

BEAUTY BRIAN D'AMATO

A N O V E L



30676 \$20.00 U.S. / \$25.00 Can.

BEAUTY

A NOVEL

People will do absolutely anything for youth. If they can put bella-donna in their eyes to make them larger, and if Argentinian women can take arsenic to make their skin paler, and if they can chance horrible infections with face-lifts, and worse things from liposuction and silicone implants, then they can certainly accept the risk of a little plastic skin.

Jamie Angelo, an ex-Yale premed and an ambitious young painter, has a secret profession, where the real money comes from: he creates masterpieces in human flesh, performing plastic surgery techniques too advanced to be accepted medical practice. At first his clients are happy just to look younger, but for Jamie that's not enough. He wants to create the absolute essence of beauty, the perfect face that will work its magic on the entire world. Then he meets Jaishree, a young performance artist with ambitions of her own. He sees in her exquisite features the potential for ultimate Beauty, and in their relationship the seeds of the ultimate Experiment. The result of their collaboration at first seems to fulfill every fantasy, but the fierce obsessions and dark appetites that lie behind it ultimately lead to ghastly—and very postmodern—consequences.

(continued on back flap)


Doubleday
Press

(continued from front flap)

This provocative novel, at once terrifying and darkly comic, is an extraordinary popular entertainment that is also a biting analysis of our society and its obsessions. It introduces one of the most original voices in contemporary fiction.



© 1992 by Timothy Greenfield-Sanders

Brian D'Amato, a graduate of Yale University, has exhibited his paintings at galleries and museums in New York, Paris, and other cities, and is a regular contributor to *Flash Art*. *Beauty* is his first novel.

Back and front cover photograph: Man Ray, *La reine de 1935* (detail)

Cover design: Phil Rose

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Doubleday
Press

PRINTED IN U.S.A.

"*Beauty* is a very unusual first novel....It's almost breathtakingly self-assured, and this confidence, which is a matter of an absolutely candid, knowing voice, takes us immediately into the novel's world, that of SoHo art galleries, modeling agencies, performance artists, and restaurants *du jour*. When a writer's voice is as compelling as D'Amato's, you have to follow him no matter where he's going. And it's also satisfying, I mean *really* satisfying, to read a novel so bristling and humming with intelligence. I've never read anything like *Beauty* before, and I am very curious about what Brian D'Amato will think of next."

—Peter Straub

"I'm stunned. This is the best first novel I've read in years and years. I find myself struggling to find appropriate and believable superlatives. *Beauty* is wonderful—deep, resonant, brilliantly scary, subtle, and above all, marvelous fun. This is a really intelligent and provocative novel, yet it also offers absolutely terrific entertainment."

—Whitley Strieber

ISBN 0-385-30676-8



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Delacorte Press

BEAUTY BY BRIAN D'AMATO

Published by
Delacorte Press
Bantam Doubleday Dell Publishing Group, Inc.
666 Fifth Avenue
New York, New York 10103

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Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

D'Amato, Brian.

Beauty / by Brian D'Amato.

p. cm.

ISBN 0-385-30676-8 (hc)

I. Title.

PS3554.A4675B4 1992

813'.54—dc20

92-3843

CIP

Manufactured in the United States of America

Published simultaneously in Canada

Book design by Robin Arzt with Brian D'Amato

October 1992

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

BVG

This is dedicated to Barbara D'Amato, who taught me
everything about writing and the world.

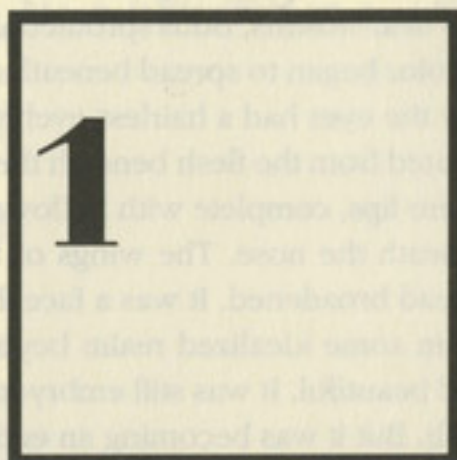
*Beauty is momentary in the mind—
The fitful tracing of a portal;
But in the flesh it is immortal.*

—Wallace Stevens,

“Peter Quince at the Clavier”

Everyone imitated my fuller mouth, darker eyebrows. But I wouldn't copy anybody. If I can't be me, I don't want to be anybody. I was born that way.

—Joan Crawford



An egg floated in the void. It rotated on its vertical axis as the blackness behind it gradated to-

ward a dark ultramarine purple. It moved closer, in microscopic increments. Its surface was absolutely pure, smoother than any real egg and scaleless in its non-space. Rose-colored light fell on it from a source apparently somewhere between the egg and the implied observer, and the light pooled one-third of the way down the surface in a spot that suggested its texture was, perhaps, slightly more glossy than that of a real egg.

Then an irregularity seemed to appear in the lower center of the oval. At first it was so slight, it might have been imaginary: a faint depression, with perhaps a slight bunching-out above and below. The depression and swellings grew, becoming more distinct with agonizing slowness. It was an order of motion that animals or machines never approach, the slowness of plants, or of crystals forming in solutions. Above the irregularity, two more slight indentations, identical round concavities in the pristine surface, manifested themselves with the same intense deliberation. They were symmetrically aligned along the vertical axis. As they worked their way into the surface of the egg, the light highlighted over and under them and shadows began to form, first soft like airbrush marks, then soft only on top and hard-edged on their lower sides.

Suddenly the egg passed over the threshold of abstraction, the

invisible barrier that separates a geometric form from the most basic figurative paradigm.

It was a face.

The eyes and mouth became more distinct. The outlines of cheekbones and the hollows under them began to alter the silhouette of the egg itself. A nose began to protrude ever so slightly, and tiny indentations under it developed into near-nostrils. Buds sprouted that would eventually be ears. A peach color began to spread beneath the surface like an Icelandic dawn. Now the eyes had a hairless eyebrow ridge and closed lids not quite separated from the flesh beneath them. The lips were still fused, but they were lips, complete with hollows at the corners and the depression beneath the nose. The wings of the nostrils extruded slightly. The forehead broadened. It was a face, but not a human face. It was a face from some idealized realm beyond death and life, ageless and silent and beautiful. It was still embryonic, and more like mathematics than flesh. But it was becoming an entity.

I typed out `HALT F9` on the keyboard. There was no perceptible change, but somehow you could tell the growth had stopped. And I'd stopped it before it had left the land of the undead for the land of the (at least in appearance) living.

I punched in a few coordinates and moved the mouse-cursor over the face, up to the command line at the top of the screen. I clicked it on `WIRE FRAME`, and instantly a small screen appeared on the lower left of the image, blocking out part of the face but showing it again, schematically, with triangular facets etched in orange lines against dark blue. I moved the cursor down to the region of the eyes and began to program.

After eighteen minutes, I clicked off the wire-frame screen and typed `RESUME IMAGE GENERATE` on the command line. The egg disintegrated itself, then reappeared a few seconds later, slightly closer. Very, very slowly, the eyelids began to rise. A mirrorlike surface appeared under them, a strange, cold, wet-looking lavender substance. Then the circle of the iris came into view, emerald green against the lavender, with magenta and golden facets shifting under the green like the spicules in Mexican fire opals. And then, as the lids passed the halfway point, the pupils should have come into view. But there were no pupils. The eyes were fully open and the face looked

straight at me with the blind, soulless, malevolent blank stare of a demon.

I looked back for what seemed like a long time. I heard a scratching sound at my left wrist and recoiled from the desk, hitting my head against the wall. A coil of paper was extruding itself from my fax machine. I peeled it off and read it:

HAVE YOU TURNED YOUR RINGER OFF?
DON'T FORGET, PENNY PENN APPOINTMENT 2:00
I'LL BE THERE IN 45 MINS. DAVID.

I allowed myself to look back at the screen for a few minutes. I rotated the head through 360 degrees, thinking about the profile and the three-quarter views. The Face was becoming a thing of awesome beauty, I thought, unless I was just flattering myself. I didn't think I was, though. I wondered whether I'd ever really get the chance to implement it. I typed `SAVE` and shut down the computer and got up. My back cracked a bit. I'd been sitting down for quite a while.

Somewhere in the microscopic binary code of sixty-four megabytes of memory, the demon slept with open eyes. The ghost in my machine.

2

“Laugh lines. I cried when I got laugh lines. That sounds so stupid, too. What a *stupid* name for

a terrible, terrible thing. I just can't deal with it. I also have three horizontal lines in my forehead, and there's one more starting up near my hairline. And I'm getting crow's-feet. *That's* an ugly name. What a stupid name for eye wrinkles. And there's four really, really really big huge acne scars. One's right here, right to the left of my nose, a quarter inch away. And there's one right above the center of my upper lip, on the—on the septum. It's called a septum, right? And the other two—they're right here, on this cheek—you should know that these two have had some collagen shots already. The pores on my nose and to the sides of my nose are too big. They're really unattractive. But my facialists say there's not much they can do about them besides keep steaming them and then putting on the astringent. Well . . . besides the *big* problem, there's a whole bunch of little things . . . but anyway the biggest problem with me, as you can see, is eye bags. Eye bags. They upset me a lot. I was kind of overweight for a while. Maybe I got them from that. I drank a lot of milk shakes in college. You went to that school, too, didn't you?”

Like many of the people I know who went to Yale, Penny Penn said “that school” instead of “Yale” when she was talking to other Yalies. “Yale” is hard to say because it's so pretentious and monosyllabic. It's like saying “fuck.”

"I was in your class," I said. "You used to hang out with Hilary Pearl and Andrew Moskowitz."

"Sure. That's great! Do you see them at all?"

"Hilary just bought a theater on Essex Street a few blocks from here. And Andrew's working for Richard Foreman, you know, the sort of avant-garde director—"

"Sure, yes," she said. "Well, I should give them a call sometime. I suppose—maybe I haven't been a really good friend to them. But the thing is, with films, you know, you just get bound up in a really specific kind of social thing, you know, it's really stupid. . . . I really liked being at school, thinking about real thinking stuff. . . . I mean, imagine getting to study with Jacques Derrida, he really is one of the most brilliant people of the century, I think. . . . Is the camera still running?"

"Yes."

"Listen, can we erase that last part, so we don't have the thing about Hilary and Andrew?"

"*Nobody's* going to see these tapes. They're just for legal protection. But I'm sorry, if they have traces of erasing, they'll be worthless. You know that. We discussed this."

She looked at me suspiciously for a split second. She had a cold streak in her, and it *surfaced* at me. I hadn't seen Penny Penn off-screen since school, where it seemed she didn't remember me from, and I was a little unprepared for the hard-nosed-businesswoman act she was pulling on me. But people who see me in these situations are always tense. They're in a vulnerable position. I should remember how empowered I am at these times. It was a switch since she was the school movie star girl, slinking around with her boyfriend Theodoro, whom I couldn't stand, and her old bodyguard with the walkie-talkie, and I was just the earnest art student.

Actually, I second-thought, not as much of a switch as I'd like. She was still incredibly famous, and I was just a medium-hot New York artist, not any fame at all, really. Only insiders know who artists are, unless you're Andy Warhol. Well, maybe I was on my way to the Warhol level with my new direction. He "did celebrities," too. He didn't have to keep it a secret, though.

"Well, okay, then let's be professional," she said. I had to watch

it. I was in something of a position of power, but she could still probably have me crucified if I screwed up.

"Eye bags," she went on. "Dr. Weil said I wasn't a good subject for a tuck because of my delicate skin. He said my eyes would look tight and the scars could show. And tucks just don't last. I mean, I *know* Cher and she really looks strange up close. And Joan Rivers looks *really* strange. Anyway, they use a kind of greenish foundation there for filming, and that pretty much gets rid of them, but I'm no good in person or even on TV sometimes with these things. And Virginia suggested I come and see you."

I had done terrific work on Virginia Feiden.

"Well," I said—I felt like a doctor—"all this seems really minor to me. You look great. And your career hasn't really been based on conventional beauty anyway. I think people respect you as an actress partly because you look different and halfway real. And a lot of this is stuff you could handle, with dermabrasions and ordinary plastic surgery."

"The hell with looking real. The hell with plastic surgery. It's not just little imperfections. I'm not talking about looking in a mirror, I'm talking about watching myself in the dailies and I just don't have what I used to have. I look puffy. My face used to have a really specific memorable quality about it, and it's just lost it. I was bigger when I was fifteen than I am now, and it's entirely because of the face thing. I mean, it's actually harder if you've been like, a child star, everyone in the industry's afraid that no one wants to watch you grow up. Seriously, I can't do ingenue roles anymore as it is. And there's plenty of time to be some old grande dame of the screen anyway. And my career is always on the edge anyway *because* I look real. It's really, really difficult. Okay? It takes constant work. And anyway, I'm just not thrilled about getting old. All right?"

She really wanted it badly. For the same reason everybody else did. She was simply afraid of getting old. She was twenty-nine, like I was, and she looked older than I did.

"All right, I know," I said. "Women just age much faster than men, and their faces age much faster than the rest of them, and it's not fair."

"You're damn straight it's not."

I snickered inside. A bond had been established. She knew I

understood her problems, and she was going to trust me. This was my biggest commission so far. I was excited.

"All right. Let's take some pictures, I'll do a set of drawings, and we'll start in a week. You can look at the drawings on, uh, maybe Wednesday the thirteenth, and we can start next Monday at two. Okay?"

She did the number with her electric date book and said it would be okay.

"Now . . . you know to be prepared for a twelve-hour session, if necessary. And a few days of resting around, not touching anything, and then maybe another session. So I suggest you get a hotel room, anonymously. Somewhere everybody minds his own business, like the Mark. Not an apartment you could be traced to. Try not to schedule any business except phone calls for all of next week, just in case. And I'll want the waiver forms signed then, and we'll make another videotape."

"Can I have a copy of the waiver thing to show my brother?"

Her brother was her manager.

"I can't do that. It's just bad policy. And really, the less your manager or anyone hears, the better it is for everybody. I know that sounds really corny, but that's the way it is." Take it or leave it, I thought.

She said okay.



We went through the photo session. I tried to do it the way Timothy would do it. She was a professional, and we were only interested in the head, but it was still a little embarrassing. Photography is a very intimate thing. Nothing remotely like what was going to follow, though.

At about ten, I figured not enough was enough. I switched off the lights and the video camera—I'd run through two cassettes just filming the shoot—and stacked my giant pile of film holders on the kitchen counter. I still photograph with an old Speed Graphic four-by-five, and so I have to switch film holders like a madman. It's a dinosaur of a camera, but it knows what I need and does it. Penny was sort of draping on her coat—a comfy-looking duffel coat—and she got an envelope out of her big floppy bag and handed it to me

with a certain amount of reluctance. I walked her downstairs and let her out the door onto Rivington Street. She said, "Bye, Jamie," stepped over some Lower East Side garbage, and let herself into the back door of an ordinary Mercedes. It whisked her away. An unassuming woman of the people. I couldn't resist tearing open the envelope and looking at the check. "Penny Penn, Box 131, Encino, CA. To: James Angelo. Three hundred and fifty thousand and no/100s——dollars."

3

I'd shot about sixty four-by-fives. I walked over to U.S. Color on Bleecker and Lafayette and dropped off the boxes, marked NORMAL/RUSH. I walked home, cleaned up the photo-mess, answered some calls, and walked back—walking's a big part of the downtown lifestyle—and spread the just developed four-by-five transparencies out on one of the light boxes there.

I picked out the ten best shots and laid them out on one side, put the others back in one of the boxes, taped the box shut, and marked it FLUSH. The little place was crowded, even at eleven-thirty at night. Mainly magazine people and one or two grade-B models and fashion and product photographers and their delivery persons who had to get their shots of Naomi Campbell in Agnès B. or Bart Simpson Tofu Bran Cereal or whatever back in time for a morning meeting. Sometimes it's impossible to get anything done in these photo places. I'm trying to cut something neatly, to do a quick paste-up or something, and these models come in with their books and pick up topless shots of themselves and wave them around, just in case the art directors from *Vogue* walk in. It's really distracting. I didn't recognize anyone, except for a cute Japanese-looking model/girl with a strange haircut—some club kid from the neighborhood—so I was a little careless.

"Hey, is that Penny Penn?"

Some goon was leaning over my light box.

"I wish," I said instantly. "She's just a look-alike."

He didn't believe me.

"No, seriously, I'm a professional. . . . I've worked with Paulina and shot a lot for *Elle* and *Interview*—what's the project with Penny? It's an endorsement, right?"

Jesus, I should be more careful, I thought. But I was too excited to wait. I just smiled nicely, scooped up my transparencies, and went over to the counter. At least the place is run by Pakistanis who, I thought hopefully, might not recognize her. Sri Devi, yes, but not Penny Penn.

"Yes, please?" said the Counter Kid, who knew me.

Just to show off to the girl and frustrate the goon's curiosity—he was still hanging around—I hit the kid with a little Urdu. "*Mu je paanch* sixteen-by-twenty Cibachromes *chai byee*, of each. *Samje?*"

"*Haa*," said the kid. He wrote out my name and account number on the blue slip. I checked it and nodded. "Four o'clock tomorrow?"

"*Accha, shukriyaa*," I said, overdoing it.

I left. Maybe I should have skipped the Urdu thing, but I just didn't want the goon to know I was ordering over a thousand dollars' worth of Cibachromes. Why would anyone need ten identical blow-ups of each of ten shots?



Penny was human-looking in real life, but in two dimensions she was stunning. Even though I'd photographed her to accentuate her flaws, even using fluorescent light a few times—something all actresses fear like death itself—she still came out looking great, a little pockmarked and baggy but still sexy and just *berself*, with that weird, wistful, incredibly famous strange look in her eyes that millions and millions of people were absolutely gaga for. I should get into photography, I thought. I could be a Robert Mapplethorpe for the nineties, especially now that he's dead.

Still, I was more excited about my own medium. It's less of a *pure* medium, but it's very cutting edge. Science is very hot in art right now. I put one of each chrome aside in an envelope and closed it, suppressing an urge to mark it BEFORE.

I wasn't going to use the computer on this job. I wasn't quite comfortable with it yet. I wanted to do this one the painstaking, old-fashioned way. I spread the remaining shots out on a clean sheet of

white homosote on the floor of the studio, dug my gas mask out of its three layers of plastic bags, and put it on. I switched on all the air vents, sprayed invisible adhesive over the photos, and rolled a big roll of prepared acetate over them. I pushed the air bubbles out from under the acetate and sliced the sheets apart with a razor knife. Then I spray-mounted the double sheets to thick sheets of foam-core, cut *those* apart, and stacked them on the drafting board. I rolled over my painting cart—which was stocked with small jars of Golden Brand Acrylics—sat down, and spooned some titanium white, ivory black, burnt sienna, and gel medium onto a Chinette paper plate. I mushed the paint around a bit with a nylon brush and started playing around, rather freely, on the first photograph, a left-side profile. This was like a dry run for next Monday. This was what Penny Penn was going to look like.

There was a mole on the side of her forehead, above her eye. I whisked it away with a flick of the brush. I feathered a little tone into her cheek and added some cadmium red light into the mix. I'm so good, you couldn't see where the photograph ended and the painting began. That's what's so great about Cibachromes, too—they have a nice even painterly surface with no dots, almost like an Ingres painting. After whisking away a few more imperfections on the cheek, I went right to work on the eye bag, lateral view.

This required a bit more skill because the bulge had to be cut into a bit and the nose had to be redrawn slightly behind it. But it wasn't hard. I put the shot aside in less than an hour, and she already looked a hundred times better and ten years younger.

But what if we allowed just a little more poetic license? I picked up an identical view, whisked out a few bumps and bags like before, and just tucked in her very slight double chin a bit. She hadn't mentioned the chin thing, but it wasn't fabulous. It was something an ordinary plastic surgeon could deal with, but with Mark's help I could probably handle it, too. I should get more into structural: *The Architecture of the Face*, I thought. What I'd mainly been concerned with up to now was surface. Surface and Gloss. Still, those *are* the things that really matter.

You can do a lot with contouring. What if she had just a little more of a depression under her cheekbones, maybe to make them just a little bit higher—not enough to turn her into Katharine Hep-

burn, not enough to diffuse her essential Penny-Penn-ness, but just a bit, to bring her into the "sophisticated" class . . . not that she wasn't already . . . but just a hint of those waspy aristocratic wing-tips . . . and she looked *really* different. But not bad. And not like someone else. Audiences around the world would be captivated by a new Penny Penn, a mature yet *perfect* Penny Penn, a Penny Penn mellowed by suffering and compassion, yet more alluring than ever. . . .

I figured the fumes from the spray glue had dissipated, so I took off my mask and wrapped it up to protect the filters. I picked up a full-frontal shot. Now *here* I could do *much* better. On frontal, eye bags were the least of her problems. We'd lengthen the eyes a bit, for one thing, and clean up a few problems under the lower lip. Tuck in the cheeks, definitely. It wouldn't be too bad to recover the whole nose, either, and launch those pores she hated once and for all. But I wasn't sure where to stop. Should I recover the whole face? Some of the things I wanted to do were things you could approximate with makeup and lighting. And most of her skin was in pretty good condition. It would be a shame to take too much of it off. And she was young. We still weren't completely sure how long the work would hold up. You shouldn't go crazy over this job, I told myself. Don't get perfectionistic. The most important thing in art is the ability to compromise and make excuses. Still, it would be a coup to redesign a real icon. And she'd be *really* perfect, not just a freakish combination of nature, makeup, lighting, and good camera angles. She'd be an *Über*wench. An elf. An icon. I went to sleep thinking, she's such an icon, icon, icon . . .

4

On Monday, October 18, Penny was due to arrive at two P.M. My assistant, David Lowenstein, showed up at nine and woke me up. Besides Mark, he was the only person allowed around when I worked. He started setting up the studio, rolling the couch—an electronically adjustable kind of psychiatrist's couch—up onto a big rotating model stand. It came up to a good working height; her head would be at my shoulder level. There was a huge plastic dropcloth, with a cotton dropcloth over that, covering the whole model stand and most of the floor of the studio. I'm a little paranoid about other people's blood, especially in the age of AIDS, so I was extra cautious about splattering it around. He put a clean lavender slipcover over the couch—I want everything to look as little like Frankenstein's laboratory as possible—while I made cappuccino in my favorite little machine. The doorbell rang, and it was Mark Saltzman, my liaison to the world of medicine. He was a little shorter than me, handsome in a sort of dark, curly-haired, Jewish-scientist way. He was wearing his regulation navy sweater and black chinos, which he had at least twenty sets of. He was carrying two big boxes.

"Did you get absolutely *everything*?" I asked.

"Sure, definitely. I got two hundred extra pads, and about five square feet of AS."

AS was Artificial Skin.

"Can I have some coffee, too?" he asked.

I steamed milk and asked him to please set up and sterilize the tools. He grumbled a bit, but he did it.

"Listen," I said, "did you get any tetracycline?"

"You didn't ask for any."

"Well, it does say on her questionnaire that she's allergic to penicillin. Do you think you could, uh, prescribe David some over the phone to the Avenue A pharmacy, and he'll pick it up this afternoon?"

He wasn't thrilled about it, but he couldn't think of a reason to say no. We'd been friends since school, but now I made a lot of money for him, and anyway, he'd turned me on to this whole process in the first place, and now he had more to lose than I did. After all, he was a doctor and I was just a psychotic artist. Speaking of which . . .

"David, could you move those paintings away from that wall? No, stack them so the good ones show."

"Why, you want her to buy one?"

"I just don't want to look like a full-time mad scientist."

"You want to look like a part-time crummy artist?"

I have a really big ego, so I just have to ignore David sometimes.

We unpacked the boxes. Disinfectant. Surgical gloves. Coagulant. Anticoagulant. Sterilized sponges and towels. Disposable skin knives. Liquid Suture, a surgical glue, by Parke-Davis. And in a little green plastic double-walled cold case, with a wisp of dry-ice smoke curling around the edges of the lid, those twenty difficult-to-get packages of Bickerton-Clarke/Experimental Burn Treatment Labs Product #AS 46A. Artificial Skin. The second A meant it was white, undyed. I'd do the dyeing myself.

I checked our rack of dyes and the little blue jars full of our own product, PCS 10. It was damp enough, without any dry patches. But we'd whip it up later anyway. It looked like thick salmon-colored cream. Sometimes we called it Beauty Foam.



Penny turned up early, like most people I work on do. I told her to send her car away. She'd cab to the hotel. She looked cold and edgy. She was wearing a Don't Notice Me sweatshirt and jeans and Arche loafers. She was obviously very nervous. Still, before I offered her anything, I took her into the studio and sat her down in the

"video chair." I sent David out for the tetracycline—Mark was being unobtrusive in the bedroom area, a mile away at the other end of the loft—and I switched on the camera.

"This is one P.M., October eighteenth, 1993," I said. "This tape is private and will be stored in a safe-deposit box until the year 2075, when the Chase Manhattan Bank or their representatives will destroy it without viewing the contents. Any attempt on the part of unauthorized persons to view or duplicate this tape will result in immediate legal action."

I paused dramatically. I hoped I sounded official enough.

"This tape is only to be used as evidence to protect me, Jamie Angelo, in a court of law should that need arise." Pause. "I'm speaking with Penny Penn, the actress. Penny, you made this appointment yourself, isn't that right?"

"Yes," she said.

"And while you were here, I didn't give you anything to eat or drink, or any drugs of any kind, and I didn't try any sort of coercion or psychological tricks on you?"

"No."

"And right now, you're in perfectly good health and a normal frame of mind, and you're not being treated for any psychological problems?"

"No."

"Could you talk for a few minutes about what you did today, beginning with waking up?"

She was a little surprised at this, but I guess she realized it was to prove she was mentally fit. She went into a lot of detail about moving into the Royalton under a false name and shopping at Charivari. I wished she'd picked a less upscale hotel.

"Okay," I said. "Now, you realize that I am not a licensed doctor and that what you have asked for is an unorthodox and unnecessary treatment that may not be successful, and that could cause problems in later life?"

"Yes."

"And you realize that you will look different, and you may not like the way you look, and you will feel different, and you may not like the way you feel?"

"Yes."

"You realize that the treated portions of your face will be quite numb. You realize you may have itches you won't be able to scratch, and that parts of you will never feel water when you go swimming or take a shower, or feel the wind on your skin. And that persons you are intimate with might notice the difference in warmth between your face and the rest of your body."

"Yes."

We went through some more legal stuff about maintenance of her face through the years. Finally, I came to the important part.

"And at this time you waive any claims you might pursue against me, now or in the future?"

She answered yes, more hesitantly. She'd probably told her lawyer some edited version of what was going on, and he'd thrown a fit. But she was the buyer. I handed her the short waiver form. She read it a couple of times and signed it. I checked the video monitor to make sure she was signing it on camera. It was only one short paragraph.

"Very well, now I'm also going to ask you to sign the retouched photographs you approve. And then we'll start the procedure."

I turned the tape off, ejected and labeled it, and switched it for a new one. I set up the camera and tripod with a good view of the "model stand." I'd turn it on when we started.

"Would you like any Valium, alcohol, or marijuana?" I asked.



I only use local anesthetics. There's a tiny, multipronged novocaine needle that they make just for skin surgery. I also spray some ethanol or dilute viscous Xylocaine on minor spots. Anyway, I wasn't going to take off much flesh. She'd agreed to the paintings of her with the double chin and eye bags removed, with the pores covered, and with the accentuated cheekbone. But she hadn't agreed to the most radical study, the one I really was most proud of. I couldn't blame her, though. It didn't look like her, and there was a lot of recognition value tied up in her look as it was. Her look worked for her, so why fix it more than aesthetically necessary?

While I waited for her to get more relaxed, I drew some guidelines on her face with a blue marker and swabbed over them with brown disinfectant. Just to get started, I novocained a mole on the side of her forehead, a quarter inch from her eyebrow. I tested the

spot with a needle to make sure it was anesthetized, buzzed the spot with the surgical sander—it looks like a dentist's drill with a tiny sphere on the end—and hit the tiny bloody red patch with a cotton pad soaked in coagulant. It stopped bleeding and scabbed over almost immediately. I brushed on a little Liquid Suture, snipped out a tiny dot of AS, and patted it down. It was whitish, but the dark scab underneath showed through. It bulged a little bit because of the coagulation.

I got out the anticoagulant. This was Mark's Trick: I soaked a layer of cotton pad in the stuff, held it on the patch, and let it seep down through the semiporous layer of AS. The bulge underneath dissolved and disappeared. I'd get out my dyes and match the skin tone later. But from a structural point of view, the patch was already invisible.

I looked at Penny for a minute. It was strange and exciting to be this close to her icon-face. She seemed to be relaxing a bit. She'd had fifteen milligrams of Valium, and it might be kicking in already. It's always a little hard for me to do the next part. But I rinsed the tiny head of the sander off in a plastic cup filled with alcohol, pressed the button, and brought it in on her right laugh line.



I hated looking at her covered with scabs. It was three-thirty P.M. She was lying still, so I took a little break and got myself a Natural Raspberry Soda out of the fridge. This was a dangerous stage. What if the building caught on fire right now, or if I slipped and cut my hand off with the soda bottle? She'd be in pretty bad shape. Mark was out, and David was reading *Flash Art* in the Couch Area. And David probably couldn't even get her back to her original looks without me around. Some calls had come in on my machine while the ringer was off, but I didn't want to break my mood by listening to them. I finished the soda and put on a fresh pair of surgical gloves. I picked up an anticoagulant pad in my left glove and a smear of prepared PCS 10 in my right. Generally, as soon as the scabs dissolve, I pat the PCS on loosely. As it begins to harden, I carve away what I don't want with tiny clay tools. I'd fill in the laugh lines first. I called to David and asked him to switch off the Enigma record and put on my favorite disk, the Cocteau Twins *Treasure* album.

PCS 10 is really an amazing thing. Mark came up with it with his partner, Karl Vanders, in his research lab at Columbia as something to use in both internal and reconstructive surgery, but it turned out much better for cosmetic surgery. It's not licensed, which is one reason we have to work in secret. Karl wanted to go through the long process of getting it approved, but they didn't have the political clout and it would have had to go through years of testing anyway. It stands for Plasti/Collagen Silver and it's basically microscopically thin silver capillaries—which conduct both heat and air very well—suspended in a base of collagen, with a small percentage of purified protein polyethylene resin added. The resin holds the silver to the collagen and makes the whole substance easy to work with. Collagen, as you may know, is a protein, not some kind of plastic. It's one of the biggest components of skin. You might have seen collagen in a sculpture by Liz Larner, a young Neo-Minimalist sculptor from California, in the 1989 Whitney Biennial. It was a laboratory beaker filled with collagen that had been tinged with soluble fluorescent dye. There were a couple of gold nuggets suspended inside. It was a beautiful little object. Maybe she was trying to say something about the amount of money people put into cosmetic surgery.

Anyway, plastic surgeons have been using collagen refined out of cowhide for over a decade, mainly to fill out minor depressions left by scarring or to tidy up wrinkles. It's usually injected just a little bit under the skin, and it's generally more reliable than silicone, which it's replacing. Silicone really is a type of plastic, and of course they still use it for large fillers like the ill-famed breast implants, but besides maybe giving you immune-system problems, it moves around, it feels cold—Edie Sedgwick, for instance, supposedly used to have to put heating pads on her breasts pretty often—and it's just not easy to control. It's what they use because they don't have PCS 10. Anyway, collagen doesn't have all the problems of silicone, and the body seems to accept it very well, but you can't sculpt it. It just sets into a kind of a hard gel, which doesn't always hold its shape. It kind of dissipates after a year or two. PCS 10, by comparison, is as flexible and, in its way, as permanent a medium as any I've ever worked with. When I use it I feel as excited as I did when I was an undergraduate,

when I was a reactionary Romantic Realist and thought that I was getting so good with oil paint that pretty soon I'd be better than Poussin at his peak. PCS hardens slowly, so it can be sculpted easily, and it can take any color. The only color we put directly in it is a heat-sensitive red dye that turns a deeper red when the surrounding skin or the flesh underneath gets flushed and warm. So except for sun tans, which have to be masked by makeup, changes in the color of the real skin are matched by chemical changes in the artificial product. The only other ingredients are some soluble anticoagulants, which keep the blood from clotting underneath the implants and which dissipate in a few days, and a tiny amount of a kind of surgical epoxy. When I'm going to work with the PCS, I whip it up in a tiny laboratory mixer—it can be whipped to different consistencies, depending on the texture of the flesh it has to imitate—and with a capillary measuring tube I drop in between two and ten parts per thousand of the hardener compound for the surgical epoxy. This helps control the hardness, too, and it makes sure that everything bonds to the raw flesh. It wouldn't do to have sections peeling off.

The final set can be extremely supple, sensitive enough to take the facial expression from the underlying muscles as well as real flesh would. The capillaries in the PCS allow the flesh underneath to breathe as much as they would with real skin. But, of course, I do have to take off all the skin underneath where I use the PCS. Otherwise, the skin would go on excreting sweat and pigment, growing hair, and generally gumming up the works.

As I mentioned before, I bind a thin layer of the Bickerton-Clarke Artificial Skin, or AS 46A, over everything. It's probably not necessary, but I think it's a little more durable than the PCS—it was designed to save burn victims who don't have enough skin left to graft—and it blends the whole artificial area in with the natural skin. It's a semi-transparent white color and extremely thin. When I drop it over the PCS—translucent foam, with the darker scarlet of raw flesh pulsing underneath—it feels like dropping a sheet of gold leaf onto an antique frame covered with sticky red bole.



I looked over at the "before" photos pinned to the wall to remind me what her pores had been like. She didn't want them, but

she'd have to have some or she'd look fake. Pores are difficult. Nobody really knows how to do them the way I do. Hospitals use the Artificial Skin on burn victims who've only lost their skin, and it holds up very well for a long time, but it always looks artificial because it's too smooth. I have a little dentist's tool attached to the handle of a soldering iron, and I can make slight indentations in the surface of the Artificial Skin with that, and they hold their shape when they cool down. Occasionally I have to add artificial hairs as well. But that's a real bitch. You have to patch in each individual hair with a scalpel and then trim it. Luckily I've found that, in general, people don't notice the absence of hair.

All that's left to do after the pores is wait for everything to set—about a half hour—and then do the color.

So I did some nice pores on the nose, on the neck, on the place where the laugh lines used to be—and except for the color difference, the transition between the remaining portions of her real skin and the Artificial Skin was completely invisible. Regular plastic surgeons just can't do the things I do. They don't have a sense of detail. And they don't have the poetry. Actually, poetry is detail, I thought. I was pretty proud of myself.

It was six-thirty. Outside, through the big windows at the west end of the loft, the abandoned buildings were becoming magenta and ultramarine. I started to wonder whether maybe I should have sanded over and reskinned her entire face. Some of her remaining pores were still a bit obvious. Her closeup shots might still have to be in soft focus. I should have just given her the smooth skin she deserved. Well, even Michelangelo had to make some concessions. He had to use funny-shaped marble blocks that nobody else wanted for the *David* and the *Pietà*. And he stopped smoothing everything out so much after a while, too. He wanted a coarser look. Still, I'm personally very into smooth.

Penny was squirming a bit. I could tell the novocaine and the Xylocaine and the Valium were beginning to wear off. I held a cold alcohol jet on her face for a while.

"I'm sorry it's beginning to get painful. We can keep the pain away until you go to sleep tonight. Your face will feel a little tight for a while, and you'll itch for a few days. But your nerves will adapt to the artificial tissue and you'll be comfortable."

She looked as if she could use more reassurance. "This is an absolutely state-of-the-art thing. Your flesh will bond to the PCS 10. It won't affect any of the processes going on underneath. It breathes, it transfers heat, it expands and contracts with your body temperature—and this isn't like a transplant, which your body might reject. The synthetic parts will stay in exactly the same place and match the rest of your skin for a long time."

"How long is a long time?" she asked. She was a little groggy and sounded scared. It's kind of sexy when women—especially really public ones—start revealing their vulnerability.

"We talked about this. I'll give you the folder about maintenance, and enough of the special cleanser to last for many years, and some refinishing fluid that you should apply every couple of months—you know, like it says in the little folder. And if you start to look patchy in a few years, or if the AS gets abraded, or if something happens to your natural skin that keeps it from matching the AS, come back and we'll do some repairs. This isn't like plastic surgery, you know, where you can only operate"—oops, I thought, I tried never to use the word *operate*—"once or twice. . . . I can go on working on top of the Artificial Skin over and over—"

"Oh, that's great," she said. "By the time I'm sixty, I'll be coming in every day."

"As I said in the contract video, I won't charge you for anything after the first process—unless you want something really outrageous—and if I get hit by a truck or something, you know it's not a *totally* secret procedure. All the tapes are in two different safe-deposit boxes, and my assistant knows about it all, and he'll carry on the process, and eventually this may be an accepted medical procedure anyway, and in fact I bet if you even got examined by a good plastic surgeon, he'd be able to figure out what was going on, and figure out something to do about it. . . . In fact, be careful around doctors, okay?"

"I can't believe I'm doing this."

She was beginning to slide into the post-op depression phase, and I wasn't even finished.

"Try to relax a little. Okay? Penny? Think how good Virginia looks."

Right after I'd done my treatment on her, Virginia Feiden had

come out in a pretty big movie and was getting a lot of press. I thought mentioning her to Penny would get her jealous. Penny was getting a little dubious. I hate that when they've already totally committed. I couldn't let her look in the mirror because I hadn't done the color yet and she looked patchy. Anyway, giving her a mirror would make me feel like a hair stylist. I'd bandage her up like I always did, even though they don't really need it, and give her a grand unveiling in a few days. It sets them up for the change and helps them forget what they really looked like. It's odd, but even when people know they look much better than they did, they still feel nostalgia for their former look. They should think of that first.

"How about another Valium?" I asked. She shook her head. "It's the best drug ever," I said. "Do you think they named it after *Valley of the Dolls*?"

She just squirmed.

"What I'm doing is going to look good a lot longer than your natural skin would anyway," I said. "Face ages fast, you know."

5

I love what I do. It's almost better than painting. And I love applying the dyes best of all. I got out

some brushes: a bunch of brand-new filbert-head Kosmos nylons from Pearl Paint, which are cheap but have a kind of gentle springiness nothing else has, and some of my old favorite Winsor & Newton Series 7 sables in each size from 000 to six. I got out my little rack of dyes in dropper bottles. Some of the dye comes from Bickerton-Clarke for use on the AS. But Mark and I worked out some other dyes that seem to be permanent even in direct sunlight. We've mixed up a sort of cobalt violet-looking shade and a terrific bloody red, which as I mentioned is also the only heat-sensitive dye we need to use on the surface. And we have a translucent titanium white so that I can do some nearly opaque layers if I need to. The B-C colors are all different skin shades, and some of them are nice, but it's as though Bloxx Colours only made fifty-seven varieties of "flesh tone." Really, I don't know how anybody gets a decent match when they just use the B-C products. But I suppose since doctors only use the AS on massive burn cases, their patients think they're just lucky they don't look like blackened redfish.

There's a big difference between pigments and dyes. Pigments, which make up most of the colors you generally use for oil painting, are tiny particles of metal or rock that have to be suspended in some medium. Dyes, for example food coloring or oil colors like phtalo

blue, are completely soluble chemicals and don't have any particular body to them. Not having body makes them much harder to work with, since they just stain into anything they touch without leaving you much time to push them around. We've added a little bit of a glycerin colloid to our dyes, to make them more maneuverable. But basically it's like working with watercolor that you can only put down once. Actually, it's exactly like working with egg tempera. Am I going into too much technical detail?

"We're done with the sculptural phase," I started explaining to Penny. "I'm just going to do some color for a couple of hours and then you can go home. Okay? You want to move around a bit?" She squirmed, but she was relaxing a bit better. The combination of Valium and the Cocteau Twins was doing the trick. She looked beautiful and helpless laid out almost horizontally in the reclining chair, with a gray sheet draped over her like the stone shroud on a dead saint. The patches on her skin were like the veins in Sienese yellow marble. For a moment she looked French. Medieval French, like the Virgin from Enguerrand Quarton's *Coronation*, the one with the strange slitted eyes.

Egg tempera. If you're not an art history major, you might not know it's what they painted small paintings with in the Middle Ages and the quattrocento, until Jan van Eyck's group invented oil painting. Before that, if it wasn't fresco, it was egg tempera. It's just finely ground pigments, like watercolor pigments, mixed with water and egg yolk, which is still the world's best glue. Maybe we'd be better off if TV hadn't been invented, and maybe the Renaissance would have been better off if oil paint hadn't been invented. Oil paint has a glossy, aquatic richness, it's like looking into pools, and I love it, but tempera has a dustier, milkier beauty. It's unforgiving—you can't move it around. But it's incredibly precise. You can do detail like you could barely even do with engraving. And so the early Renaissance had a softer but incredibly specific look to it, so that I still feel closer to those more distant pastoral times than I do to the cinquecento, which is richer, but murkier, or to the glossed-out Mannerist kitsch that followed that. The quattrocento was delicate and fleeting, but tremendously intimate and still utterly present. I can look at a panel by Sassetta or Giovanni di Paulo and know exactly what they were thinking, and see the traces of their actions and their decisions as

clearly as if they'd happened yesterday. It was action painting before Action Painting.

When I was in high school, I was crazy for egg tempera. I really thought I'd bring its kind of purity back to the world. I knew about contemporary art, but I was insanely reactionary even though, paradoxically, I also loved Robert Rauschenberg. I spent hours teaching myself techniques no one else could teach me, all from observation in museums. Ultimately, it all had less to do with my painting statement than it turned out to have with my sideline. In fact, I think it made me the only person who could handle dyes the way I do. Basically—and it's hard to describe in words—the trick is building a flowing tone without being able to mush the colors around. You can only do it by cross-hatching with a tiny brush. Of course, I have some airbrushes, too. But airbrushing's just not the same. I use it if I want to do a decent job quickly, or for some kinds of glazing and shading, like darkening the Artificial Skin under eyebrows that have been partially removed. But with the small sable brushes, you just have to make the cross-hatching so tiny and smooth that it's invisible, the way the really great ones did it. And I have my own pantheon of really great ones, the ones who were able to create these incredibly flowing variations in tone that look so cloudy and smooth, you'd never imagine there was a sort of stern, hard weave of individual marks that was creating the illusion. The difference between flesh in an oil painting and flesh in a tempera painting is like the difference between a modeled clay sculpture and a carved sculpture: the clay sculpture is just smoothed out to get a flowing surface, kind of all-over and vague, but in a carving every quarter inch has been laboriously articulated, and the smoothness is arrived at by the sum of thousands of individual decisions, which make it a more earned smoothness, more felt and alive and pulsing. And there are only a handful of artists I can think of who can get that feeling of a carving in a painting. Michelangelo, my half-namesake, is one of the best, of course, but he's also too tough, too heavy and structural for me to base much of my work on. Botticelli is one of them, but you can see his individual marks. The texture in the skin of a Botticelli painting is like a closeup of the skin in a portrait by one of the really good guys. Albrecht Dürer is much better, and he's an incredible miniaturist when he wants to be, but there's something sharp and unforgiving about his skin. It has character, but not a lot of

pulse. Giovanni Bellini is absolutely fabulous, but even though his skin is totally radiant and perfect, it doesn't quite have the sensual life of the two best people. Leonardo da Vinci is the second-best skin painter. Of course, he kind of inaugurated the smoky-oil-paint-sfumato era that I was complaining about, but even as an egg tempera gradation technician, almost no one could touch him. You can really see it best in the portrait of Ginevra di Benci in the National Gallery in Washington, and you can see it in reproductions of the *Mona Lisa*. There's nothing more delicate looking, but the skin is also completely articulated in every point of its surface. There's only one painter, a much more minor painter, who's better: Mabuse. His real name was Jan Gossaert. He was obsessed with smooth skin. You've never seen gradations like the ones he did. In a way, he was very primitive, because he let his love of the perfect gradation get in the way of all his other considerations. His people don't have any bones. Their color is strange—blue-black or greenish, with brilliant scarlets and magentas showing through. Their eyes are bulgey and stare at you. But that skin is just smoother than Teflon. It looks like, if you touched it, it would be frictionless and you couldn't feel a thing. There's something creepy, death-obsessed, and bad-taste about Mabuse. A fascination with perfection and smoothness goes along with a fascination with death. He was a lot like me.

■

I finished the dyeing. I could have done a little more with the color, and I might do more in another session, but I knew she was a smashing success anyway. Although we'd been working for more than eight hours straight, I didn't feel tired, just exhilarated. I felt I was getting so good, I should stop pacing myself and do something more drastic and radical. Maybe she looked a little flushed, but I could always tone her down a bit later. I'd used a slightly freer technique on her than usual, and it had paid off. Just the way Rubens would have orange as a first layer, and then paint grays over it, our heat-sensitive red sort of glows up through the translucent layers of skin and dyes. The whole technique imitates living tissue perfectly. But I like to think it looks just a little bit better. It has radiance.

■

It was 10:48. I told Penny she could move around a bit, without touching her face, of course, and she said she wanted to get up and use the bathroom. David had taken down the mirror in there, of course. But I decided to make sure everything was dry and wrap her up first anyway. I just used a couple of layers of soft cheesecloth, with some loops of surgical tape around the back of her neck and at her ears, and some ordinary pink porous Johnson & Johnson tape over the face to hold the whole thing together. I taped pretty close to her eyes and probably cut down her peripheral vision quite a bit. I let some of the new skin show around her lips, because she had to have lip mobility. She didn't really need much wrapping up, because the stuff I use is pretty stable, but I didn't want her pulling at her face until it was totally set. She went in the bathroom, and David and I cleaned up. He called Scull, the car service we use, and they said they'd be here in ten minutes. They're right around the corner on Clinton Street. I turned off the video camera and labeled all six cassettes with PENNY PENN and the date, and put them in an antistatic, lead-foil-lined briefcase to take up to the bank. She came out of the bathroom and put her bag back together and got into her duffel coat. She put on sunglasses and looked like a pink version of Claude Rains in *The Invisible Man*. I gave her a big hat—I have a bunch of cheap wide-brimmed blue felt hats for these occasions—and she turned up the collar of her coat, and it looked as though she and David could pretty well pass through a dark hotel lobby without attracting too much attention.

"I look like Claude Rains in *The Invisible Man*," she said.

"You're sure they don't know who you are at the Royalton?" I asked her.

"Yes, yes, it's okay, let's go," she said.

"You're going to live off room service for a couple of days?"

"I've done it before."

She wasn't used to looking horrible and weird, and so she was a little cranky. We waited nervously for a few minutes. The car person rang the bell, and David walked her downstairs. I said, "I'll call tomorrow," and typed in my appointment file, "Call P.P. 1:00. 555-1030 ext. 455, ask for Polly Crane."

It was one A.M. I was supposed to meet some friends at a new club called NUM at two. For some reason, I kept thinking about that Japanese girl in the photo store.

6

I washed and astringent-and-moisturized my face. I was careful not to scrub it. Just pat dry.

Don't stretch the skin. I ran a little product through my hair—I was very proud of my sort of bluish-red hair—changed into a Peterbilt Trucks T-shirt and my green Isaac Mizrahi jacket, rechecked the hair, went out with David, and said good-bye to him when I found a cab on Houston. I gave an address in TriBeCa from a message card. It was foggy and dramatic, and the damp shine on the Belgian block streets seemed creepy, like the foggy old London of *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*.

Was this it? I wondered. Was this all the beauty and glamour that I'd wanted access to years ago? What was I doing, still chasing this phantom anyway? The eighties were over. Andy was dead. McDonald's was into recyclable packaging. Artificiality and surface were out. They were only skin deep. We were into the Sincere Decade. Beauty didn't matter so much as Genuineness did. Naomi Wolf and her band of radical feminists had sent beauty packing. It was a myth, a scam to oppress women, an outmoded, sexist notion.

The fuck it is, I thought. Just turn on MTV.

From where I was, it seemed that the recession of the Sincere Decade had only made the people on top even more ruthless. They'd traded in their Alaïas for Levi's and Birkenstocks, but under them they were meaner than ever.

There was a big crowd of people dressed in black outside a steel

doorway. Echoing my thoughts: It looked almost as pressurized as the club scene of the late eighties. I got out of the cab and just shuffled around aimlessly until Calvin Greenaway and Andrew Solomon found me. I was too keyed up to just bag the day and go to bed, but I was tired, and I wasn't thrilled when I found out we weren't just going out to lounge around on banquettes. I guess I'd agreed to watch an evening of performance art. I was already performance-arted out for that week. Or maybe, I thought, for my entire lifetime, and for the ten billion millennia of the next ten incarnations of Brahma. It's kind of a New York complaint. Things supposedly happen quickly in this city, but there's still a tendency to not drag people offstage fast enough. And performance artists usually go on some. That's what I like about paintings, you can just look at them for a second and get the whole thing. I mean, I make them as rich as possible, but it's nice to just get in and get out. That's the most up-to-date thing about painting—it's great for today's lite attention spans.

"Why don't you have that nice girl person along with you?" Calvin and Andrew greeted me.

I didn't want to talk about any girl persons. "Do we need girl persons?" I asked innocently.

"You're the major hetero thing," they responded, almost in unison.

I have such funny friends. Sometimes I do feel hopelessly retro being so much the hetero. They made the doorpersons find our names on the list, and we squeezed through the crowd, through the door, and past a whole bunch of little performance-art-related acts that were set up in booths around what looked like the huge ruined lobby of an ancient burlesque theater. It also looked like a church bazaar in a barn in Pierre, South Dakota. It's unbelievable, the way the art moves in the second the cold storage moves out. Someone was doing a gross-out painting act with food and condiments in one booth; in another, a woman was making up another woman in a dentist's chair, doing some shtick about executive makeovers. My dubiousity level was rising, but pretty soon they got me to a shaky table and we just sat there waiting for the acts to start. It's crazy, a two A.M. curtain for what they call "an evening of performance art." *Evening*, for their information, really means the time between about four

in the afternoon and sundown. But maybe I'm the only person who still knows that.

Ariane from Click, who's one of my favorite models, was at the next table with some guy. She was dressed like a boy in knickerbockers and a Gigli vest. She has a kind of long, exotic, can't-place-it face that looks vaguely Oriental. It's a kind of look I'd like to manufacture myself sometime. She's older than you'd think now, but she still has perfect skin without technological augmentation. I was thinking about how great she'd looked in the *Times* fashion section a few months before, tall and willowy and Avedon-ish in a green satin Chanel gown. She'd had a bit part in *The King of New York* with Christopher Walken a couple of years ago. But her big role had been in a movie called *Year of the Dragon*. Her acting in it isn't too good. She just needed a little more method. I bet all you'd hear on the set all day was, "Quick, call the Lee Strasberg Institute, Ariane needs some method."

"This should be kind of okay," Andrew said, looking at the single sheet of Xeroxed program. "Alexia's written a whole bunch of new stuff they're going to try out."

"I think Jamie thinks they should have already tried it out on someone else before he got here," Calvin said.

"Are there any wait—uh, flight attendants around?" I asked. I wasn't very funny. "I'd like to get a Gourmet Natural Black Cherry Soda or a Dalmane or something before—"

On cue, the lights went down. There was a barrage of WWII-sounding sound effects.

"FROM THE SUN AND FUN CAPITAL OF THE WORLD, MANAGUA, NICARAGUA, THE CUCARACHA THEATER BRINGS YOU THE BUT SERIOUSLY FOLKS IN *SWINGING DOWN TO LA PENCA!*"

The voice on the amp was pretty deafening. I hoped the evening wasn't going to be too socially conscious. At first, they did a couple of media skits, but pretty soon they just started sending out individual acts. Ethel Mendelberger, a drag performer, did a terrific, well-written monologue-characterization of Lucrezia Borgia, surprisingly historically accurate. I was beginning to feel tolerant of the whole thing. There was one Indian girl who did some great impressions and parodies. She even did an aria, "*Mi Chiamano Mimi*," in the style of Stevie Nicks, and it was very funny. She was kind of attractive in an offbeat

way. Her manner was a bit like Sandra Bernhard's, but shyer and less aggressive.

"Who's that?" I asked, whispering directly into Andrew's ear over the noise of some Kipper-Kids-esque food-fight skit.

"It's Jaishree Manglani, she's another sort of poet-comedian thing."

"She's good, huh? Ear for dialect, and all that sort of thing? Did she write that herself?"

"Shhh."

Sure, I'll be quiet, I thought. You couldn't hear a scud missile in this place.



Everyone was kind of milling around after the show, so I got the writer, Alexia, whom we knew, to introduce me to the Jaishree person. "I thought your act was really terrific," I said. How many times this month had I said that? But I meant it. "*Aap se miblke buddie couchie bui*," I added. It meant "I am very pleased to meet you." It was actually kind of a casual phrase, but I tried to use my best accent.

"Thanks," Jaishree said. "Where did you learn Urdu?"

"In Benares," I said, "I lived there for a few months when I was a kid. But I really don't know much Urdu, I know more Hindi. Are you from India?"

"Bombay," she said. "It's pretty pretentious to run around yacking Hindi. You're sure you didn't just memorize a few phrases out of *How to Pick Up Ethnic Women?*"

"Uh, well, yeah," I said, "actually I helped edit that book." She half-smiled.

I wanted to keep in touch with her for some reason, but I could feel my friends edging toward the exit, and Jaishree was drifting off, edging toward the bar, so I thought of something fast.

"Listen," I said, "a friend of mine who's a photographer is shooting some ads for Italian *Vogue* with New York performance artists, and I think you'd be really great for it. You know, you just have to be able to wear a big floppy Missoni sweater. And maybe a *bindi* and *duputa* for atmosphere."

"Are you a photographer?" she asked.

"No, I'm like an artist," I answered.

"Do you have a gallery?"

"Yeah, it's Karen Goode, on West Broadway."

"Oh, unh-huhn."

"Do you follow the, uh, gallery scene?"

"No, not really. What kind of work do you do?"

"Nobody does. Well, my art varies a lot, I don't really have a single style, but it's generally about beauty technology of some kind."

"What's beauty technology?"

"Well, cosmetics, hair care, industrial materials designed to imitate or, um, surpass nature—that sort of thing." I wasn't lying. Most of my straight art really did deal with things like that. Anyway, I'd just given her one of my better stock lines about my stuff.

"Oh, really? That sounds kind of interesting."

Since she was getting interested, I felt I could pull back and make contact later. "Look, I think my friends are leaving. Do you have a card?" I asked.

She fished out a card. I said "Bye," and wandered toward Calvin's last recorded position. He was out in the street by this time.

"Hey, we're all going to Undersheen," he said. It was an after-hours club. "Are you coming along or what? It'll be barrels."

"I'm a dinosaur, I'm just too old for this kind of schedule," I said.

"You're only as old as you look."

"Well, I look like Vincent Price."

"Ew, gag me out with two spoons," Calvin said.

"Look, I've been creating deathless masterpieces since one this afternoon," I said. "All you guys do is sit around all day selling Jasper Johnses for millions of dollars and ordering bruschettas from Dean & DeLuca."

"You're breaking my heart," Calvin said.

I'd had enough of the brittle dialogue. I said good night and walked upstream, away from the other cab-seekers, and got a taxi home. When I got in, there were three new messages blinking out on my machine, but I just didn't have the guts to flick it on. I took two whole Valia, brushed my teeth, and started looking forward to ten hours of nonbeing.

■

The phone rang the next morning at six-thirty. Either my best friend or my worst enemy, I thought.

Shit. It was Ute, an ex-girlfriend. Pronounced *Yootie*. She was crying again.

"Didn't you get my messages?" she asked hysterically.

I picked up. "Hunh?"

"I just can't stand thinking of you going out with that bitch," she said.

She meant Katrina.

"Just because she's pretty and stupid and nineteen years old. How could you do this to me? I was in love with you, and she doesn't love you, she's just some little floozy idiot from Queens who's using you, and you're—just so shallow and a jerk, I can't believe it."

"Well, if I'm such a jerk, I don't deserve you, anyway, you're a very loving person, and you should find someone really nice who cares about you more than I can, not that I don't care about you, I mean, but really, I'm a complete clod and you deserve the best, you know?"

"Damn it, I was in love with you, and think what you *did* to me!"

What had I done to her? I was pretty groggy.

"You dumped me for that slut, and then you didn't tell me right away, and you still slept with me, and I feel dirty and disgusting!"

This was not a well girl. I'd already spent hours on the phone with her earlier in the month, trying to calm her down, but it looked as though she'd regressed.

"Look, Ute, I think you're not a well girl. I really feel like you should get some psychiatric help, okay?" I said. "I'm serious. You're really brilliant, and you've got a lot going for you, and this just isn't healthful behavior. Okay?"

"Yeah, I'm brilliant, I'll never get anywhere, no matter how brilliant I am, because I'm *ugly*!"

"Don't be ridiculous, you're not ugly, I think you're really, really attractive. You know I do. You know how much you turn me on, you know, I still think of you all the time."

"You're *lying*! You just dumped me the minute you found someone prettier. And that bitch Katrina's going to do better than me in everything because she's gorgeous and everybody notices her on the street and nobody notices me."

This kind of stuff really breaks my heart. "Look," I said, "I'm going to start taping this conversation, okay? If you jump off the roof and leave a note saying I drove you to it, I want to have some evidence about your state of mind. Okay?"

I switched on the MEMO button on the answering machine.

"Do whatever you want," she said.

"I want to discuss your behavior a bit with my shrink, okay?"

"I don't need a shrink and I'm not crazy!"

"I'm sorry, and I know this sounds a little bit like verdict first, but I tend to think that the more people assert they're not crazy, the crazier they are."

"That's just stupid."

"Listen, Katrina's not going to do better than you in everything, that's ridiculous, you've got a whole lot going for you and you just shouldn't worry, okay? And I'm not good enough for you."

"Don't tell me what's good enough for me."

"We're going over and over the same things."

"I just can't stand thinking of you with that bitch."

"Listen, for what it's worth, and I don't think we should see each other again, but, uh, I think the Katrina and Jamie thing is pretty much over, so you don't have to think about it anymore. You and she ought to get together and form a support group."

"That's a mean thing to say." Pause. "Well, can I see you today?"

"Let's just chill out, okay?"

"I'm just not pretty, and that's why you went out with Katrina."

"That's total nonsense."

"No, it's not, I'm ugly."

"You're so crazy to say that, you have a very distinctive look, it's a very ethnic look, but it's amazing and great."

"I don't want that distinctive look, I want that white look. You're just a racist, too, you like waspy girls."

Ute was kind of tan-skinned.

"Katrina's Jewish, you know, she's not exactly a wasp," I said.

"It doesn't matter, she's white, and that's what beauty is, looking white."

"Look, I just can't take this *tsouris und drang* right now. Why don't you let me take a shower and I'll call you back?"

She hung up.

I showered, got some nut mix out of the fridge, tidied the loft a bit, and called Penny at one o'clock.

"Are you having any problems?" I asked.

"I feel numb, and I'm really itchy in a few places, and I don't dare scratch."

"Well, where the tape is, on the back and sides of your head, you can rub yourself gently, and maybe if you'd rather I could come over to your hotel tomorrow morning and take the bandages off."

"That would be just so great. How about nine?"

I gritted my teeth and said okay. If I'd said it had to be later, she would have known I was just lazy. I was thinking about that singer, Jaishree, for some reason. She had something sexy about her. I dug my wallet and stuff out of my clothing from the night before and found Jaishree's card. It was on some sort of holographic lenticular laser-printed purple and green paper that changed like ocean waves when you looked at it from different angles. I'll have to get some like this for myself, I thought. JAMIE ANGELO, AMERICAN PSYCHO ARTIST. The card said, JAISHREE MANGLANI, YOUNG PERFORMANCE ARTIST. (212) 555-1113. I still had the cordless in my hand, and so I just dialed it.

"We are Jaishree and Alex, the great and terrible, not necessarily in that order," the message machine said. "*Who are you and what do you want? Beep.*"

"It's Jamie Angelo, I met you last night, I'm at 914-5858," I said, and hung up. I knew if she didn't call back, I'd feel worthless for a while, but I didn't want to push. I'd decided that in general, with answering machines, the less the better.

Calvin came over at one-thirty, a half hour late. He looked okay for someone who'd been cruising the Spike or whatever other gay club all night, though. Calvin's the better of my two "society" brokers. He's an art dealer, a real social climber, and lately he's gotten to be a bit of a pain in the neck, always backbiting, and hardly anyone I know will deal with him, but he still works for me. He says funny things, though, and he knows about stuff. He's thirty-one, tall and kind of good-looking in a dark Byronic/Spanish kind of way. Except

for his basic personality, he's terrific. He's known informally as Calvin "I'll Do Anything to Meet Fancy Fags" Greenaway.

"I've got a good one for you," he said, "and you've heard of her. It's Lauren McNiel. You know, the one who was married to David McNiel."

"Yeah, that real-estate guy who bought all that art in the eighties."

"Exactly, the one Robert convinced that he should buy all those Jeff Koonses and Peter Halleys."

"He also told him to buy Rick Prol and Holt Quentel."

"Is that so? Well, that brings me to the financial end. She also has some things you might be interested in."

He was digging in his bag and brought out a black eight-by-ten envelope and flipped it over to me. Trying to be cute, I thought. Look at this clown with his theatrical manners and his air of secrecy, acting like he was Sydney Greenstreet in *The Maltese Falcon*. I didn't say anything, though. I pulled out the photo.

"Take a look. We'll save on laundering bills."

It looked like it was nearly three feet high. The condition was amazing: It was apparently complete, and there was quite a bit of paint, black, cinnabar, and Mayan blue, still on the surface. The hideous hook-nosed face of God L—one of the Nine Lords of Xibalbá, the Maya underworld—had huge, blank, staring turquoise eyes and a protruding tongue. His head was encased in a fantastic headdress of three stacked birds, with the cruller-knot over his forehead and the tiny Jester God perched above it. There were wide ear-flange arrangements around the face, and the whole head and headdress emerged from a second headdress in the shape of the jaws of the Cauac Monster, the earth-demon, resting on what looked like a turtle but might have been a stylized crocodile.

I was taken aback for a minute but realized it was best to keep cool. "Just offhand I'd say this was from the Usumacinta region, maybe Dos Pilas or Piedras Negras, an incense burner from the Late Classic Period, about 700 A.D.," I said.

"She mentioned something along those lines."

"But she didn't mention a definite provenance? It's a looted piece."

"I don't know," he said, "she doesn't even have it. Some dealer in Merida owes it to her."

"Who?"

"His name's Antonio Portilla."

"I know him, he's a sleaze," I said. "This is sounding shadier and shadier. How do we get it up here?"

"Send a courier."

"I can guarantee you that Tony'll substitute a fake."

"So go down and take a look at it yourself, I don't know. Don't do it if it doesn't sound like a good deal."

"No, don't get me wrong," I said. "It's a museum-quality piece, and I don't have any idea what it's worth today. It might actually not be as much as our asking price. But it could be a lot, and besides, this must be a documented item, I could never sell it later without a record of sale, and then where would I have gotten the money, and where would she say she'd spent it?"

"You'll have to say you traded a painting for it."

"I don't know."

"I know you like such things, Jamie," Calvin said.

"What's your end, a larger commission for saving them money?"

"Laureen's a little cash-poor at the moment," he said. "I may ask for an Yves Klein drawing or something myself, in lieu of currency."

"I don't know," I said. "I'll have to shop this photo around a little."

"Well, let's not think too long about it," he snipped. "By the way, Laureen's already had a lift and a nose job and chin implant."

"So what, everyone's getting a chin implant lately," I said. "All these women end up looking like Margaret Hamilton."

"*Trop mal pour elles.*" Calvin shrugged. "Fat injections for lips are so big now, too. It's a permanent pout all the way from Gracie Square to the River House."

"So pouty's de rigueur right now. It goes in and out."

I helped him back into his coat and walked him out.

"Chowder," he said.

"Au reservoir."

I *would* shop the piece around. But I was kind of hooked. There was something about the expression on God L's face that I had to have. Something knowing.

I didn't bother calling Ute back. I had to go to my psychiatrist at three o'clock that day. I cabbied uptown, and the East River was all white, and there were pink helicopters flying low over it. We passed UN Plaza, and I got a glimpse of a Salle painting through the Edelmans' window on the eighth floor. They were some of the biggest collectors in the world. I'd been to parties there a few times. We zipped under the ominous overhang of the Fifty-ninth Street bridge.

The point of psychiatry is largely just ritual, getting all the way up to Park and Seventy-third, walking into that dark office with the picture of Freud and the tribal art and the lighted-up sea urchins, and doing the news of the week. When I'd started with this guy four years ago, he'd seemed cool and therapy had seemed like a good move, but lately we'd been going around in Möbius strips. He said I wasn't forthcoming enough to do "serious work," as he called it. I wished I could tell him about Penny, but it wouldn't be a good idea.

"I'm pretty cut up about Katrina," I began instead.

"You never really told me much about her," Dr. Brook said.

"She was just *La Reine de la Nuit*," I said. "I was crazy about her. I know it only lasted nine and a half weeks, but she was just so hot. And she was really smart about stuff that counts. Like she was *really* on the ball about Counter-Reformation poetry. You know, like Scève and du Bellay. All my favorite things. She even knew all about *The Countesse of Pembrokes Arcadia*."

"What's that?"

"Oh, it's a romance by Sir Philip Sidney, you know, with a lot of poems in it, 'Ye Goat-Herd Gods that Love the Grassy Mountains,' and all that kind of thing, I guess maybe you had to be a lit major at Yale to really get into that stuff, but it's really great, and she was so into it, and she had such a great figure."

"Sometimes I wonder whether you really know what all your priorities are with women."

"No, I don't, that's right, I don't know what my priorities are with women. You're absolutely right."

"We haven't yet figured out why you seem to only go after very ethnic women."

"I don't just go for ethnic women, what's ethnic mean, anyway, I mean they're all very different—"

"Maybe you just haven't found the right girl yet. Do you think you can accept that?"

"No, I can't accept that. I have to have every girl be absolutely perfect."

"Well, every girl isn't perfect. You can't just set up this bargain with the world that if it doesn't do what you want, you'll be upset all the time."

"Maybe I'll make the perfect girl."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, maybe I'll find the perfect girl."

He didn't answer.

"Oh, by the way," I said. "Ute's been calling me constantly, and, uh, I'm a little worried about her. I taped a phone call of hers. You want to hear it?"

"Sure," he said.

I took out my little portable tape recorder. It takes the same size cassettes as my answering machine. I played the conversation.

"That's not a well girl," he said. "Did she have any kind of religious upbringing?"

"Yeah, as a matter of fact, that's true, she's a Catholic, she went to a Catholic school until she went to college."

"Maybe she feels she's given you a lot by sleeping with you and that you owe her undying devotion in return. You know, sex is a very big thing for Catholics, and they tend to feel very guilty about it."

"Yeah, I suppose, maybe that's it."

"She should get some help."

"I'll tell her you said so."

We were silent for a minute.

"How's the BuSpar doing?" he asked.

"I don't know, I still got one or two little anxiety attacks this week." Frankly, after two months of popping the stuff, I hadn't noticed any difference at all.

"What's a little anxiety attack?" he asked.

"Well, I guess I kind of demolished one of my computer monitors, the portrait monitor that wasn't working."

"How did you do that?"

"I guess I kind of put one of my paperweights through it."

"One of the Lalique paperweights?"

"Not one of the really scarce ones."

"I'm worried about you," Dr. Brook said. He gave me one of his strange bug-eye looks. "You have some very violent aspects to your personality. Are you sure there isn't something you're not telling me?"

"No, no, you get the whole scoop." I decided I'd stop seeing this old jerk and buy some Thierry Mugler jackets with the money I saved. That would probably be just as psychically generative. I'd get my downers some other way. The problem with psychiatrists is that they've been to medical school. How could anyone who's spent all that time in medical school have any insight into a person like me?

"Do you take the BuSpar three times a day like I directed?"

"Yeah, once in a while I may screw up, I don't know."

"It's a systemic thing, you can't just pop it like you did with the Valium."

"Maybe we should dump a couple of cartons in my building's water supply."

"Hmmm," he said humorlessly, giving me the Herr Doktor look. "Well, let's give it another week and see if anything really stressful happens. If it doesn't help, we'll start you on Konzak."

"Oh, no chance of anything stressful," I said.

I didn't bother calling Ute back. I had to go to my psychiatrist at three o'clock that day. I cabbéd uptown, and the East River was all white, and there were pink helicopters flying low over it. We passed UN Plaza, and I got a glimpse of a Salle painting through the Edelmans' window on the eighth floor. They were some of the biggest collectors in the world. I'd been to parties there a few times. We zipped under the ominous overhang of the Fifty-ninth Street bridge.

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