting into walkie-talkies. Twenty-three men were in the apartment—and not one proposed. This fact killed me.

30

Fear of Flying; or, The Return of the Native

After the last detective left the apartment, I investigated how to find friends in New York. I thought of a childhood pal: Bambi Bamberg-Cohenberg, called Bam Bam. Ten-year-old Bam Bam and I invented the first Forest Hills rock store. We used big rocks to break open little rocks. Then, we ran around Yellowstone Boulevard trying to sell pretty rock innards for a penny apiece. I suspect that the rock store forms the nascence of my interest in deconstruction. Although I had not contacted Bam Bam in over a decade, I was sure that the rock store did not have a similar impact upon her. I picked up the phone.

“Hello,” said a still-familiar voice.



“The code word is ‘rock store.’”

“Rock store? Rock store! Sondra this has to be you. How are you?”

“Fine, Bam Bam. I’m back in New York for a while and I thought I would give you a call. What’s new?”

“Pebbles is my new nickname. This is because my fabulously wealthy husband buys me many diamonds. I married the rock store. But tell me about you.”

Ah ha. My suspicion that Bam Bam’s response to the rock store differed from mine was right on target. “I’m a deconstructionist feminist science fiction critic. I write about the fantastic, the supernatural. And I teach women’s studies.”

“I can relate to that. I’m the she-wolf of the shopping center.” It was easy to remember why I had not recently contacted Bam Bam. But since Bam Bam is a Jewish princess who has a good heart, I decided to give renewing our friendship a shot.

“It would be great to see you. Come over for dinner. You can meet my husband, Sheldon. Remember Sheldon Cohenberg from Forest Hills High School? I was depressed while spending ten years getting my B.A. from Queens College. And then I found Sheldon. And I married him. My mother is at once disappointed because I don’t have a career and happy that I’m settled.”

Herbert always liked Bam Bam. She, in fact, considers Bam Bam to be the perfect daughter. Bam Bam’s mother respects my career-mindedness. I wondered if it was too late in the game to do a daughter switch.



“Sure, I would be glad to come to dinner. Where do you live?”

“Sixtieth Street. Near the Vertical Club. But I never go to the gym; I might break a finger nail. And I’m too busy organizing Forest Hills High School reunions.”

“Oh, gawd.”

“What?”

“I didn’t say anything. Not a thing. See you tomorrow night.” Bam Bam looked like she could be Vita Conti’s twin. Her hair was bleached blond. Her eyelids were painted light blue. Her blouse was too tight. Gold bangle bracelets encircled her wrists. She wore a diamond ring on every finger. I was, however, more shocked by Bam Bam’s apartment than by Bam Bam herself. Strobe lights hanging from a mirrored ceiling illuminated the red leather furniture that dominated the sunken living room. Fountains spewing from rock gardens surrounded the living room’s perimeter. Bam Bam Bamberg-Cohenberg and Sheldon Cohenberg obviously use the same decorator as James Bond and Pussy Galore. Bam Bam interpreted my shock as approval.

“You like? Sheldon will be home soon. He must be parking the Volvo at this very second. Here he is now.”

“How was your day, dear?” Sheldon asked Bam Bam.

“I went clothes shopping. But I really need a new diamond. Bring one home tomorrow. You remember Sondra—even though she wasn’t in the Forest Hills High School in-crowd? She’s a professor.”

“Professors don’t make money.”



Norman Holland's theory about identity is correct. Bam Bam and Sheldon have not changed. But I tried to make the best of my evening with them. I also felt that, despite Bam Bam's bravado, she needed a feminist theorist in her life. And, although I hated to admit it, maybe I could learn something from a Jewish princess. Maybe we were reenacting one of those life-exchange stories: *The Princess and the Professor*—a feminist version of *The Prince and the Pauper*.

“Bam Bam, tomorrow I'm going to attend a lecture on feminism and postmodernism. Would you like to join me?”

“I have to get my nails done.”

Attempting to transform Bam Bam into a feminist would be as impossible as putting antlers on Norris to transform him into a flying Christmas reindeer.

“Next week I'm going to hear Edward Said and Andrew Ross lecture. I would love for you to accompany me.”

“I have no idea who those people are. But okay. I'm up for something different. Sheldon, honey, do you think you can manage to cook your own dinner when I go out with Sondra?”

“Yes, dear.”

Bam Bam had the same reaction to both lectures: “These men are gorgeous. Such hunks. I have no idea what they said. But it doesn't matter. Looking at Said and Ross is so much more exciting than going to the beauty parlor.”



“See, being a professor isn’t all that boring.” I felt superior. “Would you like to attend my class?”

“Yes.”

“Great. Next Tuesday we’re doing Donna Haraway’s cyborg piece.”

“Sy Berg? Sounds like someone we know. Didn’t Sy Berg own the delicatessen we went to during lunch period in high school? Is Sy Berg as sexy as Andrew Ross and Edward Said?”

“Posing that question in class could generate interesting discussion. Please remember to do so.”

Bam Bam met me under the Washington Square arch. “I have to check my mail before class. Just let me run up to the department. I’ll be back in a sec.” I returned waving a letter.

“It’s the verdict on the article I sent to *Signs*. I’m a little nervous. Guess there is nothing to do but open it.” I did so and read: “We regret to inform you that, based upon the readers’ reports for your anonymous submission, we cannot accept your article. Two readers reported that your article shows a lack of familiarity with the work of Sondra Lear.”

“Even I can tell that that report is not kosher,” said Bam Bam.

“Academe isn’t always boring—and it isn’t always kosher,” I replied. “Let’s go to class. Maybe teaching will help me to forget this disappointment.” We walked into Grimkin Hall. “I’d like you all to meet my childhood friend, Bambi Bamberg-Cohenberg,” I told my



class, while Bam Bam slowly unbuttoned her mink coat. Suddenly, a young woman—whose hair was purple and who wore a black wet-suit—jumped up from her seat. She carried a chartreuse high-powered toy water gun—the kind that generated discussion about prohibiting toy guns because they encourage real shooting incidents. Brandishing the water gun, she shot Bam Bam.

“Bam. Bam. Take that you torturer of animals,” my student (named Jennifer) said. Bam Bam was soaked. I was trying to discern how to handle the situation. Graduate school, after all, had never informed me about what to do when a purple-haired fledgling feminist theorist uses a water gun to shoot a Jewish princess. Despite this gap in my education, Jennifer’s action made perfect sense.

“Bam Bam, I should have warned you not to wear a mink coat to a feminist theory class. Jennifer is merely communicating her opposition to fur. Although I would not resort to Jennifer’s methods, I share her ideas.” I voiced my opinion as I pictured Norris being made into a coat. I suppose Bam Bam was thinking that she was not in Forest Hills High School any more. Trying to return to normalcy seemed the best way to proceed. “Class, I promised to tell Bam Bam why cyborgs have nothing to do with Jewish delicatessen owners. Let’s look at Haraway’s article.” My lecture proceeded smoothly. Bam Bam’s mink dried. She was happy about having attended my class.



We stood in Washington Square Park. “Why don’t I call a cab and we can have a snack on my terrace. I want to ask you some more questions about Sy Bergs,” said Bam Bam.

“That sounds good. But a cab isn’t necessary.”

“Surely you don’t propose to walk fifty-six blocks. I don’t do aerobics. I take cabs.”

“I don’t have walking in mind.” An alternative yellow vehicle appeared in the person of my feminist palomino. “Ed, can you carry two people?”

“Sure. I spent the afternoon with a great-looking police horse. A stallion! I feel energized.”

“Mount up, Bam Bam. Ed, Sixtieth Street and Second Avenue, please.”

“Sondra, I’ve known you since we were five. I remember the day I first saw you holding that blue feltboard in the doll corner in kindergarten. However, I’m not going to ask you why you have a talking horse. My mink is dry. It won’t retain horse odor. If the mink does eventually smell, I’ll send it to the cleaners. And if the cleaners can’t cope with extracting mare sweat from mink, Sheldon will buy me a new mink. I can ride. I went to summer camp too. Hello, Ed. Yes. Sixtieth Street, please.” We rode through Washington Square Park and up Fifth Avenue. Bam Bam was enjoying herself. “Wow. You certainly get a different view of Cartier and Saks and Bonwit Teller and Tiffany’s from up on a horse,” said Bam Bam. Although I was paying



more attention to Banana Republic and the Forty-second Street Library, I concurred. Concurring was the least I could do. Bam Bam was such a good sport about being shot and not taking a cab. And little did she know that she was about to house a horse. We reached Sixtieth Street.

“Is Sheldon home?”

“No. He’s at a business meeting.”

“Good. We can park Ed in the Volvo’s garage spot.”

Ed was not happy. “I’m a palomino, not a Volvo. My ancestors are Arabian, not Swedish. No garage. Living on your terrace is bad enough.” Bam Bam’s generosity knew no bounds. She acted more like a southern belle than a Jewish princess. “We have a terrace. Ed is welcome to use it.”

We all entered the elevator. Ed liked the apartment. “Oh boy, fountains. I’m thirsty. That was a long way to carry two people.”

“It could have been worse. I’ve been on a diet,” responded Bam Bam. I, not surprisingly, shared her thought. Despite our extreme differences, we are from the same background. Her cousin, the first person to tell me about the relationship between vaginas and penises, is now chair of the semiotics program at an ivy-league university. Only two academic degrees of separation stand between me and life as a Jewish princess. Thurston would not agree; he categorizes me as a princess—and he is a professional genre critic. I made a note to



introduce Thurston to Bam Bam. She would definitely cause him to hyperventilate and have a heart attack.

“Well, Ed has water, and here is some Diet Coke for you, Sondra. Looks like we are all comfortable. Oh, that must be Sheldon. His meeting must have let out early. Sheldon, I know it is a little strange to come home and find a talking horse drinking from the living-room fountain. But don’t ask. That’s an order.”

“Yes, dear.”

Ed made a point on my behalf. “Sondra wants to know if either of you knows any eligible men.”

“As a matter of fact, we do. Sheldon, let’s call Seymour.”

“Yes, dear.”

“Seymour, this is Pebbles. I want you to meet my friend Sondra. Come over immediately. That’s an order.”

“Yes, dear.”

“You will like Seymour, Sondra. He went to Forest Hills High School, too.” After a half hour had passed, Seymour entered Bam Bam’s apartment. His orange paisley polyester shirt was open and he wore a thick gold chain. I wanted to shoot him with an oversized chartreuse water gun. He was safe only because I was still trying to be nice to Bam Bam.

“Lovely to meet you Seymour. Maybe we can share some exciting Forest Hills High School memories.”

“That would be nice. Are you a good cook and a good housekeeper?”

“No. I’m a good professor.”



“Professors don’t make money. Is that a horse on the terrace?”

“She belongs to Sondra. Don’t ask,” said Bam Bam.

“No problem. Sondra has a horse; I have a plane. Sondra, would you like to fly me?” I looked at Seymour’s feet. He was not wearing red clogs. Nor was I.

“I’ve flown men on short notice before. Doing so in a plane would be so calming. I left some books and clothes at a friend’s house in Blackhole. Can we fly to Blackhole?”

“Certainly. Where’s Blackhole?”

“Virginia.”

“Near Washington?”

“No. In the southwest part of the state. In the hills.”

“I’ll find Blackhole on the map. Let’s go to the airport.”

“Just one moment please.”

“It’s okay to fly on a first date,” said Bam Bam.

“That’s not my concern. I just need a moment to talk to Ed.” I walked out on the terrace. “Will you be all right at home alone?”

“Sure. No problem.” I put some money in Ed’s mouth.

“Stop. Stop chewing. That’s twenty dollars you’re eating, not grass. Just because something is green, it’s not necessarily meant to be ingested. I’m giving you this money to buy cat food for Norris in the Super Pioneer grocery store located across the street from our apartment building. And there should be enough



money left for you to purchase Fritos, marshmallows, carrots, and sugar.” Overhearing this conversation, Bam Bam explained that it seemed easier to give domestic directions to a talking horse than to a silent husband. I bid adieu to Bam Bam, Sheldon, and Ed and embarked to the airport with Seymour. We didn’t take a cab; we drove in Seymour’s Ferrari.

Seymour and I were soon flying above the Black-hole campus. “I want to tell you something before we land. True, we’ve known each other for a very short time. But I love you, Sondra. Marry me. We can live in Hewlett Harbor. You can give up teaching and writing. You can spend every afternoon getting your nails done. We can share a cabana with your parents at the beach club. You can become friends with all the Hewlett Harbor housewives.”

“Seymour, is this parachute in good working order?”

“Certainly.”

I opened the cockpit window and jumped. Jed Bob, Bubba Bob, Earl Bob, Bob Bob, and Arnold were on their way to morning classes.

“Squeal,” said Arnold.

“Well, I’ll be,” said Jed Bob. “It’s a bird.”

“I reckon it’s a plane” said Bubba Bob.”

“No, it’s super tsuris,” said Bob Bob. “It’s super tsuris, strange Jewish feminist from New York with powers and abilities far beyond those of Blackhole geezers.”



With the exception of Arnold, Bob Bob (the valedictorian of Yiddish for Y'all) was the smartest member of the group I had just encountered. I was lucky. At least Kiwi did not witness my descent. Not having yet forgiven me for melting Morticia, she would have shot me on sight.

31

The Dating Game

I was on the Blackhole campus without any return transportation to New York. Always one to improvise, I walked over to the art department. “May I borrow some red paint?” I asked the secretary. Paint in hand, I enabled my mundane brown clogs to masquerade as magic red clogs. I clicked my heels and awaited transportation back to La Guardia via Ilya’s travel mode. Nothing happened. Then I heard a strange buzzing sound followed by a message: “This is Ilya Lugosi. I can’t come to the phone now. Please wait for the beep and leave your blood type.”

So much for the magic flying idea. Still attempting to use my time constructively, I purchased a large suitcase to carry the books and the clothing I had stored in The Goat’s house. Once packed, I rented a car and headed for the science fiction studies conference underway in Lexington, Kentucky.



I could hardly manage to handle the luggage carrier as I wheeled my large suitcase into the Lexington Hyatt. My Israeli friend Rachel Safir noticed my difficulty. “How nice to see you again, Sondra. But what’s with the giant suitcase? Surely you do not need a giant suitcase. We’re attending a three-day conference.”

“I’m schlepping this stuff because of my exodus from Blackhole.”

“Now you’re making perfect sense. I know from exodus.” I said good-bye to Rachel, checked into the Hyatt, inquired about Thurston’s room number, put my suitcase in my room, and then knocked on Thurston’s door.

“Oh, gawd.”

“Why are you oh, gawding? I haven’t even had a chance to say anything yet.”

“Aaargh! Not brown clogs with red blotches. What’s the red for? To hide the blood oozing from my poor abused toes?”

“Interpret the color as a red flag. I have something to say. I have just bailed out of an opportunity to become a housewife in Hewlett Harbor. You would not even think of living there or of asking me to become a housewife. I want to marry you. I have never before asked anyone to marry me. What’s your answer?”

“I regret to inform you that your proposal is out of the question. There is no way to appeal my decision. My decision stands.”

“I will go outside the university and sue. Oh, I’m sorry. I’ve been turned down for marriage, not tenure.



Sometimes I get confused about which battle I'm fighting."

"I'm leaving the conference early. Good-bye," said Thurston.

"Good-bye."

All I could do was to vow to direct more attention toward husband hunting in New York.

I went to my room and clicked my by now not-completely-red clogs together. The room filled with smoke. Ilya appeared. "You rang? I put aside deconstructing vumons to answer your call. Ah, it appears that I have touched down in a hotel room. Let's have sex."

"It will have to be the kind that defies gravity. The bed in this room is soft. There is no way that I'm going to deconstruct Lexington horse-farm fencing to get you a plank. Don't even think about it." We undressed each other and embraced. "We're still standing on the ground. I expected aerial sex."

"Think lovely thoughts."

"Book contract," I shouted.

"Lovelier thoughts, Sondra."

"Job offers."

"Not lovely enough."

"I'm not thinking any more."

"Then up we go," he said as his erect penis slid inside me. There was a knock on the door.

"Housekeeping." The door began to open.

"Ilya do something. This is Lexington, not New York or San Francisco. The Modern Language Association



has never held a conference here. This hotel's staff is not accustomed to seeing literary critics flying around hotel rooms having sex." Ilya zapped us—and my giant suitcase—to Forest Hills. We landed in mid living room, on top of the plastic.

"I've already agreed to use condoms. All this plastic is surely not necessary."

"Don't ask. But I must to ask you a favor. You do all this magic stuff. I need help finding a husband in New York. Do you have any of that love potion described in *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum*? It will be no problem for me to get mare sweat. One of my best friends is a sexy sweating mare. Or, how about some of the love potion that the protagonist of Woody Allen's *Alice* receives? Alice attracts every man in sight."

"I'll see what I can do," Ilya said as he disappeared within his usual puff of smoke. When the smoke cleared, I saw a maternal, gray-haired woman and a cocker spaniel sitting on Herbert's sofa. The dog pawed the sofa's plastic covering.

"Mrs. Bush? What are you doing here?"

"I am your fairy godmother. I get bored in Kennebunkport. So, I spice up my life by doing a little fairy-godmother work on the side. If my dog, Millie, can write a book, I can dabble in fairy-godmothering." Norris picked this moment to emerge from beneath the couch and spit at Millie. "I explain this dabbling to George by telling him that I'm promoting family values. Looks like I've arrived just in time. This is an



emergency case. Not married. Thirty-nine. Do you have any fruit in the house?”

“Just this banana.”

“A banana is too suggestive. Men like the subtle approach. How about some vegetables?” I went to the refrigerator and returned with a cucumber, a zucchini, and a carrot. “Is there only one thing on your mind? How am I supposed to construct a coach from ingredients that appropriately belong in Erica Jong’s *Fruits and Vegetables*? What happened to those good old fairy-tale pumpkins? I know. This is the nineties. I’ll do the best I can.” She waved her magic wand. A yellow, green, and orange oblong coach appeared. “I see that you already have a horse. Oh yes, your cat. I can change him into . . .”

I grabbed Norris. “Don’t. Don’t change Norris. Also, I don’t mean to be rude, Mrs. Bush. But please understand that I can’t enter Manhattan in a multicolored horse-drawn phallic symbol on wheels. When I go to Manhattan, I try not to attract too much attention. Hence, I only use one horse for transportation purposes.”

“Sorry. I guess the White House and Walker’s Point tend to shield one from reality. There is a final thing I can do for you.” She touched her wand to my clogs. They changed into red, high-heeled glass slippers.

“These shoes aren’t right either. I don’t wear high heels under any circumstance. And glass heels are impractical. Please, may I have my clogs back? I need them to irk a New England WASP who won’t marry me.”



“I’ll grant your wish.” My clogs came back. “Sorry. That was your one and only wish. I’m new at the fairy godmother thing. I can only grant one wish per house call. I can’t be of further help. Will you vote for my relatives?”

“I would rather wear high-heeled glass slippers.”

“Well, in truth, I can’t say that I blame you. Nice to meet you. Happy husband hunting, dear.” Barbara and Millie disappeared. Magic having failed, I was left to my own devices.

Yet magic is just what husband hunting in New York requires. Strangers never speak to each other here. How can I meet a husband in a place where strangers never speak to each other? Again, I assert that professionalism is much simpler than passion. I wish that I could turn eligible men into computer files. I wish that I could simply call these files up on my hard drive: `x edit “niceguy” script`. When “niceguy” file/potential husband appears on screen, I can revise him—or, if need be, erase him. While searching for a husband at the Javits Center computer show, I learned that computer software used for husband hunting had not progressed to the level I imagined. It is very far-fetched to hope for any future developments in this area. A society that has not perfected foolproof, safe birth control—a society that rejects birth control which in any way alters the male body—is certainly not going to reduce eligible men to computer chips.

Casting aside both magic and technology, I decided to tailor my husband hunt to another mode. Having



practiced for years, I was finally ready to compete in the Husband-Finding Olympics. I imagined participating in such events as keeping track of the field, dating services, personal ads, and singles gatherings. With this agenda in mind, I attended another trade show. Adhering to the “c” category, I progressed from a computer show to a cat show. I entered Madison Square Garden with high hopes of meeting sensitive men who liked cats. It soon became apparent that men who attend cat shows are more interested in cats than in women. I circumnavigated the Garden while peering into a seemingly endless number of cat cages. I watched cats win blue ribbons—and no man was interested in awarding me his attention. The cat show soon became tedious. It reminded me of a cat version of a Modern Language Association Conference, in which kitty-litter exhibits replace book exhibits. Proliferating shit is endemic to both enterprises.

Since both cat shows and computer shows had proven to be social catastrophes, I decided to turn to dating services. Unable to bring myself to enter one such Forty-second Street establishment, I stood outside its door in an office-building vestibule. A businessman emerged from the elevator. “Do you know anything about the concern that rents this suite?” I asked him.

“No. What kind of business is it?”

“A dating service.”

“Why are you interested in a dating service?”

“I need to find a date.”



“You’ve found me. Why don’t you accompany me to Bryant Park? We could get to know each other there.” I would grasp at any excuse not to enter the dating-service office. Bryant Park is a recently refurbished public space. The man was cute. His suggestion made sense.

“That would be nice.” We walked to the park and sat on a bench.

“It is a little hot here. I think I will take off my jacket, and my tie, and my shirt.” He began to strip. “And my shoes, and my socks, and my pants.”

“I’ve seen enough. Bye.” I left the park and walked into the Forty-second Street Library’s third floor catalogue room. I approached a computer terminal. I typed: “Locate: Lear, Sondra.” Five book entries appeared. Enlivened by this electronic bibliographical affirmation of exactly who and what I was, I felt brave enough to devote the evening to resuming the hunt.

I entered a bar in which a singles gathering was being held. All the women resembled Bam Bam / Vita Conti clones. Their heels and skirts were high; their blouses were tight and low. Attired in my boots, baggy slacks, and bulky sweater, I was more out of place than Gidget would be at the Modern Language Association Conference. In fact, my presence at a singles bar is as incongruous as an imaginary film called *Gidget Goes to MLA*. I positioned myself against the bar and ordered a drink. “Club soda—on the rocks,” I requested. Even though this water came from a Perrier bottle and not



from a kibbutz faucet, I felt more sick than when the kibbutz water poisoned me. My green-tinged face simply did not resemble the other women's made-up ones. Nonetheless, a silver-haired man wearing a pinstriped suit approached me. "Hi," he said. He put his arm around me. I could not believe that I was standing at a bar with a strange man's arm around me. "I really like you," he continued.

"I haven't said a word. How do you know that you like me?"

"Words aren't important. You have beautiful eyes."

"Beautiful eyes aren't important. Why don't you ask me about myself?"

"Okay, what do you do?"

"I focus on words."

"And exactly how do you do that?"

"I write books and articles about feminist theory." The man's hand stiffened in mid backrub. I surmised that this response definitely did not characterize another part of his body.

"Let's start again. What do you do? I see that you don't drink. Do you smoke?"

"Never."

"Do you dance?"

"No."

"We have reached a stalemate. Let's give this another shot. What do you do in addition to writing?"

"I read."

"I can relate to that. I think I read something a year or so ago. What do you read?"



“Feminist power fantasies about lesbian planets. The characters kill men.” His hand abruptly fell from my back.

“What can I do with you?”

“Nothing.”

“Bye.”

Knowing that this man had just logged me off, I looked around the room filled with fifty-five twenty-five year old women and five fifty-five year old men. I was soon on the subway and back at home. I decided to call my friend Carol and tell her about my experience. The happily married mother of toddler Gail, she is much more successful at this husband stuff than I am. I so much hoped that I would find a husband before Gail progressed from saying “moo, moo” and “baa, baa” to “I do.”

“That sounds like a very bad evening,” said Carol. “Why don’t you place a personal ad?”

“I just can’t bring myself to write one.”

“What? You have a ten-page vita and you can’t write a two-line ad? Let’s frame this task in a familiar context for you. You are submitting the ad for publication. I’ll be the outside reader.”

“You have made an arduous task easier. Thanks Carol.” I hung up, hugged Norris, ignored the loud equine sex sounds emanating from the terrace, and fell asleep easily. The horses, after all, were quieter than Thurston.

Ms. Ed, in contrast to me, looked very happy the next morning. “You’re certainly cheerful,” I said to her.



“Had great sex last night.”

“Sex? How did you manage to bring another horse into this apartment without my noticing her or him?”

“I’m involved with a white stallion. While you were in Kentucky, I went to the magic-horse match-maker. She introduced me to Pegasus. Pegasus and I hit it off, and last night he flew from Greece directly to the terrace.”

“Listen Ed, my husband hunt is just like the myth of Sisyphus. I need a favor. Do you think you can get Pegasus to put in a good word for me to Bellerophon? He’s had trouble with Anteia. Maybe he’s tired of being married to Iobates’ daughter. Maybe I would have a chance with him.”

“I’ll be glad to try to set you up with Bellerophon. But it won’t be very helpful to you.”

“Why not?”

“Bellerophon is not real. Furthermore, putting him in this novel is unoriginal. John Barth already used Bellerophon in *Chimera*. And your essay on gender and the literature of exhaustion hasn’t appeared yet.”

In my life, it would be reasonable to expect a Barth look-alike genie to appear on the plastic-covered sofa in the very spot where fairy godmother Barbara Bush had materialized earlier in the day. According to my luck, like Barth, the genie was probably married.

32

The Tsurisauruses

Admitting that I was not interested in trade shows, dating services, unreal men, and singles bars, I turned to areas that did concern me: teaching and Jewish culture. I was offering a science fiction adult-education course at the Hayden Planetarium and attending singles functions at synagogues. My science fiction class proved to be a poor hunting ground. After I announced that I was the world's expert on feminist science fiction, all the male students dropped the course. But I had high hopes about attending the party being given in honor of the new barosaurus exhibit at the Museum of Natural History.

The tallest barosaurus towered above me while I mingled in the large exhibit hall. Perhaps the group of dinosaurs on display had been a family. The female



barosaurus obviously was a better husband-finder than I. Not to be outdone by a female barosaurus, as soon as I saw a man I had previously briefly encountered in the planetarium office, I engaged him in conversation. “What exactly do you do in the planetarium?” I asked.

“I’m an astronomer.”

“May I use one of your telescopes?”

“Why?”

“I’m searching for something, and I’m having difficulty finding it.”

“I know all about heavenly bodies. Just name the heavenly body you seek and I can help you locate it.”

How could an astronomer sound like a dating service? “Actually, I’m more into personality than bodies. What’s your name again?” I asked.

“Barney Rubble.” One of the barosauruses smiled. “You’ll have to tell me more about astronomy sometime, Barney.”

“I would be happy to. Nice to chat with you. My wife, Betty, is signaling that she is ready to leave.” I walked across the room and sat under a barosaurus tail.

The dinosaurs did not provide a fertile husband-hunting ground. I should have known. I had spent my professional life among dinosaurs, the Blackhole State geezersauruses. Fraternizing with dinosaurs does not lead to marriage. I imagined skeletons of the Blackhole English department’s dead wood standing next to the barosauruses. Sitting under a barosaurus tail imagining that geezers are part of a dinosaur exhibit constitutes



neither successful mental fertilization nor having a yabba-dabba-doo time. I left the party, walked through the museum, used my employee passkey to enter the Hayden Planetarium, and approached the famous meteor exhibited in the lobby. Sondra Lear, the world's expert on feminist science fiction, was spending Saturday night in the planetarium lobby alone with a meteor. Maybe, like the silicon Horta my favorite *Star Trek* episode describes, the meteor was an alien life form. Attempting to communicate, I made a fist and knocked on the meteor. There was no reply. Maybe this unresponsiveness was for the best. I remembered Carol Carr's science fiction story, "Look, You Think You've Got Troubles," about a Jewish woman who marries an alien. The protagonist's mother was not happy. If I married an alien, Herbert would react similarly.

Just to make sure that I was covering all bases, I placed both hands on the meteor and made a wish. Nothing happened. Relieved that I had survived being alone in a deserted New York City building at night, I went home. At least Norris and Ed, rather than Dino Flintstone or a space alien, greeted me.

I turned on my computer and typed an e-mail message to Max Haven, a favorite teacher from my graduate-school days. Max's great sense of humor bolstered me during the years in which I progressed from dissertation trauma to job-finding trauma to tenure trauma. Max was now helping me deal with marriage trauma. (Max is married.) Where the e-mail screen said



“subject,” I typed “marriage trauma, subcategory dinosaur.” I described how, instead of finding a husband at the barosaurus reception, I encountered a tsurisauros.

Max answered—and noted that I had inadvertently implied that a dinosaur and a skin ailment are one and the same: “You have again taken great liberties with spelling. ‘Psoriasis’ was a skin disease of prehistoric creatures. You mean the tsurisauroses, actually Jewish beasts that became extinct because they were eventually assimilated. The reasons: they ate too much greasy food and got so big that they could no longer fit a *minyán* into any available cave. The next step was inevitable. Traditions died out and they intermarried with the shik-sasauroses, whereupon they began to drink heavily and they beat their wives and insisted that they were the kings of their caves, so the dumb broads had better shut up. The animosity resulted in a sharply decreased birth rate, until there was only one of the overweight *mamsers* left. (I guess you had better find out what a mamser is.) ‘King of the cave?’ screamed the last Mrs. Tsurisauros. ‘King of the abusive, tyrannical brutes is more like it! That’s goyish behavior, so you might as well goyify your name.’ And, lo, the brute changed his name to Tyrannosaurus Rex. You know what happened to those goys, I mean guys. It was a pity. Never again would the universe see the spectacle that was the singing and dancing at a tsurisauros bar mitzvah. The only one to rejoice at the end of the Jewish dinosaurs was the local *mohel* (maybe you’ll have to look this word up too), for it was no mean



task, indeed a most hazardous one, to circumcise those blimps. And that's the *tsure* portion for today."

I told Max that I understood all his Yiddish and that *mamsers* could be translated as *geezers*. I thanked him for his story, and logged off. Despite my knowledge of some Yiddish words and my self-identification as a cultural Jew, I never received a Jewish education. To me, Passover meant passing from nontenure to tenure. And, when I attended singles functions at synagogues, the difference between Reformed, Conservative, and Orthodox congregations struck me as being analogous to confusing food labels such as "high fat," "low fat," and "fat free." With my experience at the Museum of Natural History and Max's story in mind, I decided to rectify my ignorance of Jewish religious practices by contacting the Jewish dinosaurs. More specifically, always a person of extremes (Norman Holland says my identity is *sans tertium quid*), I decided to visit the Hasidim.

Since it was Saturday, politeness dictated that I could neither phone the Hasidim nor drive to their neighborhood. I turned to Ms. Ed. "We're going to Brooklyn. I need you. Hasidim do not tolerate driving on Saturday. I think riding a horse is okay, though. But please don't say anything when we arrive. It would be better if the Hasidim don't find out that you are a talking feminist horse." Ed agreed to remain silent and to undertake the excursion. We were soon trotting along the Interboro Parkway, heading for Crown Heights.



Upon our arrival, a Hasidic man began to throw stones at us. I could not imagine why. How could he know that Ed and I are feminists? How could he know about my sexual exploits at academic conferences? I tried to reason with him.

“Why are you throwing stones at my horse and me?”

“You are breaking Sabbath laws. Animals as well as people must rest on the Sabbath.”

“Ed, sit. Lie down,” I whispered.

“Not only am I not a Volvo, I’m also not a dog. I’m a horse,” she barked.

“Shh. Just do as I say.” Trusting that I knew more about Hasidim than she did, Ed complied.

“Why have you come to Crown Heights?” asked the man.

“I want to see Rabbi Pearson. I read the article in the *New York Times Magazine* about how y’all believe that he’s the Messiah. I don’t know if he’s the Messiah or not. But I’m a desperate Jewish woman and I can’t take any chances. I want to ask the Messiah to deliver me from Blackhole.”

“Blackhole? What is Blackhole?”

“Goyimville.”

“You are Jewish and you live in Goyimville? This certainly is an emergency. It is very hard to get an audience with Rabbi Pearson. But I have connections. Put your horse in my backyard and follow me.” I found myself face to face with Rabbi Pearson.



“I am Pearson, the great and not terrible. Who are you?”

“I am Sondra. As you can see, I am not small. I need to lose eight and six-tenths pounds. And I am definitely not meek. I am a Jewish New York woman who won a tenure battle at a southern state university. If you’re the Messiah, please deliver me from Blackhole.”

“That will be a simple matter. But first, before you are delivered, you must bring me the broom of the Wicked Witch of the South.”

“I can do that. Hang on for ten minutes. I’ll be right back.” I found a pay phone. “Hello, Tammy Fay. This is Sondra. Sorry to disturb you at home on Saturday. But this is important. Do you know if Morticia’s broom is still in her office? Yes? Good. Could you mail it to me? Great. Thanks.”

“Rabbi, the broom will arrive in about three days.”

“You will be delivered from Blackhole. You have a ten-page vita. You will get another academic job.”

“You didn’t supply anything I don’t already have.”

“What did you expect? You already possess courage, a heart, a brain, and a long vita. Another university will eventually hire you.” Pearson was right. This good news called for a mitzvah. Maybe the mitzvah could be a wedding. Rabbi Pearson is Jewish and single! True, ninety is a little old for me. But I have always liked older men. Now that I’m nearing forty, ninety qualifies as older. Surely, Herbert would be satisfied if I married the Messiah. This idea soon lost its appeal, though. If



Pearson is the all-knowing Messiah, he is aware that I am a feminist. Feminists and messiahs make strange bedfellows. Feminists and messiahs are more incongruous couples than feminists and spies. This situation, in fact, certifies that the tsurisauruses are not extinct.

33

Smile, You're Not on Candid Camera; or, The Empire Strikes Back

I settled down to my new routine: teaching at SUNY–Greenwich Village and the Hayden Planetarium and attending literary readings. I wondered what would happen if, after hearing every living author (there are a finite number of them), I still failed to find a husband. Luckily, I had not yet literally faced the literature of exhaustion. My plans for the evening included attending a first-amendment-rights-discussion led by Arthur Miller and Morley Safer.

I gathered my courage and approached Morley (after watching him every Sunday for so many years, I



felt a first name basis was appropriate) just as he was buttoning his trench coat in preparation to leave the lecture hall. “Morley, would you be interested in doing a story about an English department that tried to expel all of its Jews, feminists, and male homosexuals?”

“That sounds terrible. Send some material.” I complied. *60 Minutes* prepared to shoot the story. To inform my friends about this event, I resorted to surreptitious e-mail codes. For instance: “Sunday night. Tick tick. Revenge.” No one understood why I resorted to unnecessary caution or had a clue about what I meant. Out of consideration for Morley, I sent this message to Jed Bob: “I suggest you drain your pig wallow.” Jed Bob might very well refuse to do so. For all I knew, he might be plumb tickled to have the chance to show off his pig wallow on national television.

I returned to communicating with my own culture. “Hello, Bam Bam. Could you please house Ms. Ed and Norris? *60 Minutes* is coming to interview me. You know how outspoken Ed is. I think it’s best for her to stay with you. It’s no problem? Super.” Next, I called Herbert.

“Is Morley Safer married? You will be seen by millions of men. At least five of them have to be single. Make the most of this opportunity. Wear makeup. Why can’t you look like Linda Evans, Vanna White, and Susan Lucci? You always look like a nun.”

“You’re so encouraging.”

“Leave the plastic where it is.”



Since Herbert always says the same thing, I never have to generate original responses. I pulled out the Shirley and Irving plastic-protective-covering argument about the inappropriateness of guests encountering dining room chairs shielded from dust by black garbage bags.

“I can’t ask Morley Safer to sit on garbage bags. Nor can I sit on garbage bags while I’m on national television.”

Morley and his crew arrived in Forest Hills to interview me. I purposely tried to counter the prevailing image of feminists. Attired in a long white dress with my hair braided around my head, I resembled Princess Leia. Norris, in contrast, was not projecting a wholesome image. Scared by the strangers in the house, all of his fur—especially his tail—fluffed out. He at once looked like a dwarf wookie and sounded like R2D2. Morley entered the apartment, patted Norris, and shook my hand. He sat on the couch (sans plastic). The cameras rolled. “Professor Lear, how would you characterize the current status of feminist scholarship on the nation’s campuses?” The doorbell rang before I could answer.

“You picked up the plastics! I can’t trust you.” Herbert, not needing time to recover from her three-hour plane flight, screamed as she ran in front of the CBS television camera. “Hello, America. I am Herbert, Sondra’s mother. I have returned from Florida to do what is best for her. I know that there must be single men



watching out there in televisionland. If you're Jewish, call my daughter. Why should you be deprived of marrying Sondra? Consider this appeal to be a telethon. My goal is to get the attention of a million men and have Sondra married in an hour."

"Cut," yelled the producer. Morley fainted. Thankful that I was not on live television, I ran to my closet, found the red clogs, put them on, and clicked them as hard as I could. Ilya appeared. "This is an emergency. I need you to zap my mother back to Florida and to place Morley Safer and the camera crew in suspended animation."

"Consider it done."

"Can you do something to make Morley and the crew forget the last ten minutes?"

"Mission accomplished. By the way, why am I doing these things?"

"Herbert crashed my *60 Minutes* interview."

"Seems like she is resorting to Women's Action Coalition tactics to protest your singleness. Do Morley and company plan to go to Blackhole to interview geezers?"

"Yes. We will all be on our way soon after the interview segment transpiring here is filmed."

"When the interview is over, meet me in your apartment building's garage. It will not be necessary for CBS to pay for your transportation. Now go back to exactly where you were located before Herbert arrived."

Herbert and Ilya disappeared. Morley never realized



that he had been interrupted. After the interview concluded, I informed him about my travel plans. “I would be happy to make my own way to Blackhole.”

“Fine. Please meet me and the film crew down there in two days.” I said good-bye to Morley and the crew and went to the garage to find Ilya. Luke Skywalker’s x-wing fighter was parked in the space usually reserved for my father’s car, which was parked in Florida

“I thought you might enjoy flying to Blackhole in this x-wing fighter,” said Ilya. The vehicle is quite fast. So we have time for sex. If your parents’ bed is too soft, we can fly to Madison Square Garden and steal the Democratic Party’s plank.”

“I can’t have sex in my parents’ bed.”

“Your notions about your parents’ bed are petit-bourgeois nonsense. I’m in washing-machine mode. I need to satisfy my desires.”

“I love having sex with you. But I’ve had a hectic day. I have a small headache.” Ilya snapped his fingers. Herbert appeared in the x-wing fighter. Her voice permeated the craft.

“You muffed the *60 Minutes* opportunity. You appear before millions of men and you can’t find one to marry. What kind of car is this? Did I arrive in this car? Did you do something to your father’s car? This car is too small for us. We need a big car to transport all of my possessions to Florida. You know that I have to have my own bedding and broiler and six suitcases of clothes appropriate for every conceivable kind of



weather.” Ilya snapped his fingers. Herbert appeared as a wax museum figure. I began to rip off my clothes and madly toss them around within the fighter craft.

“Zap Herbert back to Florida. I’ll do anything. Just send her back.” I removed Ilya’s cape. He smiled. Herbert disappeared. “And another thing, Ilya. Get the x-wing fighter out of this garage. Forest Hills is a bourgeois community. What will the neighbors think if they see a woman having sex with a vampire in a *Star Wars* plane?” The garage door opened. The plane whooshed out of the garage and soared into the sky. Ilya kissed my neck.

“Please steer this thing. I can’t die before I see the look on Jed Bob’s face when Morley Safer enters his office.”

“Don’t worry. I have this flying contraption on automatic pilot.”

Just as I was about to return Ilya’s neck kiss, I looked down and saw the Blackhole campus. Ilya maneuvered the x-wing fighter to buzz Darryl Hall and Darryl Hall.

“Stop. I know that I can’t lose tenure for sending *60 Minutes* to the campus. But I’m not sure about launching an aerial attack from a science fiction plane.” Morley entered Jed Bob’s office at the moment Ilya’s plane stopped buzzing. Ilya deposited me in the hallway right behind Morley.

“Professor Zwiffel, I’m Morley Safer. I would like to ask you some questions about how your English department treats its Jews, feminists, and male homosexuals.



In addition, just out of curiosity, I want to know why a mud hole is located in front of your desk.”

“I’ve got nothin’ to say to no city folks. As soon as I saw that fighter plane attacking Darryl Hall and Darryl Hall, I ordered Tammy Fay to issue a memo instructing the department to head for the hills. I’m the department head; I’m commencin’ headin’.” Arnold and me head for the hills every day. But, under the circumstances, this afternoon we’re headin’ earlier and faster.” Morley turned to me. “It doesn’t look like this Zwiffel is going to be very cooperative. Whom do you suggest I speak to now?”

“I’m not sure about the proper procedure. Let me consult the faculty handbook.” I flipped through the pages. “Ah, here it is. ‘Article four, section two: Procedure in the Event that *60 Minutes* Investigates the English Department: in the event that the department head heads for the hills, then barge into the dean’s office. If the dean is engaged in trying to cover over racism or sexism, then barge into the provost’s office. If the provost is rude, there is no recourse.” Morley and I barged—failing to adhere exactly to the chain-of-command procedure the handbook described. “Ms. Jane, we’re here to speak with the Provost.”

“I’m sorry. Provost Drysdale is in Richmond trying to cover the bad publicity generated last Halloween after Blackhole cadets dressed up like Nazi storm troopers and marched on the upper quad.”

“Morley, if we have to go to the dean’s office, I’m



glad that you and the crew are accompanying me. I wouldn't go in there alone for anything." We barged again. A figure wearing a black outfit and a black helmet was seated at a desk. He breathed heavily. "Dean Darthvader, I would like you to meet Morley Safer."

"I have only one thing to say: Dean Darthvader to Blackhole State University Feminists: Drop Dead. And if they don't like my attitude, they can sue me."

"This man is very direct. He would never make an effective Terezin camp commandant. The Red Cross inspectors would see right through him," I informed Morley as we left the dean's office. We flew back to New York via garden-variety plane. I said good-bye to Morley at La Guardia.

To compliment the *60 Minutes* Blackhole segment, Andy Rooney did a piece on tenure. "I haven't complained about universities in a long time," Rooney told the audience. "But just look at the tenure system." He held up a one-line vita and a ten-page vita. "The person possessing this short vita has tenure, while the person possessing this long vita doesn't have tenure. The person possessing the short vita often passes judgment on the person with the long vita." Next, he held up a picture of Jed Bob, Bubba Bob, Bob Bob, Earl Bob, and Arnold. "This is a picture of faculty members who have tenure. Would you spend thousands of dollars to send your child to be taught by these people—and by this pig? Tattered broad-brimmed hat indeed."

34

The Sounds of Silence

My personal life entails consulting matchmakers; my professional life at SUNY–Greenwich Village entails teaching in a department that has two tenured, nonfeminist women. As a science fiction critic, I am chagrined to find myself living in a time warp: circa 1850ish matchmaking characterizes my personal life; circa 1950ish conservatism characterizes my professional life. I was not about to break out from 1950ish political mode any time soon. Because I wanted to secure a permanent faculty position, I could never allow SUNY–Greenwich Village English department members to discern my real personality. (Luckily, *60 Minutes* concealed my identity.) The reactionary SUNY–GV English department was just not ready for



a woman who aimed an x-wing fighter at her home university's administrators.

I discussed the problem via e-mail with Rhonda and Jasmine. "How can I convince an entire department that I am docile, sweet, and unobtrusive? This subterfuge is impossible. I'm not an Academy Award-winning actress."

Rhonda and Jasmine sent this reply: "You only have to enter the department once a week to hold your office hour. You'll manage."

Again, I coped with my profession by resorting to disguise. But this disguise involved a change of personality, not a change of clothes such as the one I undertook in Germany, which had transformed me into a Turkish woman. Every Wednesday, just before my office hour, I would enter the phone booth located on University Plaza. I emerged in the guise of Sondra the Subservient, a mild-mannered, cooperative female faculty member. How did I accomplish this protean feat? To remind myself to keep my big mouth shut, I placed tape across my tongue and secured each tape end under my wisdom teeth. With teeth together and lips apart, I was able to remain silent and to keep smiling. Whenever I did speak, I referred to my husband hunt. (I did take the adjunct job with the hunt in mind. But knowing my track record as Midas Lear—everything I touch turns into my career—I expected to emerge from the SUNY-GV experience hired and single. Regardless, I arranged to have lunch with my mailbox mate to see if



I could turn him into a mate mate. He, it turned out, already had a mate mate. The men in the department were satisfied that they had employed an unheard-of combination: a meek feminist.

I did make mistakes, though. The department head—a Roman Catholic father of fifteen who had inherited a manufacturing fortune—met me for lunch. (He resides in a thirty-room mansion; he asked me to cover my five-dollar lunch check.) Lack of generosity characterized his words as well as his attitude toward money. We sat at the table silently facing each other. Straining to make conversation, I said, “So, tell me. How did you manage to father fifteen children?” His expression signaled that I had asked the wrong question. The silence continued. This situation was not to my direct disadvantage. Since this department head was interested only in hiring priests specializing in literature written before 1600, he would never hire me. Yes, I would be perfectly willing to come to school dressed in a cowl. But even I could not disguise the fact that I am not a priest specializing in pre-1600 literature.

My only hope for permanent employment lay with Arnie Rosen, the person slated to become the next department head. Arnie just happened to be my dentist’s cousin. So much for my making fun of the Blackhole goyische kinfolk. According to this version of Jewish geography, the future chair I expected to wow with my talent as a deconstructionist was a cousin of the dentist who constructed my left incisor. I had no trouble



carrying on a conversation with Arnie. “I’m so happy finally to meet you, after hearing my dentist tell me about you so often. He described your Chaucer book while I was undergoing root-canal work. Your name was always present against the sound of a dental drill. I’m once again living in the apartment building where your cousin’s office is located. I’ve taken over my parents’ department while they’re in Florida.”

“Your parents have a department?”

“Oh, silly me. I miss the Blackhole department so much—why, I guess this slip of my tongue (it was not taped at the moment—so slippage was possible) reflects my collegial devotion.” Another colleague entered the department lounge.

“Sondra meet Michael Mitchison.” Michael made small talk before asking me to join him for lunch. (He picked up the tab.) I wanted to marry him. Although he looks exactly like Dan Quayle, he is liberal, sweet, and single. There was only one problem.

“I’m on sabbatical. All I want to do is work on my book. I don’t want to come out of my apartment. I don’t want to engage with anyone. I never answer my phone,” Michael explained.

“That’s not a good idea. What if there’s an emergency?”

“I can’t be interrupted while I’m working. What should I do?”

This quandary posed no challenge for me. “Tell the truth. State exactly what is on your mind in your



answering machine message.” His eyes lit up when he heard this direct, definitely non-WASPish, approach. Unlike Blackholeians, New York goyim are enlightened and open to cross-cultural intercourse.

“What a wonderful idea. But how should I phrase the message?”

“Hello, this is Michael Mitchison. I’m not responding to phone messages because I’m writing my book. If you are in an emergency situation, please wait for the beep and state your emergency. If you are not in an emergency situation, please hang up and do not call again unless an emergency arises.”

A few days later, I gathered my courage and phoned Michael. When I listened to his answering machine, I was shocked to hear my ethnic, direct tone emanating from a cowering WASP’s mouth. Since I did not want to jeopardize myself professionally—and I needed Michael more to serve as an ally than as a husband—I took my own advice. I hung up.

In addition to Michael’s answering machine tape, the SUNY-GV classroom afforded me an opportunity to play myself. I had a lot in common with the New York kids. Jason, one of my American literature students, graduated from Forest Hills High School and had had some of my teachers. But no Forest Hills High school instructor taught *Huckleberry Finn* the way I taught this novel. I was really fascinated by the part where Huck cross-dresses as a girl. (Why I was drawn to this cross-dressing scene, I’ll never know.) I stood in



front of the class and read Twain's text: "Throw stiff-armed from the shoulder, like there was a pivot there for it to turn on—like a girl; not from the waist and elbow, with your arm out to one side, like a boy." Ah ha! Gender difference. I set about to teach this text in my unique way. I addressed the class: "Let's really test what Twain is saying about how girls and boys throw balls. I need two volunteers, a female and a male, to come up here and throw this crumpled piece of paper. Thanks for volunteering, Tiffany. And the same goes for you Jason. Let's really make this fun. I'll be the target. You can throw the supposed ball at me." While I was teaching, I thought about my employment situation at SUNY-GV. My mind wandered from Huck's cross-dressing to Scarlett O'Hara's drapery ruse. I imagined myself as Carol Burnett playing a Jewish version of Sondra O'Lear: Sondra Oy'Lear. I was a desperate woman who was veiling her true voice. I clenched my pen and vowed that—as God is my witness—even if I had to lie, commit adultery, or (God forbid) get married, I would never again feign meekness.

Tiffany took paper in hand. "This is not easy. I've never thrown something at a professor before," she said.

"You can call this procedure an exercise in cognitive estrangement."

Tiffany threw the crumpled paper. I felt just as if I were back in the Blackhole English department; people routinely metaphorically threw things at me there.



Next, it was Jason's turn to throw. Jason, a Forest Hills High School baseball team star, clenched the paper ball while staring at my crotch and breasts. Always one to treat people as they treat me, I glared at his evident erection. Graduate school education was again failing me. Norman Holland never told me how to conduct a class when a student with a hard on was throwing an imaginary hardball. Jason aimed the ball at my feet. I breathed a sigh of relief and continued to teach.

"Why thank you so much for that demonstration, Tiffany and Jason. What did the rest of you observe about your classmates' throwing methods in relation to their gender? Is Twain's description accurate?" As soon as I finished my sentence, the entire class screamed. I could not imagine why. Surely, the class would not have such an intense reaction to an erection. New Yorkers are very sophisticated people. The reason for the outburst was soon apparent.

"Mouse, mouse," announced the students. I jumped up on a chair. Realizing that this was no position for a feminist teacher, I jumped down, ran to a window that faced Washington Square Park, stuck my head out, and yelled. During this emergency, I had reverted to my culture's tenement behavioral mode, in which people routinely communicate by shouting from open windows. An emergency. I could phone Michael. I vetoed this idea while shouting: "Yoo hoo, Ms. Ed. Gallop home and bring back Norris."

"Why?"



“There’s a mouse in my classroom.”

“Let it go free,” said Ed. My students had the same idea. They were not subtle; the entire class hummed the *Born Free* theme. For some of these New Yorkers, seeing a mouse in a SUNY-GV building was the closest they would ever come to experiencing nature in its raw state.

Tiffany spoke for the group. “We think the mouse is cute. We want it to be our class mascot. We have already named it Minnie. Since you taught us not to be phallocratic, we are not automatically assuming that the mouse is male.” Things were looking up. I had progressed from German piranha students from hell to New York mouse protectors. The mouse ran back to the bosom of its mouse family. I dismissed class by singing, “Now it’s time to say good-bye to all our company.” One student had a last question. “What a nice tune. What’s the source of that text?”

“It’s from a television show popular before your time, Annette.”

35

Murder in the English Department

I saw an unfamiliar and welcome sight when I walked into the SUNY-GV English department lounge. Michael had finally emerged from his apartment. “I have to wear these sunglasses. I’m not used to coming out from behind my computer and seeing the light of day,” he explained.

“Oh, look, Sondra. Here comes an assistant professor you would enjoy knowing. Rhomona Granit, I would like you to meet Sondra Lear. Sondra is interested in feminism, postmodernism, and science fiction.”

Rhomona, about seven years my junior, had Betty Davis eyes and wore vintage clothes. I liked her immediately. “Come into my office and let’s get to know each other,” she said in a pronounced Irish accent. As



soon as she closed the office door, she threw her arms around me. “At last, a feminist colleague. I’ve been here for five years without a feminist colleague.” She furiously puffed a cigarette. “The men in the department are unbelievable. I can’t tell the difference between them.”

“I know exactly what you mean. I call these guys Bush men—as in George. Bush men differ from Blackhole geezers. I will, of course, have to explain Blackhole and geezers further. Your male colleagues are antiquated, conservative, and intelligent; mine are just plumb ignorant.”

“You can’t imagine what life is like in this department. One of the men died last year. I wasn’t sure which one he was. Just as I became convinced that a specific person was no longer with us, I saw him in the hall. I mean, I know these men are half dead. But I didn’t expect to see a real walking corpse. I, of course, had the wrong Bush man. Bush man ‘A’ was dead, not Bush man ‘B.’”

“I understand. I have these two former colleagues, Jasmine and Rhonda. Why they are former colleagues is a long story that, in addition to Blackhole and geezers, I am sure to get around to relating eventually. Anyway, I told Jasmine and Rhonda that if I die I do not want people to be notified via Xeroxed memos placed in department mailboxes. The geezers would read the news, dance a jig, indulge in a pig-wallow mud bath, throw the memos in the garbage, and celebrate. I



can't tolerate the thought of numerous memos announcing my death piled in the garbage."

"If I die, there will be no mistaking me for anyone else in the department," said Rhomona.

"Yes, I think it's safe to assume that that is true."

"The department is killing me professionally. I'm not going to get tenure. I have a big mouth. I always say what I think. I'm always in trouble."

Thinking that I had met my clone in Irish form, adhering to my meek-person role, I played down my reaction. "I know that most male professors do not like assertive female colleagues."

"So how do you, as an assertive person, handle the situation?"

"What makes you think I'm assertive? I've been very quiet. How can you tell I'm assertive?"

"It takes a ball-buster to know a ball-buster."

"Okay Rhomona. I admit it. We're of the same ilk." I didn't tell her that I had fought and won a tenure battle. It was hard to play the Good Girl when faced with my true Bad Girl counterpart. Although I am not competitive, I think Blackhole State University hated me more than SUNY-GV hated Rhomona. Unfortunately, while Rhomona possessed my big mouth and my aggression, she lacked my professionalism. And she lacked wonderful colleagues of the ilk of Jasmine and Rhonda. "Well it was really great to meet you. I'll give you a call and maybe we can get together."

"I'll look forward to it."



Just as I had taken two steps outside the department's building, Jason approached. "Hi Professor Lear. I have a question."

"I will be happy to help you. Are you having trouble with Mark Twain?"

"Not really. I don't mean to throw you a curveball, but Paul Simon is going to give a concert in Central Park and I would like you to join me there."

I felt complimented that a student would seek my company. In light of my effort to be more sociable, I told Jason that I would accompany him. This decision, based purely on friendship, proved to be a mistake.

The park was mobbed with concertgoers. "This event is making me nervous, Jason. I don't like crowds. And I'm wearing open-toed shoes instead of clogs. I feel very vulnerable to murder by toe amputation." Thurston must have planned this situation to obtain revenge vis-à-vis the clog traps.

"Don't worry Professor Lear. I'll protect you. This crowd is awesome. I bet this must be like how Woodstock was."

"Oh yes, Woodstock. Woodstock is from my day."

"Wow. You must have been about nine then."

"Actually, I was in Forest Hills High School at the time."

"Did you go to high school with Paul Simon?"

"Please, don't make me even older than I am. No, I did not go to Forest Hills High School with Paul Simon. But I have a penchant for meeting men who did."



The crowd was growing more multitudinous. I was unable to move. I was pressed against Jason's six-foot, two-inch body. If we had not been fully clothed, I would have demanded condom use and reached for my diet cranberry juice.

Jason put his arms around me and gazed into my eyes. "Professor Lear, I want to sleep with you." This particular revenge was not attributable to Thurston. At the start of my graduate school career, I had seduced my forty-two-year-old professor. I loved this man. (And I still do.) Now, seventeen years later, we are still in almost daily e-mail contact. (See, there is a permanent male presence in my life. And there is a wife in his life. She has wife tenure.) I knew that Jason was in lust, not in love. This situation was bad news. Even if I did want to sleep with Jason, I would never take the professional risk. Recalling how I had felt as a twenty-two-year-old seducer of a middle-aged professor, I tried not to hurt Jason's feelings.

"Jason, again, I was ever so much older than nine during Woodstock. I'm now old enough to be your mother. You do not have my permission to call me anything other than 'Professor Lear.' And you certainly must forget about sleeping with me. Now please place your arms somewhere else."

"I understand. I'll never think about sleeping with you again. But you're so cool, Professor Lear." Jason escorted me to the subway, and we agreed to forget that our conversation had ever occurred. I called Rhomona as soon as I returned home.



“Can you hang on a moment. I have to tend to the druids,” she said.

“You have druids in your apartment?”

“Of course not. I’m joking. What makes you take me seriously?”

“I live with a talking feminist horse.”

“Oh, neat. Put her on.”

“She’s not home. She must be off somewhere with Pegasus. I don’t know why, but I think I’m going to call you Rhomona the druid.”

“Fine.”

“Do you have a nickname for me?”

“Not yet. I’ll have to think more about it. At the moment, I need some advice. Things are not going well for me in the department.” This was an awkward circumstance. I wanted to fill the position Rhomona’s termination opened. I decided that it was best to tell her how appropriately to handle her situation. “I have a lot of experience fighting tenure battles. Maybe I can be of assistance.”

“The department’s mistreatment of me has a long history. The chairman who hired me, not the present one with the offspring herd, tried to seduce me. And then there’s the Paris thing. It’s unbelievable. After I had made plans to spend a term in Paris, the department turned down the SUNY–GV travel-money grant I had expected to receive. For years, every applicant received the grant. After reading my rejection letter, I decided to use my own money to fund my research in



Paris. Once my work was underway there, departmental administrators decided to require me to commute from Paris to New York to meet my weekly seminar. I depleted my entire savings, and my health has suffered ever since.”

Forcing someone to travel weekly between Paris and New York to teach sounds very extreme to me.”

“It was. And I’m now becoming more physically ill. I’ve had to miss classes lately because I can’t afford to go to a doctor. I’m getting sicker and sicker. And I haven’t taken care of my immigration papers. Yesterday I had a screaming fight with one of the departmental administrators. And the upshot is that now the department is saying that I’m crazy and they have canceled my classes.”

“This doesn’t sound good. Screaming can only be held against you. I don’t know the legality of canceling your classes. But surely, the department is wrong to state that you’re crazy. All I can advise is that you consult the faculty handbook about the legality of your class cancellations, try to publish as much as you can, and attend to your immigration papers.”

“I think the entire situation is hopeless. The department will never grant tenure to someone like me. And I am so tired of having no source of collegial support.”

“What about doing something else with your life?”

“Never. I’m from the working class. I’ve managed to graduate from Oxford and Yale. Teaching is my life. There is nothing else that I would rather do.”



“There are other jobs at the assistant-professor level. Maybe you could find one.”

“This conversation is depressing me. Let’s talk about something else. How is your husband hunt going?”

“I’m taking a little time off from hunting to write a feminist Jewish academic novel.”

“I would love to read it sometime. I think I should go now.”

“Are you okay?”

“Yes. I’m fine.”

“Call if you need anything. Bye, Rhomona the druid.” Before going to bed, I prepared class—and I prepared myself to see Jason in class.

Teaching progressed smoothly. But since it was such a gorgeous day, I decided to dismiss the students a little earlier than usual. “It’s beautiful outside. My home campus has trees and grass. Why don’t y’all go to Washington Square Park to enjoy the sunshine? See y’all Thursday.” I walked into the SUNY–GV library to Xerox material for a contracted collection of my new and previously published essays. Although I hate Xeroxing, I resolved to complete this task before making my way to the Forty-second Street Library along my usual route through Washington Square Park and up Fifth Avenue.

I saw a crowd when I emerged from the SUNY–GV library. An instinctual group sense that something is amiss—I last had this feeling when I saw the *Challenger* space-shuttle-explosion smoke—frightened me. I soon



learned that a car had careened through the park. People had been injured and killed. I thought of my students. Afraid of seeing terrible things, I left the park area and wandered around the Village dazed. Since this catastrophic event was receiving national media attention, I called my parents and friends to let them know I was safe. I left a calm message on Rhonda and Jasmine's answering machine: "This is me. If you hear about the accident in Washington Square Park, I'm not dead." I went home, crawled into bed, and put my pillow over my head. Then the phone rang.

"Professor Lear, this is Jason. I have horrible news. Rhomona is dead."

"What do you mean Rhomona is dead? Was she in the park during the accident?"

"No. I found her dead in her apartment. She died from drinking too much alcohol. Her kidneys stopped functioning."

"But she is—I mean, she was—thirty-two years old. I can't believe it. How do you know?"

"Rhomona and I were lovers."

"I can't bear this. I must get off the phone." I walked around my parents' apartment, sobbing. Rhonda and Jasmine were the only people who could comfort me. I called them and reached their answering machine. "I'm not dead, my young feminist colleague is dead," I said.

When they returned my call, they agreed with my assessment that Rhomona's department was primarily responsible for her death. While nothing could have



prevented the car accident that occurred in the park, the same does not hold true for the loss of Rhomona. “At least Blackhole didn’t kill us,” Rhonda said.

I went to the departmental memorial service and watched as all of Rhomona’s male persecutors looked solemn and said complimentary words. The former department head who had tried to seduce her made a speech lauding feminist scholarship. I bit my tongue and refrained from raising my hand to inquire why the English department faculty had failed to support a brilliant junior feminist and why they were presently making no effort to hire a senior feminist. These men know what they did. They have to live with themselves.

Well, Rhomona the druid, I will never know what you would have nicknamed me. But I do know that, since you are so irreverent, you would love this chapter. Writing it is all I can do for you. I dedicate it to your memory. I miss you. Bye, Rhomona the druid.

36

Episode II—Attack of the Clones; or, Don't Bet on the Prince?

I tried to cope with the terrible loss of Rhomona by immersing myself in scholarly writing. I logged on to my computer and saw something strange: a handwritten message appeared on the screen. This message certainly was not usual e-mail. “Meet us by the meteor in the Hayden Planetarium,” the message read. Thinking that one of my students was playing a trick, I disregarded the note. But when I took a snack break, I knew that I had to respond to the communication. I opened the refrigerator and encountered another message: “We know that you would consistently look in here. We know you. Meet us by



the meteor in the planetarium.” No one could possibly have put the note in the refrigerator. (Ms. Ed and Norris—despite the picket sign that was once attached to Norris’s tail—can neither write nor gain access to the inside of refrigerators.)

Since it is so complicated to take the subway or the bus from Forest Hills to Manhattan’s West Side—and Ms. Ed was out on another date with Pegasus—due to the high cost of a cab, only one transportation mode was available. I put on my red clogs and tapped them together. “What now?” said Ilya.

“I’m getting strange messages on my computer and in my refrigerator. I need to go to the Hayden Planetarium.”

“I’ll send you there immediately. But be careful.”

“Why?”

“Although I am not very well versed on the subject, I know that extraterrestrial aliens use the same travel mode frequencies as vampire critics. All the frequent-flier miles you logged via your red clogs must have attracted their attention.”

“Aliens! Do you suggest I meet them? Should I take the x-wing fighter?”

“I advise you to go to the planetarium peacefully. No matter what you do, you are powerless against aliens.”

“You’re right. But I’m prepared. I’m a science fiction scholar. Encountering potentially hostile extraterrestrials can’t be worse than fighting a tenure battle.”

“Good-bye, dearest S. If you need me, call.”



It was midnight and I was standing in front of the planetarium's meteor. Then I saw them. Three aliens walked toward me. They all looked alike. Each one had thick shoulder length dark blond hair and two big blue eyes. They were five feet, three inches tall and buxom. Each one could lose ten and a quarter pounds. They wore German jumpsuits and clogs. Since I have not yet gotten around to describing my appearance in detail, please know that they were all me.

"You are our leader," one of the aliens said in a New York accent. This information was heartening—and certainly more positive than when, after I declared my candidacy for Blackhole English department head, Blackholeians throughout the university asked for sick leave.

"Why?"

"Outer space is infinite. There is enough room in outer space for every Earth person to have a planet populated by beings who are their clones. Earth is where everybody is thrown together to generate new clone types. Earth yields genetic diversity. Although we clones can transmute matter, we sometimes run out of ideas for creating new human bodies and personalities. In any event, Sondra, we are you."

"I have an idea. Can you change me so I lose ten and a quarter pounds?"

"Done." We were all suddenly thinner.

"Is there a planet populated by clones of Herbert?"

"Yes."



“Promise you will never beam me down there.”

“Never—we promise. We, again, are you. We understand how you feel about Herbert. We are not married. We have Herberts of our own.”

“Can I ask a favor?”

“Anything.”

“You say that there is an existing planet populated by me. Can I borrow a spaceship and about sixty of me to serve as a crew?”

“A ship is parked outside in Central Park. Crew members who are you await your command.” I boarded a round silver ship and put on a spacesuit. The me sitting at the control panel looked up and asked, “Where to?”

“Blackhole.”

“Oy, not Blackhole. I hate it there.”

“I thought I was in command.”

“I hate rules. I hate commands. I hate commanders.”

“Please.”

“Okay.”

The ship landed in front of the Blackhole State administration building. The ship’s door opened. Sixty Sondras, led by me, emerged. “Attention, Sondras. Hup two three four. Hup two three four. Phasers on stun,” I said.

Jed Bob looked out of his window. “Oh no. It’s supertsuris—again.” Dean Darthvader called the state police. The Sondras vaporized him. Provost Drysdale consulted the faculty handbook. “If a force consisting



of sixty Sondras emerges from a spaceship to invade campus, call the university president,” he read. He called. “Professor Lear, state your terms,” said university president Nixon. The Sondras raised their phasers.”

“I want to be promoted to full professor.”

“You are asking me to make a woman a full professor? We already have two female full professors, Lubinka Cherneva and that roach specialist. That’s enough.”

“Sondras take your mark. Sondras . . .”

Nixon’s response was immediate: “I surrender. Even though you are neither a man nor a wife, I now pronounce you full professor.”

“Pronouncing isn’t good enough.” A letter of promotion materialized in Nixon’s hand. “Sign it.”

He signed. The Sondras and I entered the ship, took off, and hovered above the Blackhole campus.

“Where to now?” asked the Sondra in command of the bridge.

“Florida,” I answered. I wanted to inform Herbert that if she ever again told me to get married I would vaporize her. I entered my parents’ Florida condominium. This domicile, like the Forest Hills apartment, was covered with plastic. But the plastic was strangely askew. I walked into the bedroom. I saw them: Herbert and Egor and Shirley and Irving. They were all naked. They were all in bed together.

Herbert broke the silence. “This is your fault, Sondra. I decided that what you write about I should



be doing. And then you left those queer theory books around the house. I love your father. But I am attracted to Irving. Irving and I think alike. And your father has always been attracted to Shirley. We all like having sex with each other. So here we all are. I enjoy sex. Where do you think you inherited your love of sex from?" I walked out of the bedroom and put one of the plastic garbage bags used to cover a dining-room chair over my head. The Sondras beamed me up to the ship.

"Don't worry: you will live happily ever after," they all said as they beamed me down in the Forest Hills apartment.

When I entered, I saw a sleek and handsome man who appeared to be about forty-eight years old. His hair was gray. His nails were long and sharp. His eyes were yellow. He was naked. Reacting to my stunned expression, he left the room and returned wearing Egor's blue polyester leisure suit. The Sondras, it seemed, had in fact made sure that I would live happily ever after.

I wondered about the first thing Norris, newly transformed into a human male, would say. It did not take long to find out. Norris took me into his arms and explained (in a Virginia accent) that "Deleuze and Guattari envisage a politics of the Lacanian imaginary. The goal of politics is to return to humankind's freedom, to a sense of being a passionate animal. They glorify the pre-symbolic stage of direct, fusional relationships, of spontaneity, of primitive, unmediated desire. They reject phallogentrism and denounce the family as the bearer of hierarchy and taboo."



“Where did you learn that?”

“I’ve been sitting by your computer terminal for years. And I’ve spent the same amount of time sleeping on your breasts.” Norris removed both Egor’s leisure suit and my spacesuit.

“I do miss my tail. But I guess I can get used to one of these human penis contraptions.”

“Wait. Before you try out your new human penis, I have to know if I can get pregnant.”

“No. You had me neutered. Remember? I certainly do.”

“I guess this means that I will never have a child. But I do want to marry you.”

“I knew you would feel unhappy about being childless. So, I brought you this kitten.” A fuzzy gray fluff with paws entered the room and mewed. I picked her up and told her that her name was Meteor. “Yes, Sondra, I want to marry you too. In addition to the fact that you are the only woman I know, I love you.” I felt Norris’s penis within me. We experienced orgasm and purred. Then I became practical.

“What are you going to do for a living?”

“I have given this issue some attention. First, I wanted to become an exterminator. I really liked the idea of spending all day in New York hunting mice and rats. But, I have since thought better of this plan. I’m going to become a vet. Women are the most intuitive gynecologists; cats are the most intuitive veterinarians. I have also thought about how your mother will deal with me. True, I’m not Jewish. But, not only do I know



from literary theory, I also know from all the Yiddish expressions used in the Lear household. I have grown up in the Lear family. I am a cultural Jew. Herbert will never know the difference.”

“Norris, I should have named you Murray Goldfarb. When I designated you Norris Compton Lear, I did so with an eye toward including you in my book acknowledgements. I never dreamed that you would become my husband. Thank God I didn’t name you Fluff Fluff or Tender Vittles or something.” The doorbell rang. When I opened it, I saw the doorman standing next to a child who looked like the young Shirley Temple. “This little girl says she’s yours,” said the doorman.

The gorgeous child walked in, sat on the sofa and began, in a familiar voice, to quote Julia Kristeva. I remained calm. If my culture includes a song about a boy named Sue, I knew that I could manage to have a daughter named Ed. “I was a three-year-old talking palomino and now I’m a three-year-old blond human child,” said Ed. “But I still have my adult brain capacity. I don’t know how I feel about this transformation. Things were so good between Pegasus and me. Now I have to wait years before I can have sex.”

So, it seems as if I have a three-year-old daughter with the mind of an adult feminist theorist and a forty-eight-year-old husband who has lived for ten years. I’ve never liked conventions. As you are aware, I am not referring to academic conferences. I thought that I owed all the Sondras a thank-you note. I typed one into my



computer. “Dear Sondras: Thank you for turning my cat into a husband and my talking horse into a daughter. I appreciate these changes. But I have to ask one more favor.” I printed the note and placed it in the refrigerator. Five Sondras appeared.

“What can we do for you?”

“Transform all the male administrators who acted against me into pigs. Transport them to the slaughterhouse in Rottingen. Then, change all the male deadwood geezers who are ensconced in English departments throughout the world into flatworms.”

“Done. And there is more,” the Sondras said.

“More? I can’t take any more.” I hoped that I was not going to be told that all the Sondras had become lesbians who planned to move to Montana.

“Yes, more. We are going to change you into something.”

“Will I like the change?”

“Yes. You have just become Earth’s first interplanetary feminist Fulbright scholar. You can go to any planet your heart desires. All of your options should be explained to you, though. Your first stop should be the Interplanetary Fulbright Commission, located on this nice little planet with a European flavor: the planet of the Ilyas. Your transportation is completely arranged. It’s parked in Flushing Meadow Park. No need for you to walk there.”

Norris, Ed, little Meteor, and I were instantaneously strapped to the exterior of the Unisphere. “I don’t think I’m on Lufthansa any more,” I said.



“At least I will never have to endure that infernal cat carrier again,” said Norris. “No matter where we go, no cat carriers for Meteor.”

Ed chimed in to articulate her own agenda. “Mother, you’re forbidden ever to tell me to get married.”

The Sondras started their countdown. “Three. Two. One. Ignition. Lift-off.” The Unisphere blasted off with all of us hanging on—very tightly. Ed provided a feminist interpretation of the event. “Is flying via Unisphere as exciting as the flying-bomb imagery in *Dr. Strangelove*? The answer is a matter of opinion. But you’re definitely not the *Dr. Strangelove* type, mother.”

I thought back upon my husband hunt. “Oy! That’s not entirely true.” *Dr. Strangelove* might be a more appropriate name for me than *Dr. Lear*, feminist pioneer.

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