



Before I steal, I pray. *Saint of Kleptomaniacs, forgive me.* That's all. I don't think it's necessary to waste the Saints' time with lame excuses about how society or New York or your parents are making you do it. They know we're weak, original sin and all that. For me stealing is like love: I'll know it when I see it.

Today it's a beautiful, little lavender bar of soap – a sudsy slice of heaven. It's wrapped in soft purple tissue paper and topped with a white satin bow. I could eat it. I survey the territory. The five-hundred-square-foot boutique is divided into sections, and I am standing in the southeast corner flush against the wall. New Yorkers are slow to come out of their holiday comas, but the late January thaw has ignited early spring fever, and the boutique is crowded and noisy. Decorative hand mirrors are propped like sentinels on the shelves above the soaps, but there are no security cameras.

I pick up one of the hand mirrors and use it to glance at the girl working the register. The crowd obscures my view. This is good news; if I can't see her, she can't see me. My

heart begins to tap dance. My fingers tingle. While holding the mirror with my right hand, I covet the bar of soap in my left, holding it like an injured baby bird. Then I set the mirror down, open my purse, and scrounge around until I find my cell phone. I don't need to make a call, but it's an old magician's trick – distraction, distraction, distraction. While removing my phone with my right hand, I open my left and tilt it down toward my purse like a slide. Whee! The bar of soap glides past my fingers and disappears safely inside. I snap the purse shut and linger by the soaps for a few more minutes, smelling the fragrances, pretending to be a normal, ambivalent shopper. 'Excuse me.' I move away from the woman elbowing her way in. I head toward the door reading the posted sign as I slip out. SHOPLIFTERS WILL BE PROSECUTED. *Only if they're caught*, I think to myself. *Only if they're caught*.

Look at the lights! Look at the people! Can you smell the roasted chestnuts, the soft pretzels, and just a trace of diesel? There is no greater place on earth than Manhattan. I could die now. I could die happy right this very minute, my size seven and one-half feet bouncing down the sidewalk, toe to toe with every other New Yorker, squeezing my dreams between theirs, offering them up to this maze of steel, concrete and blazing lights like a sacrificial lamb. I'm a lamb, I'm a lamb, I'm a happy little lamb.

I'm also a good twenty blocks from home, but I decide to walk anyway. In addition to the springlike weather, I'm emanating warmth from deep within, riding the high that always bubbles up in me after a good, clean lift. I walk with a bounce in my step and blow mental kisses to my Saints.

And before you think I'm totally off my rocker, I know I'm interacting with invisible, made-up idols of perfection, but can I help it if I feel the need for daily, Sainly

intervention? Some people throw salt over their shoulders, walk around ladders, and knock on wood for luck – I simply call upon the Universe for a little ethereal backup. And although I prefer to find God in the stars instead of a church, I consider myself a vicarious Catholic, and I figure if I'm going to be saddled with random guilt and a healthy fear of my own mortality, I might as well reap a few fringe benefits along the way.

But don't get me wrong – they may be Saints, but they aren't perfect. Case in point, here I am bobbing along, singing their praises while they're clearing the stage for the next act. Ladies and gentlemen, it's only been three blocks, two shoves, four 'Spare any change' and one 'Hey baby' since I've left the store, but the guilt portion of this morning's program is about to begin. Suddenly, the glorious bar of soap in my purse turns to stone. Its dead weight is like an anchor weighing me down. Ugly thoughts touch down and take off again like flies pestering a horse.

You didn't need a bar of soap. You should wash your mouth out with it when you get home. You could have walked up to the counter and paid for it like a decent human being. Turn around right now and take it back. But I don't. I keep walking downtown. If I make it to the twenties there's no turning back. Just five more blocks and I'm in the safe zone. The safe zone is where I can no longer rationalize going back to the store and the guilt stops. I can take it. I'm an actress, a New Yorker and a vicarious Catholic. I eat guilt for breakfast.

I don't look like a thief. I'm an attractive young woman. True, I'm clinging onto the last rung of the ladder of my twenties like a bulldog with a stolen bone, but I come from good aging genes, and I figure by the time I'm forty they will have come up with an anti-aging treatment that still

allows you to use your facial muscles to do the odd thing like smile now and again without looking like a deranged robot, so I'm trying not to freak out. In all other aspects, I'm a decent citizen. I use sunscreen with an SPF of 15 or higher, I vote, and I buy Girl Scout cookies for my anorexic friends. I get Pap smears once a year, AIDS tests every six months, and I give to the homeless.

In one way my decency makes up for the stealing, but on the other hand, it leaves me very little room to rationalize my habit. I'm neither a pimply faced teenager crumbling under peer pressure to stick heart-shaped lip gloss in my pockets nor a poor mother forced by tragic necessity to swipe a few boxes of generic macaroni for her three starving children. That would be understandable. Forgivable even. The truth is in this tale there are no starving children – not even starving cats or dogs. Likewise, no animals or children have been hurt by my kleptomania, so let's call it a wash.

I do not steal to feed a drug habit. I do not smoke crack cocaine, nor do I pop speed with my morning latte (nonfat, double shot, one Sweet'N Low). I like an occasional glass of wine (Australian Shiraz is always a good choice) or a pint of Guinness now and again, but that's about it. Okay, I have been known to drink to excess on special occasions (birthdays, New Year's, and getting to the subway only to find your ticket is gone and you've only fifty cents in your purse).

I'm afraid there are no explanations good enough to explain why I'm a 29-year-old klepto. Except this. I'm in love with ~~my eighth-grade history teacher, the captain of the football team, the cute guy who sits in the back of my psych class, the Irish guy from the Tile Bar, a bisexual actor, a Californian Crystal Consultant, a waiter/novelist,~~

~~waiter/actor, waiter/painter, waiter/waiter~~ (okay, so he had no ambitions whatsoever, but you should have seen the body on that man), ~~a Wall Street stockbroker, an accountant, a waiter/clown~~ (in my defense he didn't enroll in clown school until after we had slept together), ~~a construction worker, a mortician~~ (don't ask), a (British, Australian, Irish, Russian) ~~tourist, a married man~~ Ray Arbor. Beautiful, wonderful, incredible, there's-just-one-catch Ray.

He's a musician.

I know it's bad, it's wrong, it's foolish, it's trouble – but it is. For those of you who have loved and lost musicians, no explanation is needed. You feel my pain. You know dating a musician is akin to sticking your hand in a roaring fire to save a falling s'more. No matter how delicious it tastes, in the end you're going to get burned.

At some point in the dating scheme you have to ask yourself, 'Is he thinking three little words about me, or am I just another groupie?' Ray Arbor and I have been spending every day together for the past three months. Ray's band, Suicide Train, plays in dives all over Manhattan, New Jersey, and Long Island, and I've been a fixture at every show. By the second week of our courtship, I knew I would marry him and live in a trailer with six squalling brats if it meant spending the rest of my life staring into those jade green eyes. The guys in the band are used to women hanging on Ray, and they've started taking bets on how long I'm going to last, so I've doubled my efforts to be nice to them. I told Brett, the drummer, that he reminds me of Bono from U2, when actually with his curly red hair and freckled face, he looks more like a Muppet. I bring scotch and soda to the bass player, Tim, and point out the women in the crowd who I think will sleep with him on the first date. Nine out of ten times I'm right. Jason, the main

singer, is the one I haven't succeeded in winning over. He responds to my flirtations with a quiet disdain that leaves me feeling as though I just wet my pants in public. I have decided to leave him alone.

Last, Trent, Ray's backup singer, is a pushover. He is a hundred pounds overweight and responds to touch – a hand on the shoulder, a pat on the knee, a peck on the cheek. I'm proud to say that when Trent gets drunk after shows and rants and raves about how evil women are, he never includes me in that category. In summary, Ray and I are having sex four plus times a week, I'm ignoring my closest female friends and sucking up to his, and I regularly shave my legs, highlight my hair, and wax my eyebrows. He has to be in love with me, right?

Then why, why, why has it been six days, three hours, and twenty-four minutes since he's called? The last I heard from him was the day after Trina Wilcox's party. And even though I was blind drunk by the end of it, from what I can remember I looked smashing and it went swimmingly. We even had sex in the coatroom. It's enough to make you insane. It's enough to make you a klepto.

As punishment for stealing the bar of soap, I go home, turn on every light in my place, and stand naked in front of my full-length mirror. My roommate Kim is out so I don't even shut the door. I try to imagine my imperfect body swathed in orange prison garb. It's not so bad. I would look good in orange – especially if I get blond highlights to perk up my roots. I wonder if I'll be propositioned by a prison guard and what the chances are the relationship will last. I imagine myself by the side of the road, picking up trash with a long, sharp stick. The sun would feel good on my cheeks, my highlights would glimmer, and my fellow inmates and prison guard/lover would say, 'She's really

calmed down. She's at peace with herself. We've locked up her body but we can't touch her soul.' And 'Has she lost fifteen pounds or what?'

Here are the facts. You already know I'm twenty-nine and holding. 5'7" (relatively tall, but I'm no giant), I have shoulder-length, dark blond hair, and long, thin arms with freckles. I thank the *Saint of Freckles* that he marched them up my arms and sprinkled them on my shoulders but left my face alone. I wonder if prior to this lifetime we're given a choice about our appearance as well as our disposition. Did I give up sanity for a freckleless face? I can see Saint Peter prodding me with a white feather pen. 'Melanie dear, you must decide. Would you like a face full of freckles or a lifetime supply of Prozac?' I wouldn't have hesitated. 'I'll take the Prozac please, and make it a double.'

My eyes are my best feature; they fluctuate between gray, blue, and green like a mood ring. If I go a few days without eating, I look even better – cheekbones – but a few days after that I binge from all the deprivation, and they puff out again. I really like my feet, but I hate my ass. My feet are petite, and I have a great arch (I could have been a ballet dancer), but my ass is way too big. Ray (My boyfriend? Friend I'm sleeping with? Future husband?) tells me he loves my ass. What kind of man could love this ass? The kind who doesn't have to spend hours trying on a bloody pair of jeans, that's who. Bloody hell. (I picked that up after a week in London. That and *shagging*. Sounds like you're having way more fun. Some of it doesn't work. For example, 'Shag you!' Not enough grit. But when it comes to my ass, nothing works like a good 'bloody hell.' Sod off!)

When I'm done torturing myself, I hide the bar of soap in my bedroom closet. It's the only spot in this room that's not a disaster area. In fact the rest of my room looks like an

abstract, post-robbery painting. It's purposeful. My roommate Kim hates a mess, and although I would prefer a nice and tidy space, as long as I keep my room like this she won't dare enter it. The padlock on my closet door would grab Kim's attention like sharks smelling blood. She's a sensitive girl and would think the padlock was because of her and might even accuse me of not trusting her, blah, blah, blah. You know how we are. I would do the same thing. After all, her room is an open book. There are no locks on her closets, and I'm welcome to waltz in anytime I'd like and borrow anything of hers that I can squeeze myself into. So for now I have to put up with my messy room and content myself with a meticulous closet.

On the windowsill next to my closet sits a porcelain clown that my father gave me for my tenth birthday. We were supposed to actually go to the circus that day, but at the eleventh hour my father couldn't get out of work and instead of a night of Lions! Tigers! And Bears! (Oh my!) I got a moody babysitter and a porcelain clown. Now my father is a tour guide who lives a laid-back life in the Florida Keys, but the ten-year-old me is still waiting for an apology. Ironically, I was too young then to be bitter, and I absolutely loved the clown. Now I use it to hide the key to my closet. It just fits underneath his big blue feet. I remove the key now and hold my breath. I relish the anticipation of opening my closet.

The first thing I notice (with a twinge of panic) is that my closet is getting full. I have to hide what I steal or I can't sleep, like an insomniac squirrel. I used to worry that dirt would build up on the objects and attach to my soul, but the nightly dustings have eased that. I place the bar of soap on the bottom shelf next to a package of island coasters (Bahamas! Bermuda! Virgin Islands!), a spanking-

new Yankees cap, and six long, twisting beeswax candles. I feel a little bit sick. I didn't really need another bar of soap. I'm a horrible person. That's it. I'm done shoplifting. Besides giving myself an ulcer, I just don't have the closet space. New York apartments are infamously small.

It's a two bedroom that sits right above a sushi restaurant on Thirtieth between Lexington and Third. I used to love sushi. Raw fish no longer touches my lips. The smell of it clings to everything, including my clothes, but the worst part is that it's an open house for cockroaches and mice. They come to us in droves. I shower constantly now and stuff cotton in my ears at night after hearing a story about a woman who had a cockroach crawl into her ear while she slept. It had to be surgically removed. I've missed my alarm going off a few times due to the cotton, but it's worth it to have a bug-free canal.

We don't have a doorman, but we do have Jimmy, a homeless man who sleeps in the hallway. If he's in a good mood he'll open the door for you and flash you a toothless grin. However, if he's had a bad day he'll try and trip you, so you always have to watch your feet in relation to his. He hails from Georgia, but he's lived in New York for the past fifty years. 'I'm from Georgia,' he said the first day I moved in. I was trying to drag a futon mattress up the stairs, stopping every few seconds to swear and readjust my grip on the monstrous thing. I would like to see the basement of the person who invented the futon. I wouldn't be surprised to see it rigged up with chains, whips, and other sadomasochistic machinations. He either completely ignored the fact that people have to actually move these beasts around or enjoyed the thought of the pain it causes.

To add to my frustrations, every friend who had promised to help me move had suddenly been hit with the

the unofficial super. Charlie lives in the apartment building across the street, and it's ten times nicer than ours. They have potted palms and a chandelier in their lobby; we have a broken lightbulb and a plastic container of wheat grass. They also have a real doorman who always smiles, and I've never seen him trip anyone even once.

Sometimes I think I should report Charlie to the NAACP or some other such human rights group, but would that really help Jimmy? Isn't it better for him to have a semiwarm hallway to live in rather than the streets? The day I moved in I gave him a pillow and a blanket to sleep on, but they've subsequently disappeared. I don't understand how he'd rather sleep on bare cement, but it's really not my place to teach him how *not* to be a homeless drunk. I suppose I could protest, move out, raise a stink, but I don't. I have rent control. I like Jimmy but I'm ashamed to admit that sometimes when he smiles at me I have to look away.

Inside our apartment there are problems as well. I can handle the cockroaches (with a little help from my friend the cotton ball), but both Kim and I are terrified of the mice. They mainly hang out in the kitchen section of our pad, and if we stomp on the floor before we enter, they're polite enough to scatter back to their holes. The cockroaches, on the other hand, have no such decency and they're becoming quite bold. I found one on the television the other day watching *The Sopranos*. He was perched on Tony Soprano's right nostril. It was so entertaining we couldn't bring ourselves to kill it. I named him Tony, and I marked the top of his little body with red nail polish. He's the only one we won't squash, poison, or drown. The rest of them are on their own.

Before I go to bed, I play the movie *How I Met Ray*. It

gets five stars, it runs in my head, and I can even watch it without a huge bucket of buttered popcorn. It goes a little something like this:

EXTERIOR – NIGHT – MANHATTAN

CHARACTERS: GIRL (Me)

MOST BEAUTIFUL MAN
EVER

(Ray)

A beautiful GIRL in her late twenties (twenty-nine is still late twenties) is dejectedly walking the streets of Manhattan after a *lousy* audition for an off-, off-, off-, off-Broadway play. She leaves the audition when the director declares that it will be performed in thong underwear as a ploy to put the audience at ease. GIRL walks out without uttering a word of her two-minute comedic monologue. GIRL decides she will *quit* acting and definitely *quit* waitressing at Beef Boys Bar and Grill where Columbia frat boys come in to check out her ass over pitchers of beer.

Suddenly we hear *music*. It wails from a bar on the corner, a small basement dive distinguishable from a sad basement apartment only by the neon eye that blinks above it. GIRL drops to her knees on the sidewalk and peers in the window.

MOST BEAUTIFUL MAN EVER stands on a rickety stage with a guitar slung around his neck and a harmonica wedged in his full lips. GIRL's heart never stands a chance. She closes her eyes and holds his image. Broad shoulders, shaggy black hair, and since she can't see that well through the dirt and the din, she imagines eyes like soft blue ice (I was

wrong about the blue eyes, but jade green is unbelievable too, don't you think?), rough hands, and a mind clear enough to pierce through the clutter of hers. GIRL knows if he makes love like he plays, GIRL is in huge, big trouble. GIRL licks index finger and writes 'I Want You' backward in the dirty window. Music stops. Lights dim. MOST BEAUTIFUL MAN EVER looks up, sees GIRL, sees 'I Want You,' and smiles. The smile says, 'Then come and get me.' And she does.

THE END (but hopefully just the beginning).

Here's the part of the movie we don't get to see: One month later, lying in bed with him I ask him about this moment, the moment we fell in love at first sight. I trace the dimple in his chin, waiting for his rendition of our magical moment. Ray leans his beautiful head back and looks thoughtful. He squints and says, 'I thought you were this girl Clara I was supposed to meet for drinks that night.' Regardless, to this day I'd like to thank the *Saint of Neurotic Impulses* that I wrote on the window, and the *Saint of Obscure Skills* that I am, and always have been, an excellent mirror writer. Before I fall asleep, I strike a deal with the *Saint of Kleptomaniacs*. As long as Ray calls tomorrow, I promise not to steal.



Okay. I'm going to be honest with you. I was born with sneaky fingers. My mother delivered a healthy, eight pound, twenty-two inch, blue-eyed, wailing thief. At the age of two I stole car keys from the babysitter, at four I lifted three jars of Jif peanut butter and a box of plastic knives from Safety Town, and at six I was regularly pilfering chocolate milk for me and a few choice friends. All through junior high and high school, if anyone wanted anything, I was the girl who could get it.

They came to me for condoms, pregnancy kits, Swiss Army knives, makeup, and the occasional vibrator. I charged a flat twenty dollars an item, and by the time I graduated from high school, I had a little over six thousand dollars in shoe boxes under my bed. In every other aspect, I was a good kid. I did what my parents told me, I was kind to the elderly, I got straight As with the occasional B, and I once spent an entire summer painting birdhouses for the mentally ill. Could I help it that I had an uncanny ability to make objects disappear off the shelves and into my pockets without a trace?

And living here is like an alcoholic living in a bar. New York is full of large, anonymous, money-grubbing department stores. I can't feel too guilty ripping them off knowing that we're being ripped off in return. You can bet they're polluting the environment, gauging prices, following black people around the store, and/or have secret factories in underdeveloped countries where starving, grubby children sew glass eyes on teddy bears they'll never get to play with. Just thinking about it makes me want to run to Bloomingdale's and relieve it of a few tubes of lipstick. But today is a new day, and the blessed answering machine is blinking. I pray to the *Saint of Men Who Want to Call But Have Suddenly Had All Their Fingers Chopped Up in a Horrible Blending Accident and Finally Decide to Call With a Pencil in Their Mouth*, please, please, please, let it be Ray.

But it's not. It's a message from Jane Greer, the 'placement coordinator' at Fifth Avenue Temps. In a gravelly Brooklyn accent she demands to see me in her office tomorrow morning. Jane is intimidating on a good day, but she's never left me a message like this. I have good reason to be afraid; Jane is famous for having a short fuse and a long range. I venture into the living room where Kim is lounging on the couch with her recently painted toenails propped up on several pillows. 'Uh-oh,' she says when I tell her about the message from Jane. While I wait for her to elaborate, I study her little piggies. They're tangerine orange. It would look hideous on me, but she can get away with it. At six foot one, Kim Minx takes up the entire couch.

Her head is propped on the armrest and her long blond hair cascades down the side. She's flipping through the latest edition of *Vogue*. Despite commercials begging me

not to, I do hate her because she's beautiful. I also love her because she's my best friend. Kim and I met eight years ago at an open audition for milk, making it a 'cattle call' in more ways than one. This was way before the celebrity milk mustache campaign, and they were in search of a beautiful young ingénue to deliver the line, 'Mmm, milk. Does the body good.' In typical cattle-call fashion, young, eager women were lined up for blocks gripping their headshots and resumes, trying their best to intimidate each other out of the line.

At the time I was enrolled in serious acting classes and considered myself better than the phony, tap-dancing divas that surrounded me. I was a method actor, studying at the Village School of Acting, where I was immersed in the practice of Sense Memory. The concept was to bring your real-life experiences to bear in the roles you were playing instead of 'pretending' to be someone else. No matter what role you were playing, you simply had to scour your memory for an experience in your past that matched the one your character was immersed in.

For example, if you were playing someone in a fearful situation, you needed to dredge up a fearful memory and simply insert that memory into your scene. More than once I've longed to be the victim of an armed robbery or a carjacking just to ingrain myself with a shot of pure terror. It's brilliant because everything in life becomes fodder for your work as an actress. Aunt Betty died? Use it! Use dead Aunt Betty the next time you need to cry in a scene. Unless you hated Aunt Betty, in which case you could dredge up her hateful memory to make you shake with rage or vibrate with disgust. Did your favorite childhood cat get run over by a truck? Yes it's very sad, it's tragic – but it's golden material. Everybody in my class dredged up these painful,

wonderful memories, and we used it to make ourselves laugh, cry, or spew rage all over each other. Acting is the art of the damned, and I was its humble servant.

So while the other actresses were chatting and strutting and bragging, I was scouring my inner soul for my relationship to milk. I knew if I could dredge up a really powerful, painful memory of milk, I would get the part. Problem was, I was lactose intolerant.

Okay, I'm not *exactly* lactose intolerant, I just can't stand the stuff. On the other hand, I had really nice breasts, and I was hoping that would balance out the whole hating milk thing. Unfortunately, as I looked around the sea of cleavage surrounding me, it became apparent that everyone else was banking on their beautiful breasts, and in a fit of inspiration I knew I had until my turn in line to become one with milk.

Mmm, milk. Mmmmmm. Miiillk. Should I be sexy or coy? Or both. Maybe I could do it with a Russian accent. I was really good at accents. *Da. Milk.* Maybe I should think about milkshakes! I do like a thick, frothy milkshake. *MMM Da Milkshake.* Drop the stupid Russian thing. *Mmmm, milkshakes! Does the body good.* Except they make you fat. Strike that! Don't even think fat or you'll project an aura of fat. Shit, why did I do that? Think skinny, Melanie! *Mmm, skim milk. Does the body good!*

This isn't working. The great acting teacher Uta Hagen would tell me to use the technique of substitution. I don't have to like milk! I just have to substitute something I like and *imagine* it's milk. No – not something I like. Something I love.

Chocolate? Sex? Fame? Wait a minute – what if I substitute this very audition for milk? I want to get this part more than I want anything else in the world – so this

part will become milk. God I'm brilliant. *Mmm. Milk. Does the body goooooood.* Yes, I've got it.

And three hours later I get to say it. 'Don't be sexy,' the woman coming out of the windowless room whispers to me as I'm about to go in. 'They're sick of sexy.'

'What?' But she's gone. And she's totally thrown me. I want this job with a passion – I would die without it (and therefore without milk) and how in the world can I be passionate and not sexy? It's just not possible. I am exuding sex right now – I am bathing – make that drowning in sexual milk.

But there's no time to assimilate a nonsexual connection to milk. I was ushered into the room in front of two stern-looking people, a man and a woman bearing clipboards and number two pencils like warriors wielding their swords and shields.

'Say your name for the camera,' the man said.

'Melanie Zeitgar.'

'Okay – you didn't let me finish.' He threw a look to the woman who rolled her eyes and shook her head. I suddenly hated milk again and I started to sweat. 'When the little red light goes on you will say your name for the camera, wait two beats and then deliver the line. Okay?'

'Sure.' Two beats. Okay that's like counting to two, right?

'Miss?'

'MMM DA MILK!' I shouted before I could stop myself.

'Your name is first and then the line – after the little red light,' he said impatiently.

'Calm down a little,' the woman added. 'Take a deep breath.'

I smiled and breathed deeply to show how capable I was of following directions.

‘Okay red light. When it comes on, speak.’

I had the sudden urge to bark like a dog, and the thought made me giggle. And then I tried to stop giggling and it made me giggle all the more. And then the little red light went on and even though I was laughing so hard I was barking like a seal, I said my name and I delivered the line. And because of my inappropriate laughter, the word *milk* came out more like *mulk*. Mmm, MULK. Does the body gud. Incidentally, had I been drinking milk at the time, it would have been coming out of my nose.

‘Can I do that again?’ I started to say, but like a roller-coaster you’ve waited in line for (all freaking day in the scorching sun), the audition had lasted a few rattling moments, plunged downhill at the speed of light, and jerked to an abrupt end. A skinny assistant dressed in black appeared out of nowhere and yanked me out by the elbow.

‘Next!’ the man with the clipboard bellowed as if a straight jacket awaited me in the hall. And as I was being escorted out, I could hear the woman say, ‘Is it just me or did she sound Russian?’

I immediately hauled my humiliated self to the ladies’ room. And there was Kim Minx at the bathroom sink, crying her eyes out.

At first I thought she was just thinking about a dead childhood pet, but my trained eye quickly realized this was more than a sense memory practice. ‘Are you okay?’ I asked softly. Her watery eyes met mine in the mirror. ‘Those bastards!’ she screamed. ‘Those fucking milk bastards.’ She hung her head and really sobbed. Her long blond hair was dangling in the sink. I was about to pat her on the back when she suddenly whirled around and stuck her chest out so that I ended up patting her left breast instead. I quickly took my hand away.

‘They think they’re not even!’ she cried, sticking her chest out even farther. ‘Are they? Are they even?’

I glanced at her breasts and hesitated. The truth was, the left one did look a little bit bigger than the right. But she was so devastated and distraught that I didn’t want to hurt her feelings.

‘They said that?’ I asked horrified.

‘Not exactly,’ she admitted. ‘But I know he was thinking it. He turned his head sideways. Sideways. Like this.’ Kim suddenly dropped her head to the side as if she were a marionette and her neck string had been suddenly severed. I found myself dropping my head sideways in imitation.

‘But they’re perfect,’ I said, hoping she wouldn’t think I was a lesbian. ‘I’m sure my boyfriend would love them,’ I added, just in case my preferences were in question. ‘How dare he. How dare he turn his head sideways. You’re beautiful! You’re perfect. I just look at you and I think “Mmm milk.”’ Oh God, now I think I’ve gone too far. I was just trying to be nice, maybe even make a female friend (actresses are notorious for hating each other and hanging out with their male counterparts instead), and now I definitely sound like I’m coming on to her. But she isn’t glaring at me or backing away like I’m a freak; she’s smiling.

‘Really? You’re not just saying that?’ she says.

I guess she likes freaks so I continued to lay it on thick. ‘I’m telling you you’re so perfect you make me sick!’ I yelled. ‘You fucking make me sick!’

Her face lit up like a neon sign, and she immediately wiped the tears from her eyes. She flipped her long blond hair back and held out a soft, perfectly manicured hand for me to shake. ‘Kim Minx.’

‘Melanie Zeitgar.’

‘Do you like Mexican food, Melanie Zeitgar?’ she asked.

‘Love it,’ I lied.

And so that afternoon Kim and I went out for the first of many margaritas together. Mmm, margaritas. Does the body good. We became fast friends, shopping partners (Kim shopped, I praised and sometimes returned to the stores to steal little tidbits I noticed on my reconnaissance missions), and confidantes. She knows everything about me – except for the bit about stealing, of course. We lost touch for a while when I started classes at NYU, but we’ve been able to pick up the thread. She was the first person I called when my life imploded on me three years ago, and I was the fourth person she called when she found this great rent-controlled apartment last year. Okay, so the friendship isn’t exactly even, but I don’t care. She’s the only one who couldn’t care less about all my little neuroses. But sometimes she can be extremely annoying.

‘Uh-oh? What?’ I whine.

She turns the page of her magazine before answering. Fashion before friendship. ‘Tell me what she said again. Exactly.’

“‘Melanie, I’d like to see you in my office. Can you be here at eight A.M.?’”

‘Uh-oh.’

‘Kim. Stop saying that. Maybe she has a great assignment for me.’

‘I doubt it. But good luck.’

‘Do you have to be so honest? Whatever happened to little white lies?’

‘Sorry, Mel. You’re right. She’s going to give you a fabulous job on the Queen Mary. How’s that?’

‘Insincere.’

‘I’m sure it’s nothing. Just go in there, smile, and agree with everything she says.’ Kim smiles at me by way of example. I smile back. She shakes her head. ‘You look like you’re in pain.’ I imagine Ray kissing my neck and smile again. ‘Whoa, way too happy,’ Kim says. ‘Discount smile,’ she suggests. Kim’s favorite thing in the world is a good sale. I imagine stealing a cashmere sweater. ‘Perfect,’ Kim says. ‘That’s the smile.’