

UNCLEAN JOBS FOR WOMEN AND GIRLS



ALISSA NUTTING

Winner of the 6th Starcherone Prize
Chosen by Ben Marcus

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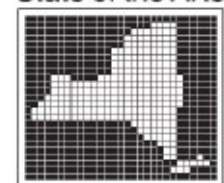
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State of the Arts



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KNIFE THROWER

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CORPSE SMOKER

CAT OWNER

TEENAGER

ICE MELTER

HELLION

ALCOHOLIC

GARDENER

DANCING RAT

SHE-MAN

MAGICIAN

For Shawn—loving me is an unclean job

I stand...with the urgency that saying I creates, a facing up to sheer presence, death and responsibility
the potential for blowing away all the gauze.

– Alice Notley, “The Poetics of Disobedience”

I scarcely dared to look
to see what it was I was.
I gave a sidelong glance
--I couldn't look any higher--
at shadowy gray knees,
trousers and skirts and boots
and different pairs of hands
lying under the lamps.
I knew that nothing stranger
had ever happened, that nothing
stranger could ever happen.

–Elizabeth Bishop, “In The Waiting Room”

This hour I tell things in confidence,
I might not tell everybody, but I will tell you.

–Walt Whitman, “Song of Myself”

DINNER

I am boiling inside a kettle with five other people. Our limbs are bound and our intestines are stuffed with herbs and garlic, but we can still speak. We smell great despite the pain.

The guy next to me resembles Elvis because of his fluffy, vaguely-pubic black hairdo. It may be the humidity.

Across the kettle a man is trying to cry, but his tears keep mixing with his sweat and instead of looking sad he just seems extra warm. For a moment, I have the romantic thought that maybe we are actually boiling in tears, hundreds of thousands of them, the sweetest-true tears of infants and children instead of a yellowy, chickenish broth.

I am the only woman in the kettle, which strikes me as odd. I'm voluptuous and curvy; I can understand why someone would want to gobble me up. The men do not look so delicious. One, a very old man across the kettle from me, keeps drifting in and out of a semi-conscious state. His head droops down towards the broth then suddenly, just as the tip of his nose touches one of the surface bubbles, he snaps upright and utters a name. "Stanley" is the first. The second, "David." We think he is saying the names of his children; we even continue to humor him after he gets to the fifteenth (perhaps he's moved on to grandchildren?), but as he yells his fortieth name it's clear that he is not poignant but nuts.

"He *isn't* crazy," the crying man sobs. "These are the last few moments of our lives. Shouldn't we all be calling out the names of everyone we've ever met? Ever known? Ever loved?"

"Uh-huh," agrees Elvis.

But the man to Elvis' left is not as fond of this idea. A series of teardrop tattoos on his upper cheek indicate victories in multiple prison-kills. Ironically, he is tied up right next to the crying man. "I like quiet," the tattooed man says.

The man directly next to me on the right, he isn't really my type. His features are youthful and feminine in a way that makes him resemble a boyish Peter Pan. But he's smiling at me through the spices and trimmings shoved into his mouth; undeterred by them he manages a nice, soft look.

Since we're about to be eaten, I lower my standards and choose to be bold.

"I love you," I say. It's coming from a good-pretend place. I just want to pack as much into these last few moments as I can.

Yet when I watch the impact my words have on his face, the effect is very real. Maybe, I figure since we are all cooking towards the finish line, things are kind of fast-forwarding. Maybe what I just said could actually be true.

And then it is. Seconds pass and love for him grows suddenly, like ice crystals or sea monkeys, all over my body.

We stare at one another and he scoots towards me as much as our fetters will allow, enough that our fingertips can touch. "I love you too," he says. "If we weren't tied up, I'd give you the softest kiss you've ever felt in your life, right on your steamy lips."

From the corner of my eye, I notice the tattooed man, who up until this point hasn't been very chatty, is suddenly showing variegated upper teeth. His lips pull back wide in order to verbalize the list of things *he* would do to me, were we not tied up. They are not romantic or legal.

“You’re a monster,” my lover says to him. “The rest of us shouldn’t have to boil in your juices.”

“Uh-huh,” agrees Elvis.

“We’re dying just like this criminal,” weeps the crying man. “It isn’t fair.”

Suddenly the old man raises his head. A drop of yellow broth falls from his chin. “Amanda,” he rasps, then his eyes roll back and his head falls down. I smile.

“That’s my name!” Glee fills me though I don’t know why. “He just spoke my name,” I tell my new lover, whose fingertips squeeze my own.

“Amanda.” My lover whispers my name into the hot mist.

“What if it’s some kind of death list,” the crying man snivels. “What if that old codger has been here for ages, been in pots with hundreds of people who’ve all been eaten, but he always gets left behind because he’s so old. It would drive a person crazy. It might make him repeat over and over again the names of people he’s had to watch die in a half-hearted attempt to bring them back.” After pondering this, the crying man lets out a long, shrill sob that is chirp-like. It reminds me of a parakeet I had when I was young. I try to remember its name.

“Dan,” the old man says.

“That’s *my* name,” my lover laughs, bouncing a little in the water. “He just said our names back-to-back. It’s like our love planted them in his head!”

The tattooed man makes a gagging noise.

For fun, I ask everyone to please mouth his name, just to see if the old man will say it next. I encourage them to hurry up and do it while the old man’s head is flaccid beneath a layer of broth.

“Hector,” whimpers the crying man.

“Sam,” sings Elvis.

“Fuck off,” mutters the tattooed man.

Dan and I watch the old man with anticipation. Finally his aged face surfaces, and he gums the taste of the broth droplets on his cheeks before saying “Lancelot.”

“See,” my lover coos. “Our names before; it was magic.”

I want this moment to stay. I want it to multiply on and on with the unnatural growth of things just before death, speeding off the pure fat of life’s last moments. I want the feeling of our brushing fingertips to breed like cancerous cells.

When the steel door opens, even the old man sits up and blinks his wet lashes. A chef walks in sharpening a long knife against a stone. “Who first?” he barks. We’re all silent, though I think I hear the old man whisper “Daisy.”

“Alright then.” The chef points his knife at me and moves it a little like he’s writing his name in the air. “I’ll take you, since you’re the meatiest.”

I give my lover a farewell glance but suddenly his screams fill the room. “No!” he cries, thrashing madly and fish-like. “Take me in her place. Please, I beg you, make her the very last one.”

“Okay,” agrees the chef. But first he twirls his knife at me a little more, like he’s casting a spell just so I know who’s in charge.

Two men wearing long oven gloves come over and cut my lover’s ropes. He stretches his lips out to kiss me, but is too soon pulled away and carried from the room like a ladder—one man at his shoulders, one man at his feet. “Please,” he begs, “one kiss,” but the two men aren’t as permissive

the cook. They possibly do not speak English, or any language.

“That was so beautiful,” sobs the crying man. “Such love.”

Despite my grief, I try to live in the moment. “Do you sing?” I ask Elvis-Sam.

“There’s a moon out, tonight,” he croons. The garlic cloves really muffle his vibrato.

When the chef and his goons reenter, the tattooed man speaks up.

“Take me,” he says, “I hate these people.”

So they take him. As he’s pulled from the water, we see that he also has a tattoo on his arm that reads, MOTHER. This makes Crying-Hector cry even harder. “I should’ve called my mother more often,” he laments. “Told her I love her and appreciate her cooking.”

“This one’s for Mother,” says Elvis-Sam. He begins singing again. “You are the sunshine of my life.”

Crying-Hector’s sobs are uncontrollable. His emotion touches me. I watch the ripples in the broth move from his torso over to mine, lapping at my stomach like a soft current. “It will be okay, Hector,” I assure him. I want to extend my foot across our little bullion pond and wipe his tears with my brother’s toes, but my legs are bound together at the ankles.

When the door opens, four men, increasingly sour from the first to the fourth, enter with the chef. “I need two,” he orders. The men grab Elvis-Sam and Crying-Hector, who continue singing and weeping respectively as they are carried away.

Alone with the old man it is very quiet, and I realize how loud the boiling noises have become. He lifts his head and says, “Heidi.”

I knew a Heidi once. From ballet class in high school. I imagine being taken from the kettle and laid onto a silver platter next to a giant cake, and on top of that cake is Heidi, posed in a graceful pirouette.

When they lift the old man from the broth, I’m surprised to see he is missing a leg. I wonder if he arrived with it missing, or if they’d eaten his leg and then put him back.

With the others all gone, the boiling bubbles feel far more scalding than before. I am bad at science and uncertain if before we had all somehow shared the heat but now I alone bear its brunt. It seems so. I miss my lover, and my willingness to suffer perhaps makes the broth feel hotter as well.

As the footsteps come, I wonder if there will be anything after death. Perhaps Dan will be waiting for me on the other side and our new and budding love will be allowed to blossom from the beyond. Then, although morbid, I try to prepare myself for what it will feel like when they cut me up. “There are worse ways to die,” I tell myself, “than being boiled then sliced with a knife.” But it takes me a while to think of one.

Finally I imagine being carried out the door to a table where all five of my kettle-mates are waiting, forks and knives in their hands, skins still pink from the boiling broth. I imagine Dan saying he has dibs on my heart, and the others laughing; Elvis singing “Goodnight, sweetheart,” as my carving starts and I lose consciousness to the sounds of battling forks and knives. This daydream dampens the horror of my fate like a bowl placed over a candle. *You can bear anything*, I tell myself. *if you know you’re not alone*, and the cold air stings my cooked skin as the men lift me into their arms. Their fingers are strong with knowledge; I’m only going where the others have already been.

MODEL'S ASSISTANT

My best friend Garla is a model from somewhere Swedishy; if you try to pin down where, like what town, or if actually Sweden, she just yells, "Vodka," or if she's in a better mood, "Vodka, you know?" which seems like she's maybe saying she's Russian, but really she just wants to drink. Garla hates particulars, and is actually able to avoid them because where she *actually* lives is model-land. I wish I lived in model-land too, but the closest I can come to that is hanging out with Garla, which is like going on vacation to a model-land timeshare.

We met at a party in Chelsea that I pond-skipped to. I definitely wasn't invited. I'd gone with my real friend to a not-so-hot party, and then left with her friend to go to a better party where I met someone new who took me to a quite hot party. It was there that I made out with the photographer who took me to the party of Garla. She wasn't hosting it but she was present, and anywhere Garla goes is Garla's party.

I think the only reason I ever saw Garla again was because I was drunk enough to tell her the truth. She was trying on bizarre clothes—there was a shroud that looked fiercely spacelike yet medical, like a gown one might wear to get a pap smear on Mars. Then Garla put on a dress whose pleating created the suggestion of a displaced goiter somewhere to the left of her neck and she sashayed towards me. She was holding my head onto my body, carefully and by the window, so that its breeze might sober me up enough to walk to the end of the room where I might then become sober enough to walk to the toilet and land on the floor. There, hopefully, the pressure from my cheek against my cell phone could call someone who knew me and liked me and wanted to get me a cab and make sure this night was not where my life's journey would end. But for all I knew it was, and when I saw Garla I held on to my head just a little bit tighter, because she appeared to be strutting over to grab it and rip it off.

"You," she said, and I straightened up grammar-school style. I puked in my mouth but absolutely did not open my lips and let it fall on the floor. "Do you like this?" She did a turn that was so beautiful and practiced and impossible but to Garla was something that accidentally slipped out of her like a tiny fart.

"It makes you look like you're pregnant in the back," I said, and used the nose of my beer bottle to itch the middle of my back where the seam of her dress magically globed out. She scowled and pranced off. I assumed she was offended until she brought over a silver-plated bowl filled with the car keys of various guests.

"Use for vomit," she said, and then, "have phone," and slipped a miniature crystallized computer wallet into my purse. I think at that point two large, gray wolfhounds walked up to either side of her and the three of them then headed towards the kitchen. "You love dogs and have a tendency to hallucinate them," I told myself as I stumbled towards the bathroom. Various refined guests were staring at me with horror as I pawed around Helen Keller-style, groping everything in sight to stabilize my journey into a small room housing cold linoleum and a sink. "Why am I always the nerd at the party?" I thought. "I am in my thirties and by now I should at least know how to pretend."

The thing about bathrooms in parties is they don't always stay bathrooms; they start out as such but then become make-out rooms or coke rooms or shower-bubble-madness rooms. When I burst through the door holding my abdomen, a slight and waify couple seemed to be using it as a get-to-know-one-another room; they were drinking very red wine, sitting on the side of the bathtub and giggling, drawing simple pictures with fingertips of wine onto the white tile. The "braap" sound

made while becoming sick intrigued them a little bit. They were children nearly, perhaps nineteen. could feel them looking at me with something real and concentrated. I don't think it was pity as much as curiosity; they seemed to wonder very much what it might be like to be so uncomposed. "I don't g when people use puking in art," said the boy, and the girl said, "Well it's not like *that*, when they do meaning not like me but like Garla throwing up pink paint onto a teal ceramic raccoon.

"I need a cab," I mumbled, and the boy was sympathetic but firm.

"I won't touch you," he told me.

"Of course not," I said, "Heavens no. Just call one and I'll get myself down to the door."

It took a great while to do this. At some point I wondered if I should try to find Garla and give her the phone back, but then I saw a great flash and there she was, the camera's light bouncing off her translucent thigh, her foot inside the host's tropical aquarium. Everyone wanted a shot of her leather bondage shoe surrounded by fake coral: people were holding up cell phones and professional equipment and thin digital cameras, "Tickle fish," Garla was saying to everyone, and there was simply no way I could have that amount of attention suddenly focus over to my own body, even if I was waving a phone that belonged to the darling of their affections. I was like a turd inside someone who accidentally swallowed an engagement ring: I was nothing, yet I carried something uniquely special.

I fell easily down the stairs and by the time I was able to stand, to my great surprise, a cab had come. "Thank you," I called up to the beautiful children in the bathroom, but it was a gurgle and I knew they weren't listening.

I kept the phone on my desk for several days wondering what to do about it. There was something wrong with the phone; it didn't ring. Garla's phone would ring, wouldn't it?

It didn't ring until the fourth day.

"Hi Womun." It was Garla. I began explaining how I'd meant to give it back, etc., but she stopped me quite quickly, "It your phone for me. I call you with it," she said, to which I could've said a lot of things, like how I already have a phone, or that I was very afraid of getting killed for this jewel-phone should someone see me talking on it in my neighborhood, because I don't have a lot of money and neither does anyone else who lives here, but oftentimes people badly need money, for personal reasons, and desperate times/desperate measures.

"I get you for fashion show," she said, "tonight at the seven-thirty."

Out of some type of pride I wanted to make sure that she didn't mean *I* would be in the fashion show, that it wasn't an ironic thing where the beautifuls each try to snag themselves an ugly, and whoever snags the ugliest ugly and dresses it up is the winner. "You mean go watch one with you?" I asked, and she said "Ha," then lit a cigarette and said, "Ha. Ha. I mean this," and told me where to meet her.

Since that night my life has changed in a myriad of ways. I'm still no one, unless I am with Garla and then I become *With Garla*, a new and exciting identity that makes nearly everything possible except being a model myself. And except being someone when I am not with Garla.

At the oxygen bar, Garla gives my face three firm slaps on the cheek. She is always taking grandmotherly liberties such as these. "Put you in special coffin," she says, which is a term of endearment on her part but I don't know what it means exactly. I like to think that it's a sort of Snow White reference, that I'm dear to her in some way that entails it would be pleasant for her to have me on her nightstand forever asleep in a glass box. Though I guess it could also mean she wants to say goodnight and close me inside an iron maiden.

Garla is sitting in front of a laptop with a solar charger plugged into it, although it is raining outside and we are in a darkened room. ~~Garla doesn't have opinions on things; she's not really the pro or con type.~~ Right now she is into global warming because she knows that global warming is chic. Things are either chic or they aren't, and if they're chic then they're for Garla. "The web won't come," Garla says.

"Solar charger," I point out. "There's no sun."

"Global warming," Garla says. She will often randomly say the media titles of controversial topics, such as "Crisis in Darfur," then take a drink and be silent for a few more hours.

A woman wearing a unisex hemp robe enters with two tanks and two breathing masks, hooking Garla in first. With the mask on Garla appears to be a pilot from the future, possibly a computer-generated one. Her perfect skin looks like a plasma screen.

"I love your accent," the smocked woman says. "Where are you from?"

"Vodka, you know?" says Garla, and the woman's eyes frown; perhaps she has just Botoxed because I can tell she really wants to frown but her eyes simply flutter a little.

"Could she get a glass of vodka," I translate, and the woman mentions that alcohol is not usually consumed during the treatment. She is already on the way to get it though, and when she returns there's also a glass for me.

It gets a little overwhelming in the mask when the pure oxygen starts to hit us at the same time as the vodka. Garla takes my hand. I don't know if I'm attracted to her or if she's just beautiful. I think it's the latter because she doesn't say much, and what she does say doesn't make much sense. But people don't have to talk a lot or make sense for others to love them. Just look at dogs and babies.

"Cloud of vodka!" Garla screams. I decide she wants another glass because I want another glass, so I hold two fingers up at the woman in hemp while pointing down to our melted ice. *Garla*, I think *you are a magic swan with Tourette's*. My fingers stay in an upright "peace" position; with our masks I imagine that Garla and I are on some kind of extreme rollercoaster that goes into the stratosphere and we're passing the camera that takes a picture for us to buy at the end, and I am saying, "This is nice and Garla. Peace."

She has made me the best-dressed party nerd of all time. Once, she put these chain link pants on me and I couldn't move, not even like a robot. Garla—wearing six-inch stiletto heels—actually picked me up, carried me up the stairs to the party, and planted me by yet another fish tank, either so I'd have something to watch or because she knew that at some point, a part of her body would be posing inside of it and she very much wanted for me to be there to say, "Now Garla has to go home" when it started to get boring for her.

There was never a conversation where Garla hired me to be her assistant. I just started speaking up when it made sense to, like when people asked if they could cut her arm a tiny bit with a sword in order to drink a drop of it off the blade's tip and she answered them with "Special coffin," in a very tiny voice. "We have to go, Garla," I used to say, but I soon learned that "Garla has to go" is a better way to phrase it, because then it seems like it's entirely out of her control and she doesn't have a choice. Garla does not like choices.

Tonight we go to another fashion show. Garla's walking in it so I wait backstage in the chair where her makeup was done, and at several points people inquire as to why I'm there. Very few actually want me to leave; they're just genuinely trying to understand.

Afterwards we go to the home of a fellow model where I watch Garla drink herself into a deep sea

She is a metronomical drinker. I can count the glasses she drinks per hour, like a time signature, and know exactly how drunk she is at any given moment. With me it's the opposite; the drunk is the mystery wedding guest who may show up early, late, or not at all. By four a.m. Garla is lying on a island countertop in the kitchen. Some guy has dumped a miniature Buddhist sand garden out on her abdomen, and he's swirling the sand around over her stomach with a tiny bamboo rake. Her head is not on the counter; it's flipped back like a Pez dispenser, and I walk over and we have this intoxicated moment.

"I know you're more," my drunken eyes say. They say this in a breathy, hesitant manner that insists it has taken a lot of time for them to work up the courage to say such a thing, without words, nonetheless.

"Yes," answer Garla's eyes, and like all of Garla's answers it is a mysterious pearl whose full value I begin to appraise immediately. I walk over to her and lift her head up with my hands so it is level with the counter, holding it. I look down at her like a surgeon.

"Some type of sausage," Garla says; she likes the cured meats.

It is hard not to drop her head, not to toss it away like a shell that seemed of greater worth from a distance, beneath the water.

I keep wondering if Garla will ask me to quit my regular job copyediting and join her full-time model-land. Her agency is very good to her, but I know she needs me, or at least could really use me more than she does, which leads me to wonder two things: Does Garla have others like Me? If so, how many Mes are there? Does she really need Me at all? The thing about Garla is that it's always okay for Garla. No matter what happens, Garla will be okay. I just speed the okayness up a little bit for her so that okay is sure to happen in real time.

Although my life has so many more great things in it now than before I met Garla, I'm still beginning to feel used. And—how can I deny this—I want more of Garla. She is a rare substance, not only because of the role and power she has in our society and not anything she holds innately. Rare substances make people feel selfish and greedy, and Garla is no exception. Neither am I.

I am also getting a little sick of my special Garla-phone, but it's really expensive and the only thing Garla will call me on. I got rid of my other phone and now have only the phone Garla gave me, perhaps because I know she intended it to only be used when she called me, and this is a small rebellion on my part. Garla doesn't pick up on rebellions though, big or small. She has no need for them.

I decide to ask if I can be her paid assistant, because she probably will not say yes or no, and I can just interpret it as yes. If anything, by quitting my job and hanging out with her more I will get additional goodies I can eBay, and Garla's schwag pays several times more than my current employer.

I strike when we are in the back of a town car on the way to a designer's private shoot. Garla is stretched out on my lap with her muss of blond hair hanging down over my knees. Her hair is softer than my shaved legs.

"Garla," I say, "I'm going to quit my job and be your assistant. You don't have to pay me hardly anything. I don't make very much as it is." There's a pause and she hands up a tiny golden comb to me, I presume for me to begin brushing her hair with. I also presume this means "yes," is a quid pro quo gesture. I call my boss right then on the Garla-phone and quit as loudly as I can without seeming hostile, just to try to burn the event a little deeper into the ether of Garla's memory.

The shoot goes well. Afterwards I take her glasses of chilled vodka that look like refreshing water and we have a look at the pictures, which are beautiful. We leave with giant bags of expensive clothing that we didn't pay or ask for.

I am feeling more visible by the second. Perhaps, I think, I should move into Garla's apartment. That way I'd always be there to do whatever she needed, and there wouldn't be all the Garla-phone calls in the middle of the night; she could just yell or do a special grunt. Although Garla never needs to yell. Everyone is already paying attention.

Except the next morning, she doesn't answer my calls, and she doesn't call me. This goes on for another week and a half. I sulk like a real model. I don't eat and I drink lots of vodka and I cut my own hair in the bathroom with dull scissors and then regret it, and the next morning I think about going to a really expensive salon and having it fixed except I don't have the money for that, especially now that I have no job. For that, I need Garla.

This is the root of my pain. I had convinced myself that she needed me, when really, anyone could and would do what I did: follow around a gorgeous person and get gifts and call outrages by name for what they are. How did I lend any type of panache to that role? Looking in the mirror at my botched home haircut, I realize that my new expensive clothes still look nerdy because they don't fit me right. They never will.

When the Garla-phone finally lights up and makes its synthetic music, it's like an air-raid siren. I'm paralyzed with fear but angst-ridden from loneliness and desperation. "Where have you been?" I scream. "We agreed I'd be your assistant. I quit my job! I haven't seen you for like ten days!"

"Vodka head," Garla explains. I want to pretend like nothing is wrong. "I'm not a bad assistant. I'm a good assistant, which means I need to be where you are, and help you with things."

"Later, a party," she says. I can hear happy screams in the background and their shrillness stab into me. I know those screams belong to completely impractical people, and I hate them for it. "When?" I ask, "How do I get there?"

I stop by a nearby bar to have a few drinks alone before going up to the party. It feels good to swallow over a glass in public. How could I have let my guard down so badly? Before Garla, I had been all guard. Before Garla, I would've seen Garla coming. My pre-Garla life suddenly seems like an amazing thing; I hadn't even known what I was missing. As I walk out of the bar and look up near the balcony I'm headed to, I can actually see Garla. It makes me feel creepy but I stand there and wait for a while anyway, until the two of us seem like strangers. Under the streetlamp and despite our distance, I notice her bone structure dazzle in the candlelight.

Compared to her, I am like a sandwich. I am completely inhuman and benign. I try to remember a sandwich I'd eaten in the fourth grade and cannot. I can't even really remember one I'd eaten a month ago. We all must be like fourth grade sandwiches to Garla.

It's not until I get inside the suite and look around that I realize it's the same residence where I first met Garla. This makes my hands and feet sweat rapidly; the line is suddenly becoming a circle.

But circles are infinite too. It's not just lines that go on forever.

As the night moves on, it's like going back in time. When I enter, Garla gives me a soft embrace and kisses my cheek, but I want restitution. I quit my job and had the week from hell, and she isn't going to flash a quick smile and reenter my life. Maybe I'm replaceable, but I don't have to be happy about it.

I take my old seat by the window and start rapidly boozing. The lights change colors in ways that

suggest I'm going too fast, and that is the speed I want to go. It's a rush, like skydiving. I keep giving Garla a scowl that says, "Hey, you. I'm not holding on. See my empty hands."

She's rubbing pieces of chocolate over her lips like Chap Stick and men are helplessly pulled to her side of the room. Garla's face is a centrifuge that separates the confident from the weak and the jealous, and I have been spun away.

Stumbling to the bathroom, I get out my jeweled Garla-phone. Part of me wants to put it into the toilet, or at least try to see if it will fit through the hole in the bottom of the bowl. I want to puke on it but it is so shiny that with its jeweled crystals and my drunken compound fly-eye vision, I couldn't aim if I wanted to. Instead the puke falls into the water and the phone falls on the ground, and when I'm finished and my cheek hits the floor the phone looks like a store of riches behind the plunger. I grab the phone and open it, kind of bumping it around, hoping it will call a friend who will come pick me up.

But it's Garla's phone, so it calls Garla. I hang up but a few minutes later she's standing over me in an Amazonian manner, one leg on either side of my body. "Put you in tiny coffin," she says, rolling out some toilet paper and batting it against my wet cheek.

"I wish you would."

She doesn't appreciate my display of self-pity. I watch her toss her martini glass out the window onto the patio where it breaks. "You go home and rest doctor-television."

After she leaves, a bodyguard enters and picks me up with a disgusted look, like he's emptying a full bedpan. He helps me into the taxi. Motoring away, I watch the colored streaks of Garla on the patio upstairs.

With panic I check my purse to make sure I still have it: the Garla-phone, the jewel. The cursed treasure that brought distress alongside fortune. Glistening in my lap it is too beautiful to be trusted. As the cab nears my apartment, I have the urge to leave the phone behind on the seat for someone else to find and answer. But I won't. Instead I'll go home and wait for her to call me and turn me into something special for however long she wants, and this time I won't forget to be grateful.

I'm expected to have anal sex with the winning contestant on the moon. I work on an Adult Network reality show called *Eat It*, where male contestants eat all they can of a given substance in order to win some level of fornication with the program's hostesses. Our show's executives decided to do a space episode for the season finale to keep up with the current trend of filming in extreme and sensational locations.

I found out that I got the space bid at a surprise luncheon in my honor. They gave me champagne and several helium-filled balloons with silver moons on the sides. I began to recall a documentary on the Discovery Channel about bathrooms on spaceships. Apparently the toilet sucks it in. It is like a pee-vacuum.

"Space itself is one big vacuum," said Dick, the show's host. He handed me a cupcake decorated with a frosting rocket ship. Dick is responsible for overseeing the eating contests and judging the line between an acceptable gag and a disqualifying vomit.

Throughout the party I smiled at the bad puns, the jokes about "reentry." As I left, my coworker Priscilla told me how lucky I was.

"Space is like ... *hot* right now, you know? An exclusive club."

That night after a shower I stared down at my nipples and their bumpy, vaguely lunar surface. I checked the show's online message boards to see what people were saying about my selection. Even though I've only been on the show for one season, I'm a hit with viewers.

GoodEatFan from New Jersey wrote, *Her breasts have a soft expanding look about them, like rising bread*. Most of them talk about my trademark—my hair. It's really brown and thick and long, and every contestant I've ever been assigned to, before we start doing anything, has always turned me around and pushed his member into my hair. It's the first thing that happens, every time. Of course that won't be possible on the moon.

Before I even meet the contestants, the show execs and I watch them get interviewed. We spy in on their conversation through a one-way mirror, giving the whole situation a police-sting kind of feel.

The contestants I'll be doing the show with are Guff, Leo, and Bill. Guff owns his own fertilization company and is by far the largest of the bunch. His voice is crazy-deep. Dick can't get over it.

"If James Earl Jones yodeled into the universe's vagina, Guff's voice is the noise that would echo back."

Kevin in HR agrees. "His chest seems supported by some exterior plate that's masked with hair."

A hidden camera—they're everywhere—zooms in on Guff's face. He is a mouth-breather. His teeth are a variety of sizes in all the wrong places, as if they'd once fallen out and he had to shove them back in a hurry with no regard to their original position. He looks naked without a log of wood beneath his arm, though this is the first time I've ever seen him, and he's logless. I bet he likes waffles.

Leo is physically much smaller than I am. What's sad is, I can tell he thinks he really dressed up for the audition. He's a disaster of buttons. Every single button on his shirt is closed and there appear to be an unnatural number of buttons—auxiliary buttons and safety buttons to back up the back.

buttons, vestigial buttons that hang at the tops of his sleeves as though, many centuries ago, a pocket may have been there. His hair is too long for his face and it makes him look extra-gaunt. I hear the executives mumble that he should be given a second HIV test, *just to be sure, he doesn't look too good*, and they're right. When I glance at Leo, it's like seeing a lemon the color of tooth enamel.

Sheila, the only other female in the room, says, "It's as if he lives in a median between our world and a race of anemic man-lizards. He lives there in his car." Sheila's an exec, not a do-er, but she seems to constantly place herself in do-er shoes and ask, *Who could ever touch him?* She's asking the question to everyone but me. I'm the answer, though, so I speak up.

"I vote keep him. He won't be any trouble. It's more than we can say about Guff."

A consenting murmur makes its way around the table.

Bill is Bill. Each episode they choose at least one contestant who could be misconstrued, on a good day, as not completely repulsive, and this episode it's Bill. The fact that he knows this, that he's receiving "hottie billing," makes him so much more sleazy and disgusting than the others. He is in no way actually attractive. Someone from casting was probably instructed to go into a PTA meeting, find the one guy there with the smallest boobs and the shortest receding hairline, and to not take any points off if his eyes were far apart. Instead of "for sure," he keeps saying, "for surely." The interviewer finally asks if Shirley is someone close to him. He roars. He acts as if he's met his comical match and tries to give a high-five, which the interviewer does not take him up on.

I meet the contestants in person on the first day of physical training. It's being taped as bonus footage for the season's DVD. We're going to put on the suits and walk around in an underwater tank.

Guff, who apparently developed extraordinary lung capacity by playing the baritone through high school, is requesting he not have to wear the suit or receive oxygen.

"I've got heavy boots," he says. "I'll just walk with you on the bottom."

"No showing off," I tease. I'm supposed to tease. I'm wearing a surfer-style bodysuit that has breast-like gel inserts sewn into the chest pockets. My actual breasts are spilling out the top of the suit, creating the effect that they're jewels of a much larger crown. Occasionally I remember that I'm the lone woman on the entire set and that everyone is staring at me, but it's something that only comes back to me every twenty minutes or so, about five minutes after I recall that I'm completely stoned.

"Your beauty is beautiful," Guff says, and immediately realizes he should've spiced the compliment up a bit. Before he starts trying to dig himself out of that hole, I notice he's eating a package of Lance Peanut Butter Crackers.

"Are those things ever fresh?" I ask.

He looks down at the package as though it will give him the answer. Neon-orange crumbs are furrowed in his beard like lice from another planet.

"I just mean," I say, "every time I see them in a vending machine, they look like they've been sitting there since the seventies. Maybe it's the wrappers."

Guff's chest starts heaving up and down, and I take a few steps back. It's possible that Lance products from vending machines are the only thing he ever eats and that they are the source of his superhuman size and strength. Maybe before he found Lance products he was as thin as Leo. I suddenly worry that I just insulted his favorite thing in life. I think about how I would feel if someone came up to me and said, "What are Valium addicts thinking? Pills can never make you truly happy!"

But instead he starts laughing, guttural undulations somewhere between the Green Giant and Santa. Leo walks over to the corner of the room, curling to it like it's his mother. He whispers, "I love those crackers."

Guff likes this. It doesn't take long before brains meet brawn and the two of them form a symbiotic relationship, like barnacle and whale. When they stand next to each other, I get the feeling that Leo recently broke out of Guff's chest, that he started as a tapeworm but fought his way up the evolutionary ladder.

Bill, of course, is too good to talk to anyone but me. I notice that his enormous gold watch doesn't work.

A medical crew puts us through a series of tests to check our vitals: treadmill running, push-ups, that sort of thing. Bill keeps checking out his own ass in the mirror. I watch him stare at my ass, then his ass, then mine, then his, as though they're having a conversation with one another and only he can hear it.

Leo has taken this occasion as an opportunity to quit smoking, which is laudable, except that the combination of physical exertion and nicotine patches are making him ill. When it's his turn for the treadmill, he runs over and his shirt is soaked from warm-ups. He peels it off and there are already four patches over his chest, sitting almost exactly where the doctor intends to put the electrodes.

"Are those supposed to be placed directly over the heart?" I ask, even though I already know the answer. A former contestant I had to sleep with wore a patch once. When he said to me, *Baby, watch the patch, eh?*, I first stared with confusion at his small, triangular goatee. But then he lifted his sleeve and displayed the patch with great pride, the way a fifth grader might show off a temporary tattoo of a cobra. Apparently it hurts if the patches get bumped, which he used as an excuse to not flex for me. *At least* if I'd been looking forward to that.

We wait until Leo is done throwing up then go get into our suits. Once inside, Leo's arms, which previously looked like blanched string beans, now appear to be relatively the same size as Bill's. This boosts his confidence.

Guff and Leo solidify their union underwater. Instead of using the reach-claw we've been provided with, Guff places Leo on his shoulders and operates him like an extended limb. Bill keeps dropping his claw and cursing into his headset microphone. He is unable to complete his "mission" of using the claw to tighten a loose bolt.

I take a moment and enjoy the secluded world we've entered, in addition to my new role as an asexual giant. It's fun to be individually wrapped and surrounded by water on all sides. Just when I'm starting to feel like one of the guys, Bill lumbers over.

"Wanna see my electric eel?"

He places his fishbowl head against mine, and we clink like crystal glasses toasting.

At lunch Guff devours all the complimentary sandwiches then asks for more, like some steroid-laced *Oliver Twist* from the lumber-and-fur orphanage. Leo ended up having to eat activated charcoal. When we were coming up from the water he puked in his suit, specifically inside his face helmet. The vomit covered the entire lens and made it impossible to tell whether he'd gotten sick or his head had exploded. Bill claimed to have lost his appetite over this incident, but after desuited I saw him walk straight to the catering table.

The rest of the day it's just Guff, Bill, and me. Leo has taken the afternoon off to recover. Guff keeps giving Bill this odd look out the corner of his eye, like he knows Bill is hiding a cookie in one of his pockets—he just can't figure out which one.

I still haven't really thought about what I'm going up to the moon to do. I'm a little afraid of being known as space's first whore, even though I don't really feel like a whore. I never have. At least I'm not giving people root canals. At least I'm not putting makeup on the dead.

As the day ends, the show's executives give us a sneak peak at our real suits. By us, I mean whoever wins and myself. Each suit has a small portal; mine's in the back and his is in the front. The man who's explaining it to us wraps their ends around each other, like marching elephants clinging their trunks to tails. Once they're aligned, they open, pressurize, and retract to an acceptable length. That way he can enter me. On the moon.

Because I'll be in a suit and will look like a hulking male physicist from behind, they've outfitted the back of my helmet with a monitor. It'll show footage of me, doing what we'll be doing, only un-space-suited.

"Any questions?" the scientist asks.

Bill has one. "Can you like, kneel down and stuff?"

I imagine Bill's panting coming through my headset in stereo. It's going to sound like he's in boot camp fulfilling a midday order to dig a ten-foot latrine. The secret to having sex with people who make disgusting sounds is to out-moan them. It gets them there quicker, too, which is half the battle.

A few days before the launch, the contestants are brought in to sample the eat-off product, which was partially designed by NASA. Because the food must be unable to break off and create airborne crumbs, the execs chose a type of hybrid sausage. It's a gelatinous, partial-meat substance that won't flake or fragment.

"Could we make this peanut butterier?" Guff's vote for a flavor infusion is denied.

"It doesn't smell like anything," says Leo. This is true, but Leo says this carefully, as if he knows they're about to tell him, *It smells delicious*.

"Actually," says one scientist, "it should smell like plastic."

Leo sniffs again. He nods.

Bill is holding a coil of sausage in two fingers, like it's the world's longest cigar.

"Uh," says Bill.

This should be good.

"I mean, do we have to eat something that looks so much like a you-know-what? Once in a while people even say the word 'sausage' instead of saying you-know-what."

"It's just food," I tell him. "It's just meat."

"Well," says the scientist, "it's not *just* meat." He goes on to list several items that aren't normally found in either sausages or you-know-whats.

We're told that the eat-off contest will be taped and performed when the ship is hovering over the moon. The winning contestant and I will then travel in a small capsule to the lunar surface to perform the sex act. The way the executive describes it sounds oddly like a honeymoon, a man and wife being escorted off to more private quarters.

Blast-off is hard. There's a moment when my mind tells me that we've blown up, and it takes a few more seconds to realize that we haven't. I feel like my bones are being chewed upon by a glacier with really dull teeth.

Then everything stops. The cabin is instantly too still. When I look at my reflection in a chrome panel, the expression on my face seems a thousand years old.

Bill mutters something about being a space cowboy. I'm staring at Dick, the only one here I really know. He's looking out the window, and he seems horrified. Instead of coming with me and the contestants to train before the launch, he opted to prepare using his own regimen of hypnosis and magnet therapy.

"Dick, are you okay?" My voice sounds weird. I decide I should just have a space persona, and the way I can quit feeling so uncomfortable about nothing being the same. I rename myself Lorna. I roll the r in a Spanish way and bat my eyelashes at the lack of gravity.

Dick is not okay.

He's very tan, and loves being very tan, and perhaps this explains his sudden preoccupation with the sun.

"*Where is the sun?*" He keeps screaming this. It's making Leo unsettled. Guff is looking for the sun inside the cabin.

Bill is trying to recite a list of one-liners from memory and keeps having to look down at the cheat-sheet in his hand. Most of the hottie-billing contestants try to memorize jokes before taping. Once the camera starts rolling, they never remember them. Never.

The medical adviser/cameraman tranquilizes Dick and straps him into a cocoon on the wall. It looks as though some giant spider caught him and hung him there. I keep watching the cargo door for a human-sized space arachnid to enter and devour him whole. I rub Dick's arm a little bit and droplets of sweat come out of his mouth. It's decided that I'll host the show on my own.

We take about an hour or so to tumble through the air and get used to weightlessness. Quarters are tight and Bill keeps reaching out to tickle my feet. I can feel my stomach and my crotch in the same place; there is no middle. Just my head and then everything else.

"I really don't feel like eating," Leo says as they give him his food-coil. After several debates, the execs decided to wrap it in yet another layer of edible protective casing. If the coil were actually dropped onto the ground on Earth, it would probably bounce.

Bill points to my chest for the camera. "I've got all the inspiration I need right there," he says. I want to remind Bill that even if he wins, he won't be seeing or touching my breasts at any point in time. But I don't. I get out my stopwatch for the eat-off. Guff has already opened his mouth wide in a head start.

"Ready ...get set...*go!*"

The first thirty seconds of the race are always the best, showcasing an initial rush of adrenaline. For a moment, it seems like anyone's game. Guff is by far the biggest, but the problem with large contestants is that they're used to eating out of hunger. He has already taken in about two feet of sausage (who knows what percentage of that is plastic), and really can't be too hungry anymore.

Bill is hurting; it's clear. I know a lot about the gag reflex. Throats are one-way lanes, up or down, and it's my professional opinion that Bill's throat has now switched to rising motion.

Leo, skinny dark-horse candidate Leo, is surprising us all. He's eating in snakelike motion ~~slithering his coil down like it's one of his own organs that he coughed up on accident—there's~~ a place for it, and he knows where it goes, and he's putting it there.

In the last thirty seconds, Bill has to quit and strap on his puke sack. It Velcros to his face like a giant gray shoe. I watch with pleasure as his abdominal contortions propel him around the cabin.

Guff has almost quit moving and resembles a gargantuan toy that needs to be rewound. Leo finishes ten seconds before the deadline. We declare him the winner, and as he and I get strapped into the craft that will take us down to the moon's surface, he keeps saying, "I've never won anything before."

As we step out I feel like there's a tree growing from my abdomen whose leaves weigh fifty pounds each. They keep falling off and floating down to my knees with a heavy thickness.

I'm watching Leo attempt a bouncing sort of walk when the intercom on my helmet beeps. "We're ready." It's one of the show's executives on Earth; I can't remember his name but he always wears funny ties. Funny in a bad way. Tiny cans of beer with angel wings.

Something about hearing his voice amidst all the nothingness makes me realize I'm being watched. It's a sensation that oddly has never occurred before in the past during any close-up, or even times when I had to squat over a toilet bowl that wasn't a bowl at all but a giant camera. I feel my fake-smile muscles involuntarily flex.

Leo gets behind me, and I give him an encouraging low-gravity pat on the arm. It takes a few moments for our suits' portals to align. When they open, it sounds like something very important is leaking out. The noise is high-pitched and quick, like wind from the future.

"Um...just a second," says Leo.

I tell him, "No rush; there isn't a time limit," although we're breathing tanked oxygen and there certainly is. When he finally enters me, I'm staring at Earth, which looks like the circular door of some ancient tomb, like if we could just reach out and slide it aside, the answer to something very important would be revealed.

There's a hiccup of static and I can hear the execs talking: *Why does this look so educational? and Should've gone with the body bubble.* I moan their voices out.

"Er... just a sec," Leo says again.

"Take your time," I say, but I break from my sex-voice to say it.

"Keep it hot," the intercom reminds me.

I feel fine but also very strange, looking at the world and its distance. I feel its weight in my stomach like a pregnancy, like an old meal. When I want to, I cover up the Earth and its oceans with my hand, and then even with the cameras it seems like no one can see me.

ZOOKEEPER

I took a baby panda home from the zoo. Technically, I wasn't supposed to. I decided to keep my job there, at least for a while, so as not to look suspicious.

Dolores from reptiles almost got me.

"Aren't those panda droppings?" she asked, pointing to my hair.

"I don't think so," I said. I put on a helmet. The panda and I were still working through bathroom and sleeping arrangements.

I named her Lulu. Pandas really like bamboo. That's not a myth.

At the time I was living in a room of the Sleep-Eeze Inn. All my local calls were free, as was my cable. I put up a DO NOT DISTURB! sign but worried it might fall off, so I taped several others like it to the actual door.

One night I came home from work with some chicken tenders. I figured the two of us could share them. I did not bring enough for all the policemen who were outside my door.

I pretended to be part of the crowd. I pinched a mother of five on her elbow.

"What's up?" I asked.

She covered the ears of her youngest. "They thought someone was making a pornographic film in that room. There were all these signs up and people heard growling and scratching."

I saw them carrying out Lulu. She looked at me with her giant panda eyes.

"Mother," she yelled.

I didn't know that pandas could talk. It might have been an accident.

While the cops questioned me, Lulu and I tidied up what was left of the continental breakfast in the lounge. I stuck Fruit Loops on the tips of her canine teeth. She seemed to be smiling.

I went to jail. Lulu went to the zoo.

There's a website, freelulu.com, that has a photo of both of us standing behind our respective bars.

Each month I write the zoo a letter, in cursive, asking them to send me a lock of her hair. They won't. When people ask me why I did it, I tell them, "She was soft."

BANDLEADER'S GIRLFRIEND

“You are embarrassing yourself on a national level,” Sister yells into the phone. “What about Dead Mom?”

“Dead Mom is not a mellow subject, Sis.” I look over at my dearest lover CT, who is lying on the couch rubbing slices of ripe grapefruit across his chest. He’s watching a television program about sexual behavior in dolphins.

“Such liquid-rubber bodies,” he whispers. CT is the lead singer for Wolf Rainbow. They are a total hit but CT doesn’t measure success in terms of money; true success lies in Worm Vibrations, or wormbrations.

CT stands for Copper Tone. He is into the rays of the sun.

Sister clears her throat. Talking with her makes me feel a little cosmically disturbed. I try to remind myself that she has invested a lot of time in me, that it became quite a habit for her, a *passion* even, and I think it is important for people to follow their passions. Unless, like Sister’s, they will hinder someone’s enlightenment. Namely mine.

My enlightenment is sparkling pink water and Sister is a levee, but CT allows me to rise up and overwhelm her walls. Sister has never before experienced the unrestricted passion of one enlightened to the Worm as CT is. She has no idea what to do with such love; it’s like giving a can of food to forest-people who can’t understand its monetary value, or the delicious pleasure that awaits them inside.

A good example of this occurred when I took CT home for Thanksgiving and Sis extended her hand to him.

“Mother of my love-cub, I greet you,” he said, and softly licked her face. After this display of vulnerability Sis’s vibes were very tight and secluded. The corners of her mouth tucked themselves firmly in like hotel bed sheets.

CT and I prefer to sleep outdoors but sometimes we’re forced to stay in really nice hotels. It’s a Management. If it were up to CT we’d just find a field close to our next venue and sleep there, but Management makes some good points: privacy, etc. CT’s nightly rituals, which are not exclusionary of nudity and spiritual vision accelerators for communication with the Worm Eternal, can be wrongly interpreted by people like the authorities.

Grog, the bassist, uses humor to mask his negative thinking when he agrees with the Management about hotels. He says things like “How can I round up babes for bonefests and take them to the middle of a corn field? The hottest babes with the biggest milkbags will not go for this. They want open bars and heart-shaped beds. Such are the desires of those with giant milkbags.” Then he’ll pause, adding, “I can’t believe you sleep in the buff where it is all wild and shit. What if a snake bit your johnson?”

Now Sister gives a loud gasp. She always talks so quickly that what she says seems urgent and true. It is some kind of trick. “You’re on nearly every television station right now! I called you because I need to talk to you about something serious, and now there’s this drama. Do you ever stop to think about how your actions affect others? I mean what if angels get *one* day to peek down to earth from Heaven and Tuesday was the *one* day Mom had for all eternity to check up on us and our lives. When she opened the clouds she would’ve been greeted with your...your spectacle.” Sister begins crying.

I know from experience that her tears aren't clear; they're a strange gray color like weird steam. ~~always figured they were mixing with her makeup until I realized she didn't wear any (not to be commercialized but she could use it. Pastel, bare minerals).~~ Her face is kind of gray too because she never goes outside; she fears nature like it's a rapist or murderer, even though it's so the opposite—*nature* is what's getting raped and murdered! But despite not having sun damage she got wrinkles before her time from watching constant news television and subconsciously reproducing Dan Rather facial expressions.

Sister likes to pull back the curtains of her windows then stare out of them and look up at the sky suspiciously.

"What did you want to talk about? Do you need some money?" Of late, Sister has been plagued with a variety of fiscal obligations, something about back taxes. "Listen, Sis, I do understand what you're saying." I peek behind my shoulder and watch CT—naked, gentle CT, pink grapefruit juice dripping down his body like cartoon sweat—pretend to plug the blowhole of the dolphin on television with a slice of his grapefruit. His giggles are like heartbeats: steady and seconds apart. "But you just have to realize that we're on different planes of existence. I'm not saying I'm better than you, just that my path is way more open with lots of colors."

Sister's weeping intensifies. "What the hell are you talking about?" she asks. "You're speaking the drug-talk. I want Claudia back and I want her in English."

If the spasm that afflicts my back and spine at the mention of my old name "Claudia" could make a sound, a single note, it would be unharmonious beyond this dimension. No one would even be able to hear what a wonky note it would be, because the human ear is not advanced enough. It's one of those things; the sound is made but does anyone hear it? *Was* it made? I speak but Sister does not hear me. *Do I speak?*

"Uuuuuuuhhhhhhhmmnnngg." CT lets out a guttural moan to begin his a.m. bowel gyration. His torso bounces up and down while his hips move like he's using an invisible hula-hoop.

His is a hula-hoop made of enchantment. It's built of understanding, spiritual experience, and opium ether, paired with a variety of other things the human eye cannot see and the human ear cannot hear. Most of our senses are completely inadequate and not to be trusted; our true feelings come from our wormholes, often described as "the heart in our stomach between our legs."

"Think about it," CT likes to say, "The organ that the wormless refer to as 'heart' is like, entirely muscle. Like a body-builder or a worker bee. If bees have muscles."

Sister does not affect my wormhole, but her disapproval makes my pulse quite irregular.

"Sister," I say firmly, "Claudia is dead."

Sis wails. I feel like I am some sort of hostage negotiator, except Sister is both the hostage and the captor. "We've been over this. My name is now Sorcerella Van Crystal. It's official; I have stationary. Our bathrooms are filled with SVC embroidered towels. You used them to wipe the perspiration from your forehead the last and only time you visited our tree house. Please don't backpedal. You've chosen to remain in my journey, thus my life."

When Sister is really upset she begins to salivate. Her harsh words shoot out at me through the phone: sleds of anger lugging down a hateful mountain. And the thing with mountains is, the higher their altitude, the lower their boiling point.

"Don't give me this Sorcerella crap, Claudia. Jesus. The court fines I paid when you lived with me during high school. That guy who set your car on fire in our driveway. After everything we've been

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