



‘You should write a memoir,’ Whitman said. He didn’t look at me when he said it. My faux pa was carefully studying the menu at a new Italian restaurant where he and my birth sire, John Gilroy, were treating me to dinner.

I felt horrible, inside and out. This wasn’t a celebration, it was a funeral. I’d just filed for an uncontested, no-fault divorce from Tremayne, one month after our wedding.

‘A memoir?’ I let out a blurt of something that might have been laughter, but was probably closer to despair. ‘Why?’

‘To help you get over it,’ he said.

‘Over what?’

‘Your life. All the mistakes you’ve made.’ He looked up at me with his piercing blue eyes. ‘Not many girls—’

‘Women,’ I corrected him.

‘— your age have been through what you have.’

‘They’re lucky,’ I muttered gloomily.

‘Three husbands, two gay dads, a mother who believes UFOs are the cause of high gas prices . . .’

That got my dad’s attention. He shot Whitman an incredulous look. ‘Carolee believes that?’

‘Mm.’ Whitman held his menu up in front of Daddy and pointed to something on the menu. ‘That’s not how you spell “carciofi”. I wonder if I should point it out to the owner.’

Daddy caught my eye and smiled.

‘What do you think?’ Whitman asked Daddy. ‘Should I let

him know? It reduces credibility when you're trying to be upscale and misspell a word on your menu.'

I looked at my dads as they bent their heads together to discuss the matter. They were so tuned in to one another, so united as a unit, with over twenty years of shared experiences. They were so sophisticated, so knowledgeable, so successful, and so much in love, still. And here was I, their daughter, a disappointment on every front, a flighty flop who'd fucked up everything and was apparently doomed to a lifetime of . . .

I sniffed in a big gob of self-pity, raised the menu up in front of my eyes, and began to blubber.

'Oh, sweetheart,' Daddy said, reaching over and taking my hand.

'I know you don't want to hear this,' Whitman said, trying to sound sympathetic, 'but you're better off without him.'

'No - I'm - not,' I sobbed.

And yet I knew I was, and I knew Whitman was right. I just couldn't admit it to myself. Admitting it meant acknowledging that I'd made yet another bad choice, that my judgement was seriously flawed. And if my judgement was that out-of-whack, what did it portend for the future? My entire un-lived life hovered there in front of me, a wasteland of loneliness.

'Drink some water,' Daddy said, handing me a glass of Pellegrino.

'I know you don't want to hear what I have to say,' Whitman said. 'I know that you think I'm judgemental and somewhat severe—'

'Whit,' Daddy said, 'maybe this isn't the time.'

'I'm sorry,' Whitman said, 'but it *is* the time. Venus can't go on the way she has been. Sort of drifting around like a jellyfish.'

I let out a horrified squawk, then a hiccough from the fizzy Pellegrino.

'It's when you're at your lowest ebb, pressed up against the wall,' Whitman said, 'that you show the world what you're really made of.'

What was I made of? I no longer knew. Losing Tremayne,

my third and best-loved husband, to a radical environmental group had undermined the little self-confidence I had. My husband had chosen nature over nurture. *My* nurture, *my* arms, *my* body, *my* love. OK, it was noble and I could see that it was even necessary, the world needed eco-warriors like Tremayne. But where did it leave me? Possibly pregnant, with no prospects in sight. And with hiccoughs.

Sitting there, lost in my misery, it seemed like the events in my life that I always thought would be major and lasting turned out to be temporary as hiccoughs. My first hiccough was Sean Kowalski, the guy I married at nineteen (what Whitman called my 'starter marriage'). OK, what do you know about love at nineteen? Nothing. You think riding around in a big souped-up car is romantic. I wanted to get out of my mom's house, fast, and Sean had the wheels to get me out of there. At first I thought it was cool that Sean was a convicted felon; later, when we were married, I realized he was permanently pissed-off and horribly homophobic, which didn't sit well with my dads, for obvious reasons.

After Sean was gone, I hiccoughed my way, or maybe ricocheted, into the arms of JD, the lead singer for a punk-rock band. It was my first lesbian love affair, and of course I wanted it to last for ever because JD was so totally awesome, with her band, her groupies, her big gleaming Harley, and attitude up the wazoo. It took me a while to figure out that cool, in her case, meant frigid. The worst sex of my life, and I always had to start it. Plus, JD was into drugs. I wanted a heroine, not heroin.

Peter Pringle, my next hiccough, disposed of dead pets for a living. Pete was permanently broke but he was boyishly cute and mine, all mine. I'd ride around and make out with him in his Pet Away van, soaking up his adoration and the smell of formaldehyde. I shouldn't have married Pete, but he was absolutely crazy about me – or maybe just plain crazy. Neither one of us had a clue about money (except how to spend it), and I danced topless and did lingerie modelling in secret to keep us afloat. But our marriage tanked anyway, weighed down with

unpaybackable credit-card debt and my growing realisation that Pete was on the obsessive-compulsive side.

And then came . . . Tremayne. He was *not* a hiccough, I was sure of it. From the moment I first laid eyes on him in bankruptcy court, Tremayne was the love of my life. He was a man with *principles* (a new concept for me), someone who worked for a greater cause, on behalf of the *entire world*. He also happened to be the sexiest man I'd ever laid eyes on. We connected physically in a way that possibly ruined me for life, because no other man alive could possibly make love the way Tremayne did. I talked him into marrying me and for our honeymoon the dads took us with them to a fabulous new wilderness resort. My pa John, the architect, had designed Pine Mountain Lodge and my faux pa Whitman, the travel writer, was writing about it. Pine Mountain Lodge was where Tremayne and I last made love, without birth control . . . which meant that now, possibly . . .

'You're too smart, Venus, to go on this way,' Whitman said, snapping me out of my reverie.

We all froze when the waiter came over with glasses of wine for Daddy and Whitman. Oh, I wanted one too, a big glass of ruby-red Italian Chianti, preferably accompanied by a cigarette, but I'd refrained from ordering wine because I wasn't sure yet if I was carrying Tremayne's baby or not.

'Sure you won't have a glass?' Daddy said. He and Whitman didn't have a clue about my possible pregnancy, and I wasn't about to tell them until I was certain. The whole thing filled me with a crazy kind of ambivalence because of course I wanted Tremayne's baby, but a baby was the last thing I wanted.

They clicked their wine glasses to my glass of fizzy Pellegrino.

'Every ending is a new beginning,' Whitman said. 'A new opportunity.'

'To do what?' I asked. 'Hic.'

'Well, your father and I have been talking,' Whitman said. He pulled a clean, folded handkerchief from his pocket and

handed it to me. 'Here, sweetheart. Dip it into the cold water and pat the area around your eyes or they'll get even puffier than they already are.'

I obeyed. It was easier to obey. I dabbed and hiccupped.

'We've been talking,' Whitman went on, 'haven't we, John -'

'Mm-hm,' Daddy nodded, stroking my hand.

'And we feel somewhat responsible for what happened. Well, I feel somewhat responsible. Since it was my idea for you and Tremayne to spend your honeymoon with us at Pine Mountain Lodge.'

And the whole story came pouring back into my head and my heart, like some rerun you've seen a thousand times before but can't stop watching. The trip to Pine Mountain Lodge, Tremayne's disappearance, my terrifying wilderness trek to find him, the way we barely escaped death at the hands of those drunken rednecks, how we were saved by my dads, and then Tremayne's announcement that he was staying, that our marriage was over, that he was going out into the wilderness to become an eco-warrior. Scenes flowed past quick as a dream. 'I don't blame you for what happened, Whitman,' I said. 'Hic. You and Daddy saved our lives.'

'Well,' Whitman said, 'that's what fathers are for. But at this point, Venus, we can't save you any more. Unless you want to be saved.'

I looked from Whitman to Daddy and back to Whitman. Something was up. I can always tell.

'Do you?' Whitman prodded.

I was cautious. 'What do you mean by "saved"? Hic.'

'I mean getting out of the endless rut your life always seems to be in. I mean going back to school. I mean having a career. Like the intelligent, responsible adult I know you really want to be.'

Ugh. Yes, he was right, much as I hated to admit it. But at that moment, dabbing my eyes with chilled Pellegrino and trying not to cry through my hiccupped, I didn't want any responsibilities. I didn't want a career. I just wanted to

crumble up and disappear into an emotional coma and not wake up until I felt better.

‘It just so happens,’ Whitman said, ‘that I’ve been asked to write a monthly travel column for *Aura* magazine.’

‘For *Aura*? Oh my God, Whitman, that’s huge. Isn’t it?’ I knew virtually nothing about his world of freelance travel writing, except that it kept him constantly on the go.

‘It’s potentially huge,’ he admitted. ‘But it’s an enormous amount of work.’

‘It’s a good thing you’re – hic – a workaholic, then,’ I said.

‘I’ve never turned down a challenge,’ he said. ‘And this is a huge one. But I need some help.’ He sat back as the waiter placed a mixed salad in front of him. ‘Research help. I’ve got to come up with a year’s worth of story ideas and present them to the editor-in-chief in New York next month.’

‘Hic. So you’re going to be travelling even more?’ My caesar salad looked really good and I lifted a leaf to my mouth. Yummy, even in my misery, with just the right amount of garlic, olive oil and parmesan.

‘Some of it I can recycle from other pieces I’ve done,’ Whitman explained. ‘I looked at my resumé the other day and it’s a mile long. But I need someone to do some research for me.’

The romaine leaves were perfect and perfectly crisp. I bit into another one.

‘You know how to operate a computer, don’t you?’ Whitman asked.

I looked up.

‘Yes, honey,’ Daddy said. ‘Whitman wants *you* to be his assistant.’

‘Temporary assistant,’ Whitman clarified. ‘Paid, of course. So you won’t have to go back to working in that dirty-book store.’

I cleared my throat. It’s awful trying to think practically when all you want to do is wallow in the mud of your misery. ‘I don’t know that much about computers,’ I said. ‘Hic.’

‘Well, you know how to search the Web, don’t you?’

‘I don’t have a computer.’

This admission seemed to astonish Whitman, who sat in front of his high-speed wireless flat-screen computer for hours at a time, day after day. When he wasn’t at his desktop, he was on his laptop. ‘You don’t have a computer?’

‘Hic. I don’t need one,’ I said.

‘*Everyone* needs a computer,’ Whitman said. ‘How on earth do you—’

‘We can get her a computer,’ Daddy said. ‘And send her to some computer classes.’

‘She can have my old laptop,’ Whitman said. ‘I need to get a new one anyway.’

Some part of my brain was registering all this and trying to accept it. Another part was fighting the whole notion with a kind of a primitive anti-Father Knows Best reflex action. Granted, there were dreary realities to be faced. I knew I’d have to find a job, and I knew I didn’t want to go back to Phantastic Phantasy, the porn store where I’d worked right up to the day I married Tremayne.

Doing research work for Whitman didn’t seem so awful. But he was such an exacting person, I was afraid I’d do something wrong.

‘How does that sound?’ Whitman asked. ‘Twenty dollars an hour. And an all-expenses-paid trip to New York.’

‘Hic. New York?’ My heart, despite its pain, skipped a beat. ‘When?’

‘Next month. My subletter is leaving for China so we can all stay in the apartment again.’

‘Just like old times,’ Daddy said.

And just like that, my hiccoughs disappeared.

Old times. New York.

As I left the restaurant and set off across town, thinking about the Big A helped vanquish some of my divorce-related gloom. In three months I’d be legally single again. Mom had lent me the money and helped me with the on-line filing.

I hadn’t been in New York for nearly ten years, but once

upon a time I flew out there on a quarterly basis to spend time with the dads – well, with John, my birth dad, because I basically hated Whitman back then. The dads had a small rent-stabilized apartment with a garden on the Upper West Side of Manhattan. Whitman had found this place before he met Daddy and he'd kept it even when he moved to Portland with Daddy.

Since Whitman came from one of the oldest families in Boston, and took things like table manners very seriously, it always seemed odd to me that he lived in a cramped, roach-infested apartment in a 'transitional' neighborhood. I always pictured him gliding around a penthouse on Park Avenue, telling the servants to polish the silver. Eventually I learned that his family had disinherited him because he was gay, and without old family money to prop him up, he had to make his own way in the world. So the apartment on West 102nd Street between Broadway and West End Avenue meant a lot to him because it was part of his life history. It was where he lived as a struggling writer, and where he and Daddy lived together for several years. It was a home that he'd created for himself, and they'd created together. Just as he and Daddy had created a new home for themselves up in the West Hills of Portland, with a fabulous view of downtown and Mount Hood.

I didn't have a home. Not really. I'd been expecting to make a home with Tremayne, but now I saw what a pitiful fantasy that had been. Oh, I didn't want a big house. I would have been happy in a cute little Portland bungalow, like my mom's. Or even in a one-bedroom apartment. But that was my fantasy, not Tremayne's. His idea of home was a tent in the forest or a platform high in an old-growth tree. He'd been happy to crash and make love in my tiny studio apartment in Portland, amidst the debris of my life, but he never aspired to the idea of moving up to more square footage with our name on a lease. I thought maybe he would, and burning all my bridges, as usual, I gave up the apartment when we got married.

So when I returned husbandless from what was supposed to have been my honeymoon at Pine Mountain Lodge, I didn't

have any place to go or any money to rent an apartment. I stayed with the dads for a few days, then, when I couldn't stand their unwavering neatness any more, I moved over to my mom's. It was like being a kid again – you know, always looking for your little bit of private space away from *them*.

I still had my decrepit old Toyota and my ancient cellphone. Those two items were my lifelines, allowing me the illusion of independence. But even they required money.

Everything required money.

*Life* required money.

I had to start thinking about the future.

I was in no position to turn down Whitman's helpful offer of employment. Since my break-up with Tremayne a month earlier, I'd been floating. That's fine if you're a balloon, but scary if you're not. And *really* scary if you're floating and possibly pregnant at the same time. I knew I had to do something, develop a plan of action, but emotionally I felt like I'd been hit by a stun gun.

As I sped across town to my mom's, I tried to get excited about the computer classes, tried to imagine myself with a 'career'. It was weird, like trying on a dress that doesn't fit and is not you at all. I vowed that no matter how successful I became, I would *never* look like one of those briefcase-toting women I first saw on the subways in New York, wearing carefully tailored suits and running shoes.

Mom insisted she wasn't waiting up for me, but of course she was. Since moving back in with her, I'd gotten a peek at her private life and the rituals that kept her afloat. She could barely keep her eyes open after ten o'clock.

She was stretched out in her favorite pink robe on the too-soft sofa that I slept on, watching an old Marilyn Monroe movie as a fan oscillated up and down her body. 'Hello, sweetheart. How was dinner?'

'Good.'

'What was the restaurant?'

'Mangia Mia.'

‘Good?’

‘Great caesar. Whitman said the pasta wasn’t quite al dente enough, but I liked it.’

‘Whitman is very sensitive about things like that,’ Mom said. She pointed the remote control at the TV and froze Marilyn Monroe, who was wearing a low-cut gown, long gloves, and weighed down with jewels.

My mother, Carolee, had a great fondness for sexy female movie stars from earlier eras, especially if she knew that beneath all the glitter and the glamour they were abused and miserable. Mom dropped out to become a hippie back in the Sixties and never quite dropped back in again, except to marry Daddy. He was a hot-shot architect, and she was a hot-shit stunner. I’m the product of that culture clash.

When Daddy came out as a gay man and fell in love with Whitman Whittlesley III, Mom was devastated. But she was always civil to Whitman because she truly loved Daddy and wanted him to be happy. If not with her, as she’d hoped, then with Whitman. Jilted and generous, that’s my mom. She’s totally wonderful, in her own unique way, but she’ll believe anything, no matter how weird or wacky, because ‘there’s always an alternative for what we call reality’.

‘How’s your father?’ she asked me now, hoping I’d throw her a nice juicy titbit. She was always ravenous to know about Daddy and Whitman’s glamorous life.

‘OK.’

‘How’s Whitman?’

‘OK.’

‘How are you?’

‘OK.’ Over the past few days, and earlier that afternoon, we’d been crying together, Mom and me, and I could tell she was hungry for some more blubbering. She loved it when I cried in her arms and she could cry along with me, offering meaningless words of comfort as she held me close. But I was sick of crying. It didn’t get you anywhere. It didn’t lead to any insights, except that you were miserable.

‘Have you been thinking about Tremayne?’ Mom

prodded, nudging my tear ducts. She tsked and sighed. 'Oh, sweetheart, I'm so sorry about what happened.'

I sucked in a ragged breath, determined not to go there, to her land of boo-hoo. 'Whitman's hiring me to do some work for him,' I said, kicking my shoes off and flopping down on her recliner.

'Whitman is?' Oh, that's nice.'

'They're sending me to computer classes.'

'Computer classes?' Mom eyed Marilyn Monroe's image and fluffed up her own nest of red hair, squashed at the back from lying down. 'I didn't know you were interested in computers.'

'I'm not, but I'm going to do some web research, so—'

'Because my computer just sits there,' Mom said. 'You've never even turned it on. You've never used it, except today when I helped you to file for your divorce on-line.'

That word again! Divorce! It was like pressing a sore tooth. She just had to remind me, to see if it would turn on the eye taps. 'And we're going to New York next month,' I said.

She gasped like a game-show contestant. 'New York! Who is?'

'The dads and me.'

'For something special?'

'Whitman's subletter is leaving. So we're having an old times visit.'

'Lucky you!' Mom cried.

'He has to present some stories to the editor of *Aura* magazine. They want him to write a monthly travel column.'

'*Aura*! That's my favorite magazine!' Mom searched through the stacks of junk on her coffee table. 'It was here a minute ago,' she muttered.

'Never mind,' I said. 'I'm not as New Age as you are.'

'I was New Age way before I was Old Age,' Mom said, continuing her search, 'and *Aura*'s the only magazine that honors my belief in alternative realities.'

I rolled my eyes and sighed. Mom and her alternative realities. Sometimes I thought she'd be happier if she just

looked life in the eye and gave real reality a chance. But reality, I had to admit, didn't offer much fun or comfort.

'Maybe I took it into the bathroom . . .' She hoisted herself up from the sofa and went to check. 'Aha!' A moment later she returned, waving the magazine with a triumphant flourish. 'It's not all totally New Age, you know. There's a column in here I just love.' She flipped through the pages. 'Here it is. "Nothing to Hyde" by Susanna Hyde.' She scanned something and let out a cackle. 'Listen to this. "Dear Susanna, I am a virgin and because of my deeply held religious convictions I intend to remain chaste until my wedding night. My boyfriend says I can perform fellatio on him and still remain a virgin. Is this true? Signed, Pure but Puzzled."'

'What does this Susanna What's-Her-Name say?'

'Hyde, Susanna Hyde. "Dear Pure but Puzzled,"' Mom read, "'It's true that a blow job will not rupture your hymen, but neither will it give you much physical satisfaction. Apparently your religious leaders and your boyfriend didn't inform you that sexual relations are supposed to be mutual. The solution is some good, old-fashioned tongue for two: he eats you while you suck him."' Mom nodded thoughtfully. 'That's good advice, don't you think?'

'I guess. It's hard to believe anyone could be that stupid, though.'

'You mean Pure but Puzzled? Oh, I disagree. I think women are still in the Dark Ages when it comes to sex.'

'I'm not.'

'Well, you've had a lot of practice, sweetheart. But when I was young, why, a blow job was something you got at the beauty parlor. I didn't have a clue what fellatio was until I married your father.'

'You gave Daddy—'

'That's why it's so good to have columns like this Susanna Hyde's,' Mom said, not answering my question. 'We all want to know these things but we're just too shy to ask.'

'Well, I'm never having sex again as long as I live,' I vowed.

'Don't say that, sweetheart. You're just feeling down on it

now because of Tremayne. Because of what happened.'

Oh, the lovemaking. I ached for him. Tremayne was the sorcerer of sex. He could make me feel sensations that required vocal accompaniment.

'You're still young and pretty,' Mom said. 'Another man will come along and sweep you off your feet.'

I shook my head. 'I'm going to concentrate on having a career.'

Mom stared at me, her mouth slightly open, as if I'd just morphed into a werewolf.

'I am. I really am. I'm sick of never having enough money and not doing anything with my life.'

'Is that what you think I've done?' Mom asked, her voice quavery.

I didn't want to answer that one. 'I'm tired of always being in an emotional quagmire, Mom.'

'Emotions are a primal legacy of womanhood,' Mom said defensively, 'and denying the goddess within just to fit into some man's version of the world is sick. Sick and anti-feminine.'

'They're just a big fat drain of energy, Mom.'

She sucked in a startled breath as if I'd just slapped her. 'Emotions remind us that we're feeling human beings, not heartless machines. Emotions remind us that we're connected.'

'To what? Our delusions? Our mistakes?'

'To our loved ones,' Mom said.

'No.' I shook off her suggestion that I should make myself comfy in the messy nest of my emotions. Mom fed on emotional chaos but I wanted something else, something clearer, something surer, something out in the larger world and not so eternally bound up with a guy. 'Whitman and Daddy are giving me a chance to do something with my life, and I'm going for it.'

'This sounds serious,' Mom said, getting more and more agitated, maybe because she knew it meant that I'd leave her. 'Why don't we go over to Saturna's for a tarot reading? She's got a two-for-one special this week.'

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‘I don’t need a tarot reading, and even if I did, I don’t have any money for one. That’s the problem, Mom. I don’t have any money, or any prospects, and I’ve just sort of frittered my life away, always thinking that having some guy was going to make it all better. And it never did. It was just wishful thinking.’

‘So now you’re going to start thinking about yourself,’ Mom said.

‘Yes. I’m going to start thinking about my future.’

Which made me think about the baby I was possibly carrying, Tremayne’s baby, and of course that made me cry, and then Mom, my crying-buddy, eagerly joined in, and soon we were sobbing and eating Oreos and watching Marilyn Monroe sing ‘Diamonds are a Girl’s Best Friend’.



The following Monday, determined to be prompt for once in my life, I walked into a windowless computer classroom at 8 a.m. sharp to begin my new life. Panic struck almost immediately. *School*. I stared at forty strange faces and forty strange faces stared back at me. At first I thought maybe it was because my halter top or red micro-mini was inappropriate. But then I realized it was because I was late. I'd misread the schedule and the class began at 7.45 a.m.

'Ah – Ms Gilroy.' I thought he'd be pissed, but the instructor seemed to brighten when he saw me. He nodded sympathetically when he heard my excuse. 'Just have a seat here, in the front row,' he said, indicating a computer right in front of him.

Maybe you weren't supposed to wear heels to school. Maybe that was why all eyes were upon me. A horrible dreamlike sensation of being shamed or exposed in public brought heat to my cheeks as I clicked over to my assigned chair. I straightened my back and tried to look rapturously interested as the instructor backtracked, just for me, and explained how to boot up a computer. He looked about Daddy's age but twice as old, his skin gray-green in the wash of overhead fluorescent light.

I assumed that this computer class would be filled with geeks, but that wasn't the case at all. Some of the students were older than any living creatures I'd ever encountered. One guy was ninety. There was a woman in her eighties who said she wanted to be able to send e-mails to her

grandchildren. There were a few nervous housewives, and some guys whose enormous hands looked more cut out for heavy manual labor than tapping a computer keyboard (it turned out they were there for 'career retraining'). Almost everyone was older than me and every time I turned around a guy's staring eyes would quickly dart back to his computer screen.

It was fun and boring at the same time. I knew far more than most of the students, but what I knew was haphazard, stuff I'd picked up here and there. To me, computers run on magic.

After learning the basics of booting up, we dived straight into the World Wide Web. Of course I knew the Web was out there, but it had never really interested me. There was nothing in my life or about my life that made it imperative for me to sit down in front of a computer and navigate through cyberspace.

But now I was sort of intrigued. When the instructor told us to search for the website of something we wanted to know more about, I typed in 'Aura magazine' just for the hell of it. I got *Aura's* website and typed in 'www.auramagazine.com'. And suddenly there it was, with some cool music in the background and shifting images on the screen. Magic.

Then the instructor told us to type in the name of someone we wanted to know more about. It didn't have to be a famous person, it could be anyone. So I typed in my dad's name, John Gilroy, architect.

I couldn't believe my eyes.

My dad existed in cyberspace. There were even photos of some of the buildings he'd designed. Including – oh my God – Pine Mountain Lodge, the luxury wilderness resort where I'd gone with Tremayne for what I'd thought was our honeymoon.

Suddenly I realized the obsessive possibilities of the Web. With the right skills I'd be able to navigate and explore a whole new universe. Far from being a geeky pastime, it immediately threatened to become a way of life.

I Googled Pine Mountain Lodge and clicked on the link.

There it was, heartbreakingly beautiful, with a live Web cam tour of the grounds, the public rooms, the spa, and the guest suites.

Then I went one step further: I Googled Tremayne. And – oh my God – there were dozens of articles, written at the time when he became an environmental celebrity by sitting in an old-growth redwood down in southern Oregon and refusing to leave because a timber company wanted to cut it down. I sniffled and clicked on one of the sites.

His photo appeared.

I couldn't help myself. I blurted out a sob.

'Is something the matter, Miss Gilroy?' the instructor asked.

'N-n-n-n-o. Just allergic to something,' I shook my head and quickly clicked the 'Back' icon to return to the Pine Mountain Lodge website. I didn't want the instructor to see Tremayne's too-gorgeous image.

The instructor looked at my screen. 'Pine Mountain Lodge. It looks fantastic. Are you going there for a vacation?'

I shook my head. 'No. Just got b-b-b-back.'

'Perhaps you'd like to take a break for a minute. There's a water fountain right outside.'

Nothing like crying in front of your entire class. I burned with embarrassment . . . until I noticed all the guys were smiling at me in sympathy.

Because *Aura* had a New Agey edge to it, Whitman was going to call his monthly travel column 'One Thousand Places To Enjoy Before You're Reincarnated'. 'It's a brilliant idea,' he said, 'because I can spin off all the magazine stories into a travel book with the same title. And Stuckey Universal Media will probably publish it.'

'Stuckey Universal Media?'

'That's the media empire owned by Lord Farrell Stuckey. He owns *Aura* magazine. Along with half the other magazines and newspapers in the world, and some television and radio stations, and a publishing house or two.'

'Oh.'

We were sitting in Whitman's home office and he was telling me about my new job. He'd given me his 'old' laptop, which was a thin, sleek, beautiful machine with a pixel count in the billions and amazingly high color resolution. By now I'd finished my computer classes, so I knew about stuff like that. I was turning into a geekette who spoke Computer, throwing out words like gigabyte and modem. I was now enrolled in a quickie typing class because, as Whitman said, 'typing forms the basis of modern civilization.' He wanted me to be 'fluent on a keyboard'.

As Whitman explained what he wanted me to do, I got more and more nervous. Because none of it was black and white or cut and dried. In my last job, my duties were clearly defined: clean and arrange the DVD and video boxes for all the porn movies, make change so men could go back to the 'viewing booths', and operate the cash register. It didn't require skill so much as a certain amount of bravery, given what the customers were buying up front and doing in the back.

What Whitman wanted me to do, though, was collect information. And ferret out interesting titbits that he could use in his travel stories.

'Why don't you start with Angkor Wat,' he suggested, handing me a five-page list of possible destinations.

'Angkor what?'

'*Wat*. You know, the state temple in Cambodia.'

'Um – how do you spell that?'

I pecked out the letters as Whitman spelled Angkor Wat, then Googled. Hundreds of articles and websites appeared. 'Am I supposed to read *all* of this?'

Whitman folded his arms and worked at being patient. 'You'll have to learn how to be quick and selective,' he said. 'Scan and skim, or you'll be days on one destination.'

I flipped through that daunting list. 'How long should I spend on each place?'

'Half an hour, max. Find something that gives you a quick summary of what's there. Jot down a few key phrases. Like,

“twelfth-century temple with quincunx of towers and highly decorated bas-reliefs. National symbol of Cambodia. Spiritual Mecca, first Hindu, then Buddhist.” Stuff like that. And pull out any intriguing little bits and highlight them for me.’

I nodded, my head spinning. What was a quincunx? It sounded dirty. What were bas-reliefs? Something to do with sheep? How could I possibly ferret out anything especially intriguing when it was all so utterly foreign to me?

‘Type up each one as a brief summary. Four or five sentences. And at the end, note the website address of national tourist offices or any public or private agency that looks useful.’

‘And I’ve got half an hour to do all that for each one of these thousand places?’

‘Fifteen minutes would be better.’ He must have seen the look of panic on my face because he came over and put his hands on my shoulders. ‘It probably seems impossible, but you’ll get the hang of it. You’re smarter than you think you are.’

‘I hope so.’

‘Look, darling, if you’re ever going to make something of yourself, you have to learn to think on your own two feet. You have to accept challenges. The people who succeed the most aren’t the ones who file widgets and count beans.’ He planted a little self-conscious kiss on my cheek. ‘And you couldn’t ask for a better boss.’

I don’t know how I did it, but I did it. By the time we were in Portland International Airport waiting for our flight to New York, I had summarized one thousand potential travel destinations.

I was surprised at how much I hadn’t minded. Learning all those new skills had occupied my mind and kept me from obsessing 24/7 about Tremayne. And it boosted my self-confidence. I now knew that I was capable of doing something completely unlike anything I’d ever done before.

And boy, did I ever learn a lot. Because of this work, the world was suddenly a much larger oyster, filled with exotic

cities and strange customs and odd clothes and scary politics.

My newly acquired skills were becoming a part of my daily life. It gave me a weird geeky thrill to turn on my laptop every morning and hear its familiar clicks and whirrs and recognize its sequence of screens followed by the Microsoft finale. Sometimes, as my typing skills improved, I almost felt like a concert pianist. My fingers flew over the keyboard, fast and accurate.

Anyway, the impossible-to-please Whitman seemed genuinely pleased with my work. That was an enormous milestone.

'You see,' he said, 'I knew you were smart. I knew you could do this.'

'I wasn't so sure,' I said.

'You have a native intelligence,' Whitman said. 'Like your mother. It's just never been focused on anything creative or intellectual.'

'Maybe that's because I'm not a creative or intellectual person.'

'What are you suggesting,' Whitman said, 'that you're *ordinary*?'

'Is that so awful?'

'Look around you,' Daddy muttered.

I wondered what he meant. We were sitting in the new concourse waiting for our flight. I hadn't been in an airport for years. To me it was all tinged with the excitement of an impending journey.

'That's what I've always loved about New York,' Whitman said, 'and why I miss it so much.'

Daddy nodded. 'Nothing's ordinary in New York.'

'Well,' Whitman said, giving Daddy's neck the briefest and sweetest of strokes, 'you have to love a city where you fell in love.'

'Is that where you two fell in love?'

Daddy nodded. He and Whitman were looking at each other. 'Over twenty years ago now.'

'And we *still* can't get married,' Whitman said.

For although they *had* got married, in a quickie ceremony

along with three thousand other gay and lesbian couples, the state of Oregon had divorced them after voters demanded that marriage be defined as between a man and a woman. The official papers the dads had signed with such incredulous joy were now null and void and their registration fees had been returned with a curt official note that revoked the legality of their union. It was a real sore point with both of them, and ever since then, Whitman had been talking about moving back to New York.

And now it suddenly struck me – we were going back because the dads were thinking about doing just that. *Moving back to New York!* They hadn't said in so many words that this was their plan, but all the pieces fit together. Whitman's apartment was vacant. He was going to write a regular column for a magazine based in Manhattan. Daddy was taking two weeks off, which he never did, just to be in the old apartment and 'get in touch' with New York again.

I won't say I panicked, but the thought of losing them, of having them three thousand miles away, while I was stuck back in Portland with . . .

Before I could complete the scenario, my cellphone rang.

'Are you in the airport?' Mom asked.

'Yeah. Was there something you wanted?'

'Oh, no,' Mom said, her voice cracking. 'I was just thinking of how I used to bring you out there – to the airport – when you were a little girl, and you'd fly off all by yourself to New York to visit the dads.'

What was I supposed to say?

'I hope you have a wonderful time,' Mom said. 'I wish I was going with you.'

'Mom, you'd hate it there.'

'You mean the noise and the dirty air and the terrible weather?'

'For starters.'

'But there's just so much to *do*,' Mom said. 'I mean, from what you've told me. The museums and the theaters and the restaurants and the opera and the shopping—'

‘Mom, you’re afraid of flying, you’re agoraphobic, and you can’t stand it when the temperature goes above seventy-five.’

‘Is it hotter than that in New York?’ she asked.

‘I just checked on the Web and it’s ninety-eight degrees with eighty percent humidity.’

That silenced her for a moment. ‘Well,’ she finally said, ‘maybe autumn would be a better time to visit. What’s that song?’ I didn’t know, so she sang it for me. ‘“Autumn in New York, why does it seem so inviting?”’

‘Mom, they’re calling our flight, I’ve got to go.’

‘“Autumn in New York”,’ she warbled, ‘“it spells the thrill of first nighting . . .”’

‘Love you, Mom.’

But she wouldn’t stop singing. ‘“Glittering crowds and shimmering clouds in canyons of steel . . .”’

‘Mom, I’ll call you from New York.’

‘*Bon voyage*, sweetheart! You’re not a little girl any more.’

No, I was a big girl. A woman who menstruated. My period had come two weeks earlier.

I’ve always been a little irregular, and maybe the incredible physical stress of what Tremayne and I went through at Pine Mountain Lodge had something to do with my missed period. But the moment I felt that familiar little ooze of moisture in my crotch my mind just went blank. It was such a huge deal that I couldn’t deal with it. My first instinct was to cry, and my face was pulled in, tight as a mask, as I made my way to the ladies’ room at Starbucks. Once inside, I could feel this swell of emotion starting to slosh around. Tears dripped from my eyes, which welled up as I fumbled with my change and inserted coins to buy a tampon. When I saw the blood in my panties I let out a big snot-filled gasp of sorrow and relief.

If the walls of that ladies’ room in Starbucks could talk, they’d tell you all about the young woman – me – who sat on the toilet and sobbed her guts out. It was one of the most memorable cries of my life. I’d just bought a pregnancy test but I’d been afraid to use it. Now I had my answer.

I’d been freed from the burden of having a child by the man

I loved most and would have done almost anything to keep.

I wasn't ready for motherhood, I knew that in my soul. But in my fantasies, I sometimes gave birth to Tremayne's baby and it magically reunited us.

With one internal flush, my life had changed. I was free of all biological ties with Tremayne. Now if I could just dislodge him from my heart.

Whitman claimed the air was better in Business Class and he'd used over a hundred thousand of his frequent-flyer miles to get us up there. 'Otherwise it's like taking the bus,' he said, as the Business and First-Class passengers were ushered into the jetway ahead of everyone else. 'To think, we're not even fifty and we've already lived through the golden age of airline travel.'

It was kind of shocking. I hadn't flown for so many years that I didn't know how much the airlines had changed. People in Economy Class now had to *bring their own food*. 'And the smell of all that fat and grease just turns my stomach.' Whitman shuddered. From his carry-on he extracted three face masks, the kind you wear over your mouth and nose, and handed one to Daddy and one to me.

'Are you kidding?' I said.

'I am not kidding,' he said, slipping the elastic band over his head. 'I know it looks crazy and uncool, but even the air in Business Class is loaded with viruses.'

'I'm sorry, it's just too weird.'

'What's weird,' he said, 'is when you suddenly come down with an illness that nobody can diagnose and nobody knows where it came from and suddenly you're in a coma or dead.'

As if to prove his point, the man next to me let out an enormous sneeze and then started coughing without closing his mouth.

I put on the mask.

But took it off when the flight attendant asked if I'd like a pre-takeoff beverage.

‘We’ll all have some bottled water,’ Whitman said through his mask.

‘I’d like a margarita.’

‘Alcohol is the *worst* thing to drink on a flight,’ Whitman warned. ‘It dehydrates you and makes you more susceptible to headaches and insomnia.’

‘But it tastes good.’

The matter was settled when the flight attendant, a woman who looked old enough to be my grandma, said the airline didn’t serve tequila except on flights to Mexico and South America. So I had water and dreamed of the red wine I’d order with dinner.

It would have been an on-time departure except that a safety check revealed that the landing mechanism needed a replacement part. That was reassuring news. The doors were locked and nobody was allowed off even though the mechanical problem took over an hour to fix.

Since we had to wait so long, the captain announced that we could continue to use our electronic equipment. Whitman and Daddy, sitting across the aisle from me, took out their laptops and cellphones and carried on as if they were at their offices. I hesitated but then did the same. I removed my laptop from its carrying case and set it on my tray table and opened it up. And at that moment I realized I was living in a new world. A new world for me, I should say. The ‘new’ Venus Gilroy, unpregnant, on her way to New York, was adept at making a slim, slender machine do her bidding. The ‘old’ Venus would never have had a laptop, or known how to use one. The old Venus would have whipped out the latest issue of *Vogue* or *Elle* for some serious browsing, eyed the potential love interest around her, nervously wolfed down an economy-size bag of super-salty potato chips, or slept off a hangover from too many margaritas the night before.

I’d crossed a personal and technological threshold. I felt *professional*, somehow. Important enough to sit in Business Class and use a laptop.

I looked at the executives around me, men and women, all

of them so busy, so intent on pushing their business forward and adding to the jackpot of their lives. I texted Whitman sitting across the aisle. 'Do you want me to reorganize the information for the thousand trips?' I heard the little dinging tone as my message entered his cellphone.

I watched as he read the message and texted his response. It was like a pingpong game. A moment later my phone dinged. 'No need to reorganize thousand trips,' his message read. 'Start writing your memoir instead.'