



Ask any woman who has a sister: are you the smart one or the pretty one? She'll have an answer. There may be fine distinctions, but eventually each sister knows well which role her parents assigned to her when she was too small to carve distinctions for herself. Of course, pretty implies not-smart – and vice versa – to a child. And some kids have a hard time swallowing compliments mixed with shortcomings. Especially the smart ones.

Sisters Amanda and Francesca Greenfield sat next to each other on bar stools inside their co-owned Brooklyn Heights café, sipping their drinks and staring at the busy city street. Which sister was pretty and which was smart would seem plainly obvious to any stranger, though both women shared a certain gray mood, despite the crisp mid-January brightness of New York.

'What about that one?' asked Amanda, pointing at a tall, thin man on the street, bundled tightly in a black coat and brown scarf. 'No hat, advertising nonbaldness. Light-footed walk of a man without problems.'

'Unless he's trying to disguise them,' responded Francesca, known to everyone as Frank, her nickname since birth (not that the Greenfield parents wanted their

oldest child to be a boy – a question that had been raised many times over the years). ‘His bounciness could be a cover for his disillusionment.’

The man in question stumbled slightly as he walked past the coffee bar, his footing perhaps disturbed by the two women inside examining him like a moth on a pin.

Frank said, ‘Right there! Did you see that? Light-footed, my ass. He crumbles under scrutiny. A clear sign of something to hide.’ She paused to sip. ‘He’s cheating on his wife.’

Amanda shook her head slightly. ‘Unmarried. I can tell by the footwear. No woman would let her husband leave the house in those loafers. How he dresses is possibly the one thing you can change about a man.’

‘Look,’ Frank said, pointing at him openly now. ‘He’s going into Moonburst.’ The man with bad shoes had to fight his way into Moonburst, the franchise coffee bar. It’d opened right next door to the sisters’ café, Barney Greenfield’s, two years ago. Frank swiveled on her bar stool away from the street to face inside her floundering place of business. Exposed brick, polished wood floors, ceiling molding. The street-level shop had once been the parlor floor of a Victorian brownstone. In its time as a coffee bar and before, the space had accommodated thousands of guests, the walls holding inside each brick the sounds of a hundred years of sitting and talking. That day only two customers were there. Just two. In the five seconds it took Frank to turn back around, ten customers had come and gone from Moonburst with a couple more waiting to enter. Frank sighed the dry exhale of radiator heat.

The younger sister, picking up on Frank's glumness, said, 'Here's another one.' She tilted her head out the window at another pedestrian. 'Blond, small hands. Hard-set cast to his face shows determination, intense ambition. Red lips, passionate by nature, but reserved unless he's with a woman he truly loves.'

'Can we stop?' asked Frank. 'This game depresses me.'

Neither sister was currently with a boyfriend or even casual fling. Hadn't been for a while. Frank's last boyfriend, Eric, the circulation manager at the magazine she used to work for, had left her abruptly after a three-year relationship, having woken up one beaming July morning with the sudden realization that Frank's 'chronic mild discontentment' wouldn't be a healthy emotional environment for his future children. Frank suspected, after two years now of postrelationship hindsight, that any woman Eric dated would be left mildly discontented. Who wouldn't be with his dreary adherence to routine? Amanda, at the time, advised Frank that relationships between two people with similar characteristics tended to stall because they had nothing to learn from each other on their karmic quest.

Newly thirty-three, Frank saw her spinsterhood flung out before her like a worn black blanket. Amanda, twenty-nine, who'd never had a relationship that lasted longer than two months, couldn't understand her sister's preoccupation with the romance of loneliness. Amanda's remedy refrain, 'just go out and meet someone new,' struck Frank like a bitch slap, even though she knew her sister meant no harm. Amanda never meant harm,

though she could dole it out unwittingly with ease – a veritable venomous rose.

One of the customers, a cranky old woman the sisters knew as Lucy, waved a liver-spotted hand in their direction. ‘Refill,’ she demanded. She’d had three cups already. Frank hesitated. A couple of refills were expected. But a bottomless pot – in their financial straits? The woman pointed to a sign taped to the cash register. ‘That’s what the sign says,’ Lucy reminded them. Grudgingly, Frank served the cup, placing it gently on the table, smiling a plastic-fruit waxy grin. Lucy reached for her hot mug and drank. Frank stepped back, watching her future flow down the old lady’s wrinkled throat.

From across the room, Amanda quivered slightly and said, ‘I just got the strangest feeling, Frank. Like a wave of negativity rolled all the way across the bar, from right where you’re standing to right here, by me.’ Amanda curled her fingers over her curvy hip. ‘Whatever you’ve done, apologize to Lucy,’ she said to Frank.

‘I didn’t do anything,’ protested Frank.

Amanda had long claimed she had unusually strong intuitive powers. Frank dismissed Amanda’s ‘cosmic sensitivity’ as nothing more than finely honed observational skills, which by themselves were impressive. Frank *did* believe Amanda had other gifts, however. Long, wavy auburn hair. Flawless cream-and-petals skin. Grass green eyes. Even a blind man could see that Amanda was gorgeous. Compared to that, Frank’s smartness often felt like birth’s booby prize. The labeling hadn’t been overt: Mom had never once sat the girls

down on her knee and said, ‘Well, Frank, you’re very clever and you learned letters and numbers quickly, but you’ve got a flat face and stubby feet. We’ll call you “the smart one”. As for you, Amanda, your nose couldn’t be teensier and your hair is a wonder, but you show no interest in books. We’ll call you “the pretty one”.’ The message was more subtle than that: Frank received praise for making *As*, and was punished for *Bs* (though that happened rarely); Amanda got kudos for her innate style and was criticized for gaining weight, which she had a tendency to do (never a problem for Frank).

Where Frank stood now, an adult who’d incorporated her parents’ appraisal into every decision she’d made for thirty years, she knew that intelligence was more valuable. For one thing, pretty was available to anyone who had the time, energy, money, and will. And even without exercise, makeup, and plastic surgery, Frank considered herself serviceably attractive. She elicited grunts from workmen; baggers at the supermarket, though, called her *ma’am*.

Amanda liked to use the suffix *-er*. She would tell Frank that her hangup with pretty and smart wasn’t conducive to personal growth, that, perhaps, she, Amanda, was *prettier*, and that Frank might be *smarter*. But both attractiveness and intelligence were culturally defined. Who’s to say that, in Tangiers, Amanda wouldn’t be considered uglier and brainier than Frank? Whenever Amanda presented her special brand of logic to her sister, it made Frank’s head hurt. Among other things, why Tangiers?

Today Amanda was wearing a long, flowing peasant

skirt (wholly inappropriate for the weather), a cashmere pullover, and thick-heeled black clogs. When she moved, the skirt dipped between her knees, making her legs seem even longer. She walked across the creaky planked floor to the cappuccino machine. It'd been dead for about a month. Amanda stroked its bronze casing as if her touch could ignite the fire of life. She said, 'You know what would really cheer us up? Let's go shopping for a new one.'

Frank couldn't help a tiny snicker. 'Shopping?'

'What's with the snicker?'

'We don't have money to buy a cappuccino machine.'

'Oh, let's just buy one of those cute little Krups ones. With the spout on the side.'

'I don't think we can stave off ruin with a cappuccino machine that makes one beverage at a time,' Frank said. 'We can't afford a new café-caliber model. And we can't make much money without one.' Not that having a working cappuccino machine would send the crowds at Moonburst back to Barney Greenfield's, where they belonged. Amanda and Frank had been minding the store since their parents' deaths almost a year ago. In less than fifty weeks, they'd minded it into the ground.

Amanda noted, 'I'd say we're straddling the horns of a dilemma.'

'You wish,' Frank said.

Amanda laughed generously and twisted her hair into a knot at the top of her head in one fluttering motion.

'Unless something changes radically in the next, oh, ten minutes, this coffee bar is over,' Frank said.

Amanda shook her head sadly, causing the soft

auburn curls to tumble out of the topknot and tickle her cheeks. She kept her eyes on Frank while she rearranged her hair. 'The tide can turn,' she said.

'The tide can turn, but not the tidal wave,' Frank said. 'You know the kind of pessimist who digs deep and finds a reserve of optimism just when all seems lost?'

'And how you're not one of them?' Amanda responded.

'Exactly.'

'Never heard of them.' Amanda nibbled her manicure. 'Okay, so I'm willing to admit that things have looked brighter. Yesterday things were brighter.'

'It rained yesterday.'

'I don't mean literally,' she said.

Amanda hardly ever meant literally.

'Let's think about the good things in our lives,' Amanda suggested. 'We've got our health. And we're young. Our lives are full of possibility!' she said, trying to cheer up her dour sister.

'We've got nothing,' countered Frank.

'You're talking as if this is the end.'

Frank sighed heavily. 'This *is* the end.' Frank knew a lot more about the family's finances than Amanda. For instance, Amanda was unaware (despite her power) that Citibank was one mortgage payment away from foreclosing on the building. Since the sisters lived in the apartment above the store, a foreclosure would leave them homeless, too. Frank had heard rumblings that the manager at Moonburst was just dying to expand into Barney Greenfield's space. Frank could secure their apartment by renting the building's ground floor to her

greatest enemy, probably at a screamingly outrageous price (plus the cost of their souls), but that'd be like spitting on the graves of her ancestors as well as admitting personal failure. Frank considered telling Amanda the true depth of their troubles. But why burden her with the horror, too? Frank thought it best to shield Amanda from reality, let her float along in the cushion of the cosmos.

'Just trust me,' said Frank. 'We're done.'

The sisters stood together at the cookie case. The shop was filled with the gurgle of coffeepots. Amanda said, 'I think we should hug.'

She held out her arms to Frank and waved her in. The older sister, uncomfortable with nonsexual touching, felt something in her heart, some understanding that her little sister's compassion and love were sustaining and real, but Frank couldn't bring herself to get mushy. Instead of answering the call of Amanda's arms, Frank said, 'I think we should consider our options.'

'If you're rejecting my hug, you have to indulge me in a toss.' Amanda jogged behind the cookie display case (Brooklyn's finest breadstuffs, delivered fresh three times a week) and opened the cash register. She removed six pennies from the till. Frank watched silently as Amanda shook the pennies in her hand like dice and tossed them onto the counter. The pennies spun and danced, eventually slowing and surrendering to gravity. Amanda arranged the pennies in a vertical row depending on where they fell. She studied the pattern of heads and tails. By doing so, Amanda believed she could see the future. The practice, known as the I Ching, had

been a fixation of Amanda's since . . . since the sisters stopped having regular conversations.

'I don't think your Chinese fortune-telling is going to drag paying customers in here,' Frank said as her sister analyzed the toss.

'The idea is to see how our energy is flowing,' explained Amanda. 'Maybe we can get a clue about how to save ourselves.' She examined the pennies carefully, gravely. 'Sky over lake,' she concluded. She reached for her handy I Ching translator under the bar. She dragged her finger along the laminated sheet until she found the right spot on the grid of sixty-four squares. She read, 'Treading on the tiger's tail but the tiger does not bite.'" Amanda looked up at Frank with rods of hope shining from her eyes. She said, 'Something's going to change, Frank. For the better.'

*Jingle.* The door to the store jingled. The co-proprietors turned to see a young woman – she couldn't have been more than twenty-three – in cigarette pants with a button- and eye-popping fitted black blazer. Her blond hair successfully achieved the high-maintenance, heavy-product, just-out-of-bed look. She walked straight up to the counter and asked for a tall, skinny cap, whip it (translation: a small cappuccino with skim milk and whipped cream). Knowing that a cappuccino wouldn't be possible, Amanda went behind the counter and, with a big smile, she pitched, 'Nothing like a nice hot mug of good ol' Sumatran coffee, I always say.'

Cigarette Pants frowned. 'Cappuccino machine busted?'

'Actually, the whole store is busted,' Amanda

admitted. Cigarette Pants accepted brewed coffee and looked around the place. Besides the crone Lucy, the only other customer was reading a paperback romance novel while dipping her brownie. Lucy tapped frantically on the keyboard of her PowerBook, pausing momentarily to look around suspiciously from over the top of the monitor.

‘The floor’s sweet,’ said Cigarette Pants. ‘Venetian parquet. Giant storefront windows, antique panes. Steel counter – hygienic and aesthetic.’ The woman was sprinkling cinnamon powder on her Sumatran – something no connoisseur would ever do to a spicy Indonesian, thought Frank.

‘Are you the owner?’ asked the blonde. Frank nodded. The woman mirrored the nod and said, ‘You’ve got a really nice space here. But business doesn’t look too good. You know anything about marketing? Public relations?’

Frank and Amanda had enough trouble with private relations. ‘We pass out fliers on the corner every day – dozens of them,’ Frank said, not sure why she was telling this woman anything about her business, but she was a real live customer, a break in the routine.

Frank was intrigued by the blonde. She’d never seen such self-assurance in a woman so young. Perhaps her confidence came from a strange place, a tiny world inhabited by a superior class of human – those with smarts and prettiness.

‘Clarissa O’MacFlanahagan,’ the woman announced, her right hand stretched out, gold and jeweled rings on three of her fingers.

Frank shook. Her grasp was bony and dry, cool from the January outside, but not cold. Frank worried that her own hand was clammy and distasteful. ‘Francesca Greenfield. This is my sister Amanda. We’re co-owners.’

‘May I see your flier?’ asked Clarissa. Amanda peeled a copy of the red page from the top of the stack behind the cookie counter. Frank picked out the color herself. She thought cherry was cheery.

“Gourmet coffees and cakes,” Clarissa read. “Come for the hot coffee, stay for the warmth.” Hmm. It’s sweet. But fliers . . . I don’t know. They’re soft sell. You need a pull.’

Amanda asked, ‘What do you mean?’

Clarissa explained, ‘A pull is a marketing strategy. It’s a tactic that yanks customers in to the store as if they had ropes around their waists.’

‘You mean belts?’ Frank asked, wanting to sound wry.

‘More like umbilical cords,’ responded Clarissa with a small smile. Frank couldn’t help but smile back.

‘How do we do it? What’s a good pull?’ asked Amanda.

Clarissa frowned. ‘It’s kind of complicated; I’d have to explain the whole concept to you and then come up with a strategy.’

‘Can’t you give us the Cliff’s Notes version?’ asked Amanda. It struck Frank that every aspect of Amanda’s life read like the Cliff’s Notes version – her relationships, her observations, the I Ching throwing. ‘Because, as you’ve noticed, we need help,’ said Amanda. ‘A lot of help. We can’t do this by ourselves.’

Clarissa looked around the café again. ‘I see potential.

I really do. But with school and ...' She stopped suddenly and faced the sisters. 'Actually, maybe I can do something for you. We may be able to help each other.'

The sisters glanced at each other, Amanda's face full of hope, Frank's incredulous. 'I'm not sure what we can do to help you,' said Frank, certain that she had nothing this woman could use.

Clarissa took a long drink. 'Great coffee,' she said. To Frank, she continued, 'I'm only credits away from completing business school – the Stern School of Business, NYU – major in marketing and public relations. I need a final project – a field thesis – to graduate with top honors. I'll save your business. No charge. And all you have to do is stand back and watch.' She turned on the heel of her ankle boot and faced Amanda. 'I can do it. I'm telling you. I feel it.'

'Your confidence is catching, but I think you're a bit too late,' said Frank. 'The people have spoken, and they choose Moonburst. Quality isn't important. People want the chain-store brand. They want to dress in Banana Republic, have their living room outfitted by IKEA, brew their overroasted Moonburst coffee, and drink it out of a mug with a *People* magazine logo on it. Americans crave homogeneity. It relieves them from the mental work of having to make choices. By driving small businesses under, chain stores limit options. They're un-American, the very breeding grounds of evil. Except The Gap. I like The Gap.'

That silenced the room. Even the coffee stopped gurgling. Amanda broke the quiet lull. 'Please ignore

everything Frank just said,' Amanda pleaded. 'We're not giving up and we'd love to hear your ideas.'

Clarissa waited for a few beats. Finally Frank said, 'Yes, of course. Please stay. I can't help myself sometimes. I tend to be defeatist.'

'What next?' Amanda asked their new partner.

'We sit, drink and talk,' she answered.

Frank said, 'That's a real departure.'

'Come on, Frank,' admonished Amanda. 'Give this ten minutes. We don't have anything to lose.'