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EXECUTIVE SPA

It was nearly winter, cold outside and I was ironing naked, a special treat in an unheated apartment, even if it was something your mother tells you never to do. Mothers have their reasons. Mine was expressly concerned her daughter keep her clothes on at all times. “Iron dressed,” my mother would say.

Ignoring my mother’s advice and not for the first time, I leaned over the board in the buff, pressing my leotards and leg warmers. I was an aerobics instructress. Two pairs of leg warmers, four leotards, three t-shirts and one pair of designer jeans I could no longer fit in were about all I owned. I heard the sizzle, first, then came that horrible feeling you get when you fall and land funny and something goes crack and you go white and there’s no chance you’re gonna move, no how, no way. Not for a while, anyway. Not of your own accord.

I lived, if you could call it that, in a tenement apartment on the Upper East Side. It was a railroad flat, which is exactly what it sounds like: a room, then a room, then a room like train cars linked by doorways with no doors. The tub was in the kitchen and a pull chain toilet sat quite quaintly in my only closet. I’d hung a decoration over the commode, a stolen One-Way sign, the arrow pointing down. My two other furnishings were my grandmother’s hand-me-down sofa and a pullout bed bolted to the wall. At night, I could hear the click clack click of roaches mating, multiplying under tub and sink and toilet. In the mornings their shed egg cases crunched underfoot, especially near the

refrigerator. They were feeding their young, I'd supposed.

A saccharine steam wafted up, startlingly sweet, familiar, the fragrance of my own flesh burning. I gripped the ironing board and looked down. A faint electric hum rose from the iron which buzzed with life – my life – and my skin singed back. We were melded at our bellies, appliance to girl, girl to appliance. Like wrestlers locked in combat, it was hard to tell who was pulling energy from whom. The burn lasted only a second or two, during which I could sense under the iron's yellow performance plate, the coils of its irony bowels conducting heat and transforming electric volts into energy, melting my skin into beat blanket softness.

I could have pulled away at any time, but I was just pissed off enough at the world, at myself, to lean back into the iron. It was worse than putting your palm atop a fiery stove, worse than losing your virginity, maybe. I don't know: I was stoned on methadone at that time. The iron hissed just like any other iron, wanting to go back to its natural state as soon as possible. It was, apparently, not as lonely as I.

I sucked it in, jumped back, and looked at the damage. The scar was a triangle, of course, symbolizing my ability to stay in the middle, while moving simultaneously along two divergent paths. An example: I am standing on the railroad tracks facing a fast moving train. I will stay in the way of the train. I will get out of the way of the train. I will watch myself trying to decide whether or not I will or will not face down 2000 tons of fast moving train. I was always curious, always getting into trouble. The iron's Teflon tip and, in particular, the steam holes down its side, had permanently branded my hide.

I shivered, dabbed myself with the kitchen towel, skin coming away. I hadn't any

cream to soothe the damage. I went to the tub and ran cold water, splashing some over my side. A scar would soon form, the burn cracked and dry.

That was the way the entire city felt that winter. Like a powder keg too wet to ignite, but able to dry up without warning and explode at any time. The Federal government had just told New York City, the city, my city, to drop dead. “**Ford to City: Drop Dead!**” The insult ran across the top of the October 30th Daily News front page in big bold courier font, the President of the United States telling the city’s already decimated 7.2 million citizens to go to hell in a hand-basket. The 15 cent, week old paper still sat on my hand-me-down sofa. We needed 150 million dollars to make payroll. Even those who had a job would not get paid. I wanted to scream “Fat chance, Mergatroid!” but who was I? A 17-year old girl without a job, ironing naked in a tenement walk-up on the upper east side who had just put a triangular hole in her left side. I wanted to take my iron to Washington and press it into the Feds’ money-green eyes. I wasn’t the only one either.

My situation: five days out of my parents’ you’ll-come-crawling-back house, finally in my first apartment and I’d just lost my job. My aerobics instructress job at the Susan Castlerock Gym on West 59th Street. Snap. Bam. Just like that. Because I’d told my boss, aka Susan Castlerock, the three fried eggs she’d eaten for breakfast, bathed in butter, showed. Because she’d badgered me, like she was my date or something, “Am I getting fat?” Like I was her guy “Does it show here?”

I tried so hard to lie. “No not at all,” I told her.

“Does it show there?” she kept on.

“You look even thinner than yesterday.”

“But here look at this --” She stuck my face in her thighs.

“OK, yes! Maybe! Possibly!” I spat back.

“Maybe possibly what?”

“You’re fat?” I said, like this was a quiz and I really wasn’t sure.

Nowadays I avoid all of this. When someone asks me, “Do I look fat?” I say “Yes.” That usually stops them.

So she fired me on the spot. I’d imagined everything but that. Getting hit by a bus, raped in an alley, showing up in the hospital in frighteningly large white underwear, so big you could picnic on them. But losing my aerobics instructress job?

“You’re a lousy salesperson”, she said, when she stopped crying. “Not a lousy person”, she assured me, “but a lousy salesperson.” Because, she said, apart from our “fat” conversation, I also told Mrs. McElroy of West 74th Street that the in-and-out Nautilus thigh machine would not cure her massive cellulite. “You shouldn’t say the truth,” Susan said. Probably because then no one would come there. And because, probably, though I will never know for sure, I refused to sign up Gladys Hemlock. Her ribcage protruded beyond her breasts, she had hollows in her cheeks and under her eyes, and her thighs, thin as twigs, had begun sprouting long black hairs where they shouldn’t in a concerted effort to keep her body warm. So I did not take Gladys Hemlock’s \$595. “But who fires someone five days out of their parents’ house Thanksgiving around the corner?” I begged. Susan Castlerock, apparently, aka Witch Lady.

I stopped and took stock of my assets. Besides my body, which was small and not worth much, I had \$355 from a student loan, two subway tokens, a bus transfer, and a partially eaten banana in my refrigerator. \$385 in rent was due in two days. My stomach

growled. I had boiled four onions for dinner the previous night, but there was nothing left of them now.

I forged on, pushing heavily on the iron, stomach pulsing. I had to get a job. I was hungry. I was in pain. Everyone was hungry in those days. I got dressed, threw on my only jacket and headed out the door.

In 1975, Executive Spa was off a side alley, down 42nd Street between 7th and 8th Avenues, where the red light district glowed, the flickering neon of pornographers' signs blurring in the rain. This was not unusual for a fitness center in those days. Everything that was anything, or hoped to be, was midtown. No one in his right mind wanted to be downtown in those days, unless you were an investment banker or broker and even they didn't want to be downtown.

I climbed the wide stairs, their concrete balustrades slippery when wet, and chanced to look inside. It was not a habit I had, this pre-looking. I was never that cautious. It just seemed an appropriate homage at the time. After all, I was thinking of working there. Being Catholic, I put bosses right up there with nuns, doctors and priests. It did not seem amiss to genuflect, or at least reflect, before the possibility of a job.

The place was a renovated mansion. The kind that had been chopped into several small offices, the original owner gone broke, no doubt, the interior walls knocked down helter-skelter by the foreclosing bank to make way for more enterprising ventures that could pay rent so the bank could earn interest on its long defunct mortgage bond. In those days, the local banks were in the same shape as the city, few being able to reach for depositors elsewhere.

The building's signage read: Omar's Jewelry, Bill's Bail Bond's, the Pawn-ery,

Electrolux (vacuums \$1 a week for life), J&R Legal and, of course, Executive Spa. So I twisted my brown hair – I was my natural color then -- up in a tight bun, like the gymnast I was, and pushed the front door open. A yellow hall led to a lobby, walls covered in ferret grey carpet. Ferret or mongrel, I could not decide which. I once touched the skin of an elephant and it felt like that. Scratchy. Broken. Tired. She was an abused elephant and cried out. She would steal bananas right out of her babies' mouths. That was in Thailand, in 1989. I paid 25 cents to ride her bareback, bristles on my thighs, to slap her sloppy mouth away from her baby elephants, as they chomped on banana peels.

There was a mirror of sorts, many dead spots in it, where I checked my attire. Olive-skinned, narrow-hipped, petite in that way people mistake for pretty, I was dressed in my best workout gear, navy blue leotards and leg warmers, and US Gymnastics Federation royal blue jacket with white stripes down the arms. The jacket was the same as the last Olympic women's gymnastics team. It had always been my lucky jacket.

To the left, a pink neon light flashed on and off, a diseased eye, that zzzzz'd like a bag of mosquitoes. "Executive Spa!" zzzzzzzz "Executive Spa!" zzzz zzz z "Executive Spa!" I had arrived.

I took a deep breath, pushed open a beaded curtain and stepped into the inner sanctum. A crystal bowl filled with candies, heavily spot-lit and sitting on a table covered in black velvet, caught my eye. I went straight for it. But the bowl was only heavy industrial plastic and not the crystal the flaring light had promised. N'est ce pas! The cinnamon candies looked a bit old and worn, the paper sunk into them, like treats they still serve on Russian planes on the short hop from Shanghai to Hangzhou, crusty and bursting at the seams. I reached for a butterscotch, unwrapped it and popped it into

my mouth. It was a lemon ball, quite sour.

“Name please?” The bottle-blond receptionist, chewing gum, had a headset strapped on. Her wrap-around hot pink leotard clung to her breasts. They were soft and white. I stared at her perfect tits. I wondered if her ass was just as white. I often wondered about body parts, being a trainer and all. “Your name, hon?” She smiled. Her houndsteeth were slightly crooked and her uppers gapped in front. It was kind of sexy, so sexy I was stumped. “Name please?” I stared at her, forgetting all. I had irritated her, which was not my intention. Her false smile said the deaf-mute in front of her wouldn’t last here long. “OK! So, why don’t you sit right there, hon?” She pointed hurriedly, removing the gum from her mouth and crinkling it in a tissue. She cluck, clucked into the headset. “He was soooo wrong! You were sooooo right, hon!” Done with me, she continued her conversation.

It took a while for my eyes to adjust to the murky dark. There was one light beam and it shone on the candies. Other than that, the ferret-mongrel carpet absorbed everything, light, sound, dirt. A fine dust sifted downward through the beam of light. As my eyes adjusted, I could make out two men in business suits, equipment salesmen – who else would wear a suit to a gym? – competitors, no doubt. They sat across from one another on the carpet clad benches, hands clasped between their knees, each trying to avoid the eyes of the other.

I took a seat at the far end of the oval room, close to the candies near the shadow of the water cooler, and waited for my interviewer to arrive.

A girl came in, teeth like sparkles, through the carpeted spa door. She was blond, slim, and what men call well-endowed. Dimly lit she looked young enough, no more

than a teenager, her face made up with shadow, foundation and rouge. Her pink leotard was low-cut and she had sparkles in her hair and slim gold chains around her tiny waist. She reminded me of my best friend, Lisa, the belly dancer. I had never seen an aerobics instructress that dressed like a belly dancer before, but this was the '70's, the age of the Village People, where people reinvented themselves by dressing in the roles of characters they wanted to become, cowboys, disco roller divas, punks, etc. She looked like wildflowers but smelled of Opium perfume, a scent a woman twenty years older would use, and when she giggled she sounded older. Her giggle was gravelly, not high pitched like a child's. She passed over me. "Robert, how are you?" she said to one of the men. "You got more for me?" she asked. He smiled, like he knew her well, like he had sold her a lot of things before, leotards and makeup. She giggled again. I was trying to place where I had heard such a giggle before, when she took hold of his hands which trembled a bit and led him through the curtain of beads. And there was this smell that wafted through the curtain.

The smell evoked my parents' bathroom late at night. An overlay of vinegar and cucumber douche. My mother was a beautician. I thought then that she was doing her hair. The laughter of after sex, which I did not know then, every night would waft into my bedroom. Our house was small with the short hall from living to sleeping quarters flaring out into something like a pelvis, a sunburst clock hanging on the wall. The clock was a metaphor for happiness or maybe a begging for it, the equivalent of a smiley face on speed, a shiny gold clock, ill-machined sun rays shooting out of it, some three inches long, some six or seven, each about an inch wide at the base – near the face – chiseled down to a point at their ends which shot out into the world and occasionally caught me by

the hair. The tops of those rays were polished smooth, the seam up the middle like a long slim tent top, but they could be deadly sharp on the underside. That is because ours was a cheap sunburst wall clock, reflecting all the hopeful poignancy of a suburban Utopia we would never achieve, not in Queens nor in this lifetime.

I kept eating candies and watching.

“Dat’s de owner, babe,” said the receptionist, chucking her curls back, tying them up in a topknot and stabbing a pencil through it.

A small, wiry man entered the room. He wore suspenders over shirtsleeves, and was a dead ringer for my Uncle Al, a nervous guy, from Sicily. The family spoke of Uncle Al in whispers and when he disappeared, no one wore black. He always pinched my cheek – I didn’t mind – and brought me chocolates, and he liked my knees, besides. Audrey Hepburn knees, he called them. I had no idea, at the age of 9, what a compliment it was to have Audrey Hepburn knees. Then I grew up and realized there are not many movies in which Audrey Hepburn bares her knees, so how could Uncle Al know, really? What he meant was, my knees were, all things considered, rare and splendid knees. That was almost as good as being sloe-eyed and doe-footed, which I read in a novel once. I loved my Uncle Al. No one ever told me how Uncle Al passed on, but it wasn’t a heart attack or the cancer.

Working from a call sheet on a clipboard, without looking up, the wiry man called my name. It was a nice name, better than what tradition would have called me, which was Concetta, my father’s mother’s name. She did not speak to us for ages because we had spurned tradition and because she believed my father was too good for my mother. She would opine over her knitting in her rocker, careful not to drop a stitch. “Amen, he

came back from the service and, *ave Maria, dio mio*, felt he had to make good. *Lui e promesso!* He would never have married your mother, otherwise. My son, my son. Too good for the likes of her.” I was one and a half at the time, crawling in my playpen, and she thought I wasn’t listening. Or perhaps she hoped I was. My mother’s mother, Rose, of course, thought the opposite. She would throw plates, decrying the entire male race, “*Bastardo!*” “*Brutto!*” “*Peccato!*” One time she threw Concetta out of the house – or perhaps it was the other way around, depending on which grandma told the story.

Crockery flew. “Your son is a beast, a brute, a burro!” Crash! “And your daughter is a puttane. Pah! Una strega, a witch! Aaaaaiiiiiieeeee!” CRASH! So the family split apart, neither grandmother setting foot in the house of the other from the time my brother was born. Every weekend, rain or snow, my brother, mother, father and I traipsed back and forth, back and forth like mailmen to visit one grandmother or another, bringing news of one family to the other, but unable to bring them together. It was silly really: my parents were perfect for each other. But splitting the family asunder had birthed a “vendetta” and disrespect for it carried the curse of the evil eye.

Behind the owner was a big guy, a goon, with a thick, stocky face, unhelpfully off-sides. The goon’s nose was amiss, as if it had been broken and moved to the left, then re-broken and moved right in an attempt to put it back. His face was pockmarked, cheeks puffed and fallen, his lips were thick. He was the kind of man dogs growl at, no matter how nice he really is, which makes you feel like you want to take him in your arms.

The owner again softly called my name. “Paula Brancato.” Like an accountant, he wanted to check that I was there, to cross foot the numbers. This time I responded.

As if in a classroom, I raised my hand. “Here?” I squeaked. What else was I supposed to say? I caught my legs swinging, had the sudden urge to break a pencil or poke the boy sitting in front of me or even bite my hair: I was back in the first grade, insecure and undersized. I wondered if anyone could tell I’d just been fired.

The wiry guy looked me up and down, frowned at my chest, smiled at my legs and exited. I was nonplussed. I was used to the trainers who hired me examining my body. I was an elite athlete, a thoroughbred, and this was a part of the interview process, no different than insisting I do a flip or handstand or backbend. I had great legs. I was proud of my legs. My chest was not as strong as my legs. Anyone could see that.

A moment later, the goon with the pockmarked face politely held open the door. “Dis way, please,” he grunted and led me down a long, dank hall with a cement floor. I had at least passed the first part of the process.

“Is dat Paula or Paulina?” the goon asked. His voice, low and gravelly, suited him.

“Paula,” I said, walking slightly in front of him, a small echo of himself. “Pauline is the diminutive.”

“Diminu-what?”

“Diminutive. You know, like Lina. My mother’s name is Pauline. She’d be Lina, if she’d had a nickname. I mean my father is Yiano and that’s short for Sebastian but I just call him dad. Nina, Tina, Lina, all these names mean little one.” I talked a lot when I was nervous. Looking up at him I blushed. There was nothing diminutive about Joey. In the claustrophobic passageway, he had to hunker down so as not hit his head.

Paula and Pauline. We would do exercises together on a mat in the living room,

standing on our heads while watching Jack La Lane. We would cut school and go to the movies. I saw Cabaret 8 times. And A Clockwork Orange once, stoned on acid, my mother sitting beside me lamenting “Oh, God! Oh, God!” eyes glued to the screen.

Or was that 2001: A Space Odyssey? Was I really stoned twice? In those days, everything melded together. My mother, whose attention was fleeting, always elsewhere, landing on this or that for a moment. She would even forget I was there. You could take her hand and feel its powdery sweetness, like the wings of a butterfly. We would go see the Rockettes every Christmas at Radio City Music Hall, taking the bus, then the train from Queens to New York. There I was never stoned. I could be her child. We walked in crowds with herd instincts. You could meld in and simply follow. Cars would never mow down crowds. She could be her butterfly self. Once we even went to Madison Square Garden, just my mother and me, to see the Ice Capades. But there I had to be vigilant. The streets were big, the crowds uneven. I would grab her hand and walk her across 7th Avenue, because she never paid attention. I would restrain her on the corners.

“The light is red, ma!” Reality never stops anyone who isn’t in it.

“Oh, is it?” She would step off the curb.

“Put that foot back, ma! Put it back.” A car would zoom past. I would hold my breath and squeeze my eyes. My name made me bigger than my mother, but I was never quite big enough. Not big enough, for instance, to stave off vendettas or evil eyes.

“OK, alright, already”, my mother would snap, stepping back with some annoyance. “I saw the car. I saw it, OK?”

I’d look up at her, wishing this was true, squinting in the sunlight. “It was a truck, ma.” Truck, car, train wreck – it was all the same.

“Come on,” she’d say, stroking my cheek. “I’ll buy you an ice cream cone. Just don’t tell your father.” But by the time we crossed the street, she’d already forgotten the ice cream. She was a woman of many minds, all of them insane.

The owner was already seated when we entered his office, a bare light bulb screwed into the ceiling with a long pull-string hanging down. He made the introductions, names being so important and all. “Me. I’m Vinny, hon,” he said with more of a grimace than a smile. “And dat’s Joey.” He pointed to the goon.

“We’s already acquainted,” said Joey, his smile lopsided.

I stood in the doorway, not sure where to go exactly. Most trainers didn’t ask me to sit. They just wanted to examine the goods, to have me walk around. Vinny ordered me in. “Take a load off. Forgeddabout. Siddown.” He indicated a rickety chair across from the desk and I took a seat, careful to keep my legs closed. A leotard and tights was not an easy uniform to wear to an interview. Some of the places I worked in had us wear little skirts over our leotards, unless we were teaching class. But now, there was no hem to smooth over my thighs, no long pants either, just my leotards, and legwarmers, my gymnastics jacket and me.

“Take your jacket off,” he said. I did and handed it to Joey. There were no pictures at all on the damp, concrete walls. Disco music seeped in, the base reverberating, the aching voice of Donna Summers singing Love to Love You Baby. Donna was moaning softly. Or someone was.

My side throbbed, suddenly. It was the iron side, the side with the steely burn from ironing my clothes naked. But I wasn’t going to tell that to Vinny. Or Joey either. “You, OK?” Vinny asked, eyes wide beneath his coke bottle glasses. I nodded. I hadn’t

had a thing to eat, except a sourball, all day. I thought I smiled. “Joey, the girl’s not OK. Get’re a glass of water. And a Bromo...”

“No, no Bromo!” An Alka Seltzer commercial flitted through my head. Plop, plop. Fizz, fizz. All we needed were the meatballs. It was odd how familiar, how comfortable all this was. I tugged at my waistband. “I’m OK...I’m OK really,” I managed, weakly.

“She’s OK, boss.”

“Joey, don’t make me count to three. One. Two. Get’re a –.”

“OK, alright, already!” Joey headed out the door.

Vinny eyed my resume. “You’re a good girl, hon, aren’tcha?” His wiry hands kept working his suspenders, snapping them.

“Yeah, I guess, good.” No, I wanted to say, not really. I am the prodigal daughter. I left home at 17. But Vinny reminded me of Paul Muni, the original Scarface circa 1932, in his own way beautiful.

“You remind me of my daughter,” he said suddenly beaming, pushing both suspenders out with his thumbs, the proud pa-pa.

“You have a daughter?” Bad move, right off, expressing my disbelief and all. I’d brought his smile to its knees. “That’s good, really, um, good. I like daughters....or, and, uh, sons too.”

Joey entered and sensing the tête-à-tête, politely stared at the wall.

Vinny cleared his throat, put my resume aside. “Ahem. OK, then, everything seems to be in order.”

Joey handed me a plastic cup of water. His hands were stained brown, grease

under the nails, like a man who ran a printing press, like my Uncle Al.

“Now, let me tell you,” said Vinny not without pride, “about our girls.” This was good. This meant he liked me. I was already one of his girls. “We work shifts. We got the lunch crowd, the after work crowd, the night crowd.”

All girls was good, too. I preferred a gym with women only, no men pawing at you. I had quit a job as a salsa instructress at Arthur Murray because so many men twice my age or more wanted to rest their hands on my ass while dancing. A salsa is not a dance where the man is supposed to rest his hands on your ass. “Nights is no problem,” I offered up.

“Good, that’s good,” said Joey.

Vinny stuck his lower lip out as if to collect some scotch and swill it. He also seemed impressed with my night shift. “What do you do in the day?” he asked.

“Uh, school.”

“Huh?” The scotch would have hit the spittoon.

“I go to school.”

They looked at me as if school was on another planet. “You hear dat?” Vinny slapped Joey’s arm. “She goes to school. Smart kid, eh? One o’ them colleges, I’ll betcha. Me, I never got to school, not dat kinda school. And him,” he pointed to Joey, “he never even passed third grade.”

I wished I’d eaten another sourball, or stuffed a handful in my pocket. No one would have known.

Joey pointed to the plastic cup in my hand. I had not touched it. “Hey, uh, drink up!” On closer look, the plastic was stained and icky, but he had spared me the Bromo,

which was good. He came in closer, nose inches from mine. “Drink,” he ordered.

I shrunk back. “No, thank you, really.”

“Drink!” His hands were on the arms of my chair.

I took a sip, smiled weakly and tried to hand the cup back. Joey wrang his hands, like my grandmother sometimes did. Vinny shook his head and pouted. “The girl doesn’t wanna drink, she doesn’t have to drink!”

The two men exchanged a glance of chagrin – there was no other word for it.

“All our girls are good girls, clean girls!” said Vinny.

“I take showers,” I said, insulted. That was a lie. I had a bathtub in the kitchen, no shower, no shower curtain, no curtain in fact of any kind.

There was a moment of absolute silence. Vinny looked like he was trying to figure me out. It was one of those points in a negotiation where it can go either way, or in a love affair, when you can be honest and get in deeper or blow it up and walk off. How could he know if I did or did not have a shower? Then in a shiver, his eyes went from pinpoints to olives. He cracked up. “Ha, ha! Very funny!” he said, slapping his leg. “You’re a hoot. The girl’s a hoot.” He laughed and laughed.

“Yeah, a hoot!” said Joey, laughing hysterically, “My sides’ splittin’, Vinny, you see my sides splittin’?”

This was going really well. I had no idea what was so funny, but encouraged, on a roll, a joke slipped out. The only joke I knew. “What’s the difference between a boner and a bonus?” As soon as I said it I wanted to take the words rights back, but they shook their heads, laughing harder now. “Your wife can blow the bonus?” I said, my voice rising. They positively howled with laughter.

Joey sat, beseeching me to drink, tears his eyes. He was laughing. I was laughing. We were all friends now. I gave in, drank the whole damned cup. Maybe the plastic added calories or minerals at least. He filled the cup again.

“It’s alright. You’re alright,” said Vinny, wiping his coke bottle eyes. “What did you say your name was, Paula, right?”

“Uh, right.” My stomach growled. I leaned back, trying to squelch the sound, but my feet didn’t touch the floor. I could not get comfortable. When I was a little girl, on holidays, I wore patent leather shoes and white anklets with lace. I could see myself in those shoes. I would sit in big chairs and kick my feet back and forth, back and forth, because I could. That behavior did not seem appropriate now.

Vinny smiled. Joey beamed. Vinny burst into song. “Hey, hey, Paula... I want to marry you...” Vinny’s singing, Joey’s smiling, we’re all smiling, one big happy family of perfectly round, yellow smiley faces. I began counting my paycheck. I didn’t even mind that they were singing that stupid song everyone always sang to me. “Hey, hey, Paula...” Then Vinny stopped. “You got a police record, Paula?” he said out of the blue, or grey, really.

I practically spat up my drink. “Pardon?” Oh, no, I thought. Here we go. I could feel the job slipping through my fingers.

Joey frowned. Vinny came ‘round the table and sat at the edge of his desk, very serious, as serious as any little wiry guy who reminded me of my Uncle Al could be. “A po-lice record?”

“NO!” Guilty, I gripped the arms of my chair.

Vinny leaned in, very apologetic, like he was going to make the Stations of the

Cross or something. “Sorry, but, I gotta ask.”

“We gotta ask,” echoed Joey, De Niro facing the girl he doesn’t want to kill.

“You got a police record, you’re out, see,” said Vinny. “Like I said, all my girls are clean.”

I crossed my legs, sat up, leaned forward. Maybe it was the hunger pangs, maybe the ferret grey walls, but things started to seem surreal. I felt like a Rockette, like I should have a corsaged bonnet hat on my head, tilted just so, a rabbit fur muff for my hands, a velvet coat and little white booties – I felt cold, too, like a June Taylor dancer hitting the ice. “No,” I said carefully, “No, I do not have a police record. No, most certainly not.” I was lucky. I was underage when I was caught. First for shoplifting, then for an assortment of colorful drugs. But I didn’t tell them that.

Vinny winced having to ask the next question. “You do drugs?”

Did all men my father’s age read minds or what? “NO!” I shouted, practically leaping from my seat. So much for the ice-y façade.

“No?” he said, face implacable, then waited. As if by his silence he could pull the living truth out of me. If you want someone to talk, then don’t. Most people can’t stand silence. It leaves them with only themselves, a great big void to fill. My void was endless. I sat back down, picked at my cuticles, shifted on my seat uneasily and, lickety-split, caved in.

“Uh, OK, once, maybe.” Truth was I had been stone cold sober for at least an entire year, for the last 1/17th of my life. Don’t ask before that.

“Once?” He raised an eyebrow.

“OK, twice,” I said, like I was in the confessional. As if the interview with Vinny

was a cleansing ritual for the ultimate sacrament of receiving a job and the martyrdom that would follow. I have often felt that way about jobs. You can throw the girl out of the church, apparently, as several priests had done to me, several times (for talking in the vestibule, for not wearing a bra, for fucking on the altar), but you can't throw the church out of the girl. Religion is always hard-wired.

“Twice?!” He made a face, like my first boyfriend when I told him, “I cheated, sort of.” “Two boyfriends means no boyfriends,” he said and grabbed his coat. “Even if you stop him in the middle of sex, even if you push him out and you think it doesn't count, more than it counts, on balance anyways, like only the head went in,” I said and barred the door. He picked me up, pushed me aside and left. But I only did that once and I didn't feel anything then. Now I felt like a great big flop, a humiliation, a mess, a failure. “It was a long long time ago,” I said to Vinny, my voice squeaky, “like when I was... uh, really young.”

“Young? Ha, ha! Young. What, like three minutes ago? Hee, hee! Ha, ha! You crack me up!” He jumped up, sat back behind his desk and nodded like a pursed-lipped parson. Maybe it was OK again. “You willing to take a lie detector test, Paula?” said Vinny, to make sure, he said, I was clean.

Joey gave me a look, half pain, half pleading.

And then I got it. And then a picture formed in my mind. Vinny's “girls” lying back in a circle, like the petals of a flower against the mongrel carpet, breasts falling out of their pink sparkly leotards, and men in business suits, Asian, white and black, peppering the center, the stamens. I was a petal. I recognized my silky white legs and arms, the V of my chest and shoulders. One of the business men sank his head into my

crotch.

In a fog, I was unsure what to answer. “They don’t work,” I stated, point blank.

“What?”

I uncrossed and re-crossed my legs, Sharon Stone in *Basic Instinct*. Their faces, like Michael Douglas’ and the fat guy’s in that movie, began to sweat. I focused solely on the question and tried not to think too much about the job. “They don’t work, Vinny. They aren’t accurate.” I said. I got that awful feeling like when a boss on Wall Street years later tried to kiss me on a business trip. “But my dad looks just like you!” I blurted out. I meant it as a compliment, a nice way to deflect a bad situation, but the man’s face fell like a cleaver.

Vinny shrugged at Joey. “You hear dat? College girl.” He shakes his head like I am some great big mistake, leans in. “Will you take the test, or not, because all my girls do.”

“All our girls,” Joey repeated, his face full of concern, “take da test.”

“Well, you know, I’m a psychology student,” I started out slow, not really knowing where my mouth would lead me. I was so hungry I didn’t care. “And we learned that lie detector tests aren’t statistically valid.” Joey’s eyes pleaded with me, but I relentlessly marched on. “Because they can only gauge autonomic nervous response, like skin temperature and pulse rate and perspiration and...” I raced on “... you can control those things by meditation, or randomness, or thinking of something else. You can make your skin hot or cold or green or grey. Buddhists do it, all the time. They just do.”

Vinny looked at me like he’d had something bad for lunch, like people did when I

was eager to explain things, which always made me want to explain more, which only made people more and more frustrated. I jumped up trying to explain. “Liars do it, all the time! The kind of liars you are trying to rule out.” What did I mean? They only hired the other kind of liars? “If you were really and truly a good liar and believed in your own lie, which most of the best liars do, a lie detector test would not be able to rule you out and that is why lie detectors are inadmissible as evidence in a court of law or a police station or anyplace really.” I stuck my chest out, what little there was of it. “Well, it’s true!”

And that about summed it up. Me. Vinny. Joey. And all of the rest of us. The whole lot of humanity. In this time and place. A bowl full of liars.

Vinny’s face looked like Patton’s when he bitch slapped that private in the hospital bed in the movie. Joey blushed, downright ashamed. I had slipped into Little Miss Bossy Boots, refusing to lie about lying and refusing to leave. I was dancing around the issue. This was a massage parlor. The only thing athletic that went on here was sex. I was being consciously unconscious for the sake of how the story would unfold. Because I found the whole darned thing interesting. Because if a train were coming at me at 180 m.p.h. I would stand in its headlights waiting for it to split me in two, mow me down. Because I needed the money. They were going to have to fire me from this interview to get me out the door. Caught in the grip, I was going to let them decide. A thousand priests shook their fists at me, fingers pointing towards hell. And the face of my father rose in my mind, 42 when I’d left home, handing me my bags on our stoop.

“Uh, but, yeah sure,” I said, shrinking back in my chair, heart rocked with grief. “I can maybe take the test.” Always after I had said what I wanted, done what I did, torn

the curtain away and brought the whole house down, I wanted the world to go back to how it had been without me. But that was impossible.

Vinny shook his head, his lips relaxing. Joey, stricken, was still nodding, side-to-side, trying to warn me to shut the fuck up! I've seen that look many times since, usually in boardrooms, sometimes from lovers, their fathers even, from men many years my senior who wouldn't dare to be so honest, the look that makes me wrong when they feel incomplete. Never from my father, but perhaps he is star struck. And only once, from a man I made my husband, when I left him standing in disbelief, both of our worlds shattering like slow-moving clouds. I was right, but so what? I tried to find Vinny's face but he had turned toward a shaded corner of the room, as Joey was doing now. Vinny blew his nose in his handkerchief, waved his hand. "You're a good girl, hon. Good luck."

"But—"

"This is not for you, hon. " He wouldn't meet my eyes.

"I can do this. I can do this, honest -- ." What the hell was I saying, my mouth way ahead of my head. I would work in a massage parlor?

"G'night," said Vinny.

Joey led me out. As he held the door, I opened my umbrella, and he bent forward, down to my level, rain hitting his face. "I liked you, I really did," he said like I was already dead and departed. "Maybe I can talk to him?" he offered. I looked at my soggy Adidas. There was no reflection back. "You know, he ain't that bad," said Joey.

"No, thanks. I -- ," I stopped. Something salty ran down my cheek. "Bye," I said and ran off.

The big man pulled only slightly back, as if something he'd caught in a bell jar suddenly disappeared, like the beautiful wings of promise had dropped to dust. He stood and waved, Japanese style, continuing until I was gone. His face in its rapt attendance was like a peculiar sort of Geisha's. His pockmarks, powdery white. His eyes with a mineral shine.

It took three blocks, that uninterrupted series of gentle waves, but he did it and in the rain.

I turned the corner, where a bag lady screaming bloody murder had marked her territory -- a corrugated-box-walled shanty. The traffic light changed and we stood trapped on the corner, the woman and I, the red of the district bathing our faces. "You think you know who you are?" She shook her skirts and snarled her lips, her breasts religious headlights. "You think you know something? Motherfucker!" Then she hauled off and kicked me.

"I think I know nothing at all," I said. Rain streaming down, I walked off into the night.