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The Cut of a Suit

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Table of Contents

The Cut of a Suit	4
The Longitudinal Effects of Smothering	21
Geisha Girls	29
Splitting Hairs	50
You're #1 Fan	76

“Mirrors”

The Cut of a Suit

I had been trying to get my father into a suit for years, so when my mother called and asked me to help her pick one out for my dad, I was on a plane to California that night. She was asleep by the time I got in so I went up the stairs into my old bedroom, avoiding the spots that creaked. I put my bag on the floor and looked around. In the moonlight I could see nothing had changed in the ten years since I had left home. The hideous wall paper I'd tried to cover with posters still hung on the walls, my desk still littered with books and dust, and my dinky twin bed was still in the corner. I lay down and rolled into the sagging middle of the mattress and sighed. I lay awake for a long time, staring at the glow-in-the-dark stars on my ceiling.

I opened my eyes and for a minute I thought I had been transported back in time. My mother was leaning over me in her faded old bathrobe, gently shaking my shoulder. Her hair was clumpy and her eyes puffy.

“Is it time for school?” I asked.

“No,” she said. “We have to go to the store.”

“Oh... yeah,” I said, suddenly regaining my senses.

The parking lot at the mall was fairly empty so it was easy for me to recognize my brother's old jeep parked near the entrance. I was surprised. Jeff hated shopping for clothes. I pulled in next to him. He got out of his jeep and waited for us. I turned off the engine he opened Mom's door.

"Hey," he said, looking across the seat at me.

"Hey yourself."

Inside the men's department Jeff seemed completely lost. In his jeans and sweaty baseball cap he followed me, randomly picking up shirts and setting them back down again.

"Hey, Jeff?"

"Yeah?"

"Could you help mom pick out some undershirts and underwear and some socks for Dad while I look for a suit?" He looked relieved to have some direction.

"Sure."

"Don't forget a tie. They're right over there, next to the underwear," I pointed. They headed to the other side of the store. In the suit area I ran my hand

across the row of jackets, all perfect in a row, and I remembered the first time I ever bought a piece of clothing for my father.

I thought my mom was taking me shopping for back to school clothes.

“Why are we in the men’s area?” I asked.

“We have to get Dad some new clothes,” she said. She held my hand and took me past packages of men’s underwear and bags of socks.

“But why? Daddy never gets new clothes.” I looked around. There were racks of pants and shirts, each with a sign that had a red slash through a dollar symbol. I picked a shirt off the rack, examining it. It wasn’t like any of the shirts my dad wore. It had buttons down the front with long sleeves. It even had a pocket on the front. My dad only wore t-shirts.

“Because he is starting his new job today and he has to have new clothes.”

“What job?” I asked, putting the shirt back.

“Well, he’s starting his own business. Do you remember when he was going to night school?”

I nodded.

“He was going to school to be an accountant and now that he’s graduated he finally gets to run his own business.” She could see that I had more questions so she quickly said, “Why don’t you go pick out a new tie. It will be a present from you for his new job.”

Arranged on several round tables and dangling from little hangers, ties in various shapes, colors, and textures were displayed. There were brown knobby ties, wide ones with stripes, skinny ones, some had funny pictures. Some were in boxes, some were not. Some hung on racks like belts. I picked up a shiny red one, careful not to mess up the perfect little row of ties. I rubbed the fabric between my fingers—it was soft. I put it back and found a blue one that felt just the same. . I loved blue. It was my favorite color.

I went over to the mirror to try it on. I noticed that there was a little tag on the inside with writing. It spelled *s-i-l-k*. I loved this blue silk tie. It would be the perfect present. I saw my mom approaching in the mirror.

“Well, what did you find?” she asked.

I took her over the display and pointed out all the many different ties. She laughed at the funny ones and said the rough knobby brown one reminded her of Daddy’s hands.

“But this,” I said, handing her the blue silk one from my neck, “is the one I want to get him.” She turned it over in her hands, carefully examining the tag. “It’s made out of silk,” I said proudly. She looked at the price.

“Yes, I see.” She looked at the ties in the boxes. “Let’s see if we can find one already in a box.” We searched until we found the exact same blue one. I was so excited that we found one already wrapped that I didn’t read the sign above the boxes. It said “*Rayon.*”

I glanced across the store and saw Jeff’s baseball hat above a rack of Hanes underwear. He was just like Dad, he never cared about clothes. Jeff became a varsity soccer player in high school, which made him part of the popular crowd. He would wear the same jeans and rumpled t-shirt and yet girls still liked him anyway. Because I was his little sister I was part of the inner crowd by default. My clothes were plain, but they seemed to pass the critical peer inspection. I became best friends with a girl named Lara. She wasn’t beautiful, but she made up for looks in the way she dressed. Her dad was a doctor and she loved to go shopping.

In junior high I would go to the mall with Lara after school. She taught me the difference in fabrics, how a softer feel meant better quality. She said she could tell how expensive somebody's clothes were by how they fit. She said expensive clothes were cut in a way that made you look better.

The easiest way to learn, she said, was to study men's suits. One night we went into her parents' closet and showed me her father's suits. She picked out a pinstriped one and made me hold it while she talked.

"Nice suit jackets come in slightly at the waist and the pants break just above the ankle, and of course, the fabric is soft." I ran my hand down the length of the sleeve and nodded in agreement. The fabric was soft.

"It's even easier to tell when they're striped." She pointed to seam along the shoulder and every stripe met at the same point.

"I never noticed that before," I said. "I guess I never really looked that close." She put the suit back on the rack and started to leave the closet.

She whispered as she turned out the light, "My dad actually has a little bit of a pot belly, but you can't tell when he wears his suits."

"My dad doesn't have a belly so it's a good thing he doesn't wear suits," I said.

“You can tell how much somebody is worth” she said, shutting the closet door, “just by the cut of their suit.”

One day Lara and I walked into a store that I had never been in before, but I recognized the shopping bags from her mother’s closet. The saleslady approached Lara and I. “We have a great sale in our Misses section in the back”

“We don’t need any help, thank you,” said Lara, examining a rack of cashmere sweaters.

“Cheap stores,” Lara said to me once the saleswoman was out of ear shot, “always put their sales clothes in the front of the store to get you to come inside. Nice stores always put their sales clothes in the back because they know people want to shop there no matter what.” When Lara wasn’t looking I looked at the price tag on one of the sweaters. I definitely needed to go back to the Misses section.

“Did you notice how she mentioned the sale rack, like *I* couldn’t afford to shop in here? Daddy gave me his credit card and said I could pick out what ever I wanted.”

“Technically,” I pointed out, “your dad’s the one who can afford to shop here.”

“Well, your dad could never afford to shop here,” she mumbled under her breath.

“What did you say?” I felt my face start to tingle. Lara casually put down the sweater and turned to face me.

“I’m saying that you say your dad’s an accountant but I’ve seen the way he dresses and it’s not like how my dad’s accountant dresses.”

“My dad’s clients are not doctors, Lara. They’re farmers and mechanics and he helps them out by not charging too much. Besides, he barter with them for services and sometimes we get more that way than if he had charged them more money. Like that time he got his truck painted by the mechanic instead of charging him for doing his taxes. That paint job was worth more than what it would have cost him to pay my Dad’s fees.”

“Well, maybe he should see if he could do that saleslady’s taxes, then he could get some better clothes.”

“I can’t believe you said that, Lara. I thought you were my friend!” I yelled the last bit and the store clerk started to head our way. Her face looked like she was going to kick us out of the store.

“I telling you this because you are my friend,” she said in a low voice, trying to ward off the approaching saleswoman. “I’m just saying that if your Dad dressed better he would get better clients.”

“Oh yeah? You mean like fat doctors and their snobby daughters?” I yelled. I stomped out of the store, leaving Lara to deal with the saleswoman.

After that I stopped talking to Lara, but I couldn’t forget what she said. Later that night I went into my parent’s closet and examined my father’s clothes. First I looked at his shoes. They were the same ones my mom had bought on that first shopping trip. He had gotten them resoled and his daily polishing kept them looking almost brand new. He didn’t have a suit, but he did have several pants. I rubbed the fabric of his favorite brown pants between my fingers. It looked similar to Lara’s dad’s pants, but the fabric was slightly rough. I pulled the tag out and checked the label. It said *polyester*.

Lara and I stopped talking to each other after the fight. I made new friends but I rarely invited them out to my house. I usually had my dad drop me off early at school and at places I would meet my friends. When my friends did meet my dad I wondered if they too, like Lara, noticed his cheap polyester dress pants and

re-soled shoes. At Christmas I tried to slyly update his wardrobe by buying him some new pants and a jacket I had found on sale. My brother laughed and said I should have gotten him the hand-saw. On Father's Day I bought him new shoes, but they sat in the box in his closet. He said they weren't broken in like his old ones and pinched his toes. My brother got him a new part for his car and they spent the day together installing it. Finally, when my family went to my high school graduation I thought he would finally wear a suit, but Jeff pointed out that it was 100 degrees outside and there was no way I was going to get either of them to wear a jacket.

I was examining a suit jacket in the men's department when I heard my mother and my brother arguing. I took it with me and walked quickly over to where they were. Mom was crying.

"What's wrong?" I asked, mad that Jeff had made her cry.

"We can't agree on a suit," she said, tears started to roll down her face.

"Well, that's what I'm here for Mom. Don't worry, I'll help you choose one."

"That's not the problem," she said. I was confused. Jeff interrupted,

“I don’t think he should wear a suit. He should wear a t-shirt and jeans like he did every day.”

“Jeff,” I said, “he can’t wear his ratty old t-shirts and ripped up jeans. All his clients are going to be there, our family. I won’t have all these people come and see that we couldn’t even get him a nice suit to wear.”

“It’s not like they are going to care what he’s wearing, Sis. Besides, he never cared either.”

“I can’t take this,” sobbed my mother. I handed her a tissue.

“Jeff, it may not be important to you, but it’s important to Mom and it’s important to me. We are getting him a suit.” I could tell my brother still wanted to protest, but when Mom’s sobs started to attract the stares of the other customers he backed off.

I carefully selected a dark blue suit of wool silk blend. It was soft and silky between my fingers. My mother picked out a plain white, button up shirt. Jeff came back with his hands full. His eyes were a little watery and I could see he was struggling.

“They don’t sell single shirts or underwear. They only sell them in packages of three and I didn’t know what color socks to get so I got a package that has blue, black and brown.”

“Don’t worry about it,” I said. I looked at the rest of the things in his hand.

“Jeff, he doesn’t need a belt or shoes.” I said.

“So do we even need socks?” he asked.

“Yes,” said my mother. “All his socks have holes in them and he’s not going to get all new clothes and have old socks.” We stood in a little semi-circle, surrounded by packaged shirts, hanging slacks, folded sweaters. She gathered all our little gifts for him, hugged them to her face and cried, knowing they would be the last.

After the pastor finished speaking, my brother opened the microphone to the crowd, and a long line formed. A balding man with thick eyebrows was first to speak.

“Mark wasn’t just my accountant,” he paused, “he was my friend. When I was going through a divorce and having a rough time, I remember he put his arm around me and said, ‘We’ll get through this together.’ I never forgot that. He didn’t say ‘*You’ll* get through this,’ he said *we*.” The man started to choke up and put his hand over his mouth. He passed the microphone to the next person. The woman who took the mic was in her late thirties.

“Mark was always helping people. The first time I met him my husband had abandoned me on the side of the road with my two kids. I had no car and no way to get home. He offered me a ride a ride and at first I was so scared that I didn’t want to but he his eyes were so kind so I said yes. He did my taxes every year after that and didn’t charge me too much since I was a single mother.” She handed the microphone to the next person.

My head was starting to spin from all the perfume in the room and so I slipped out the side door to the courtyard. I leaned my back against the stucco wall, felt its prickles in my back, and stared at the overcast sky. I wished I could make my mind as grey and blank as the clouds. The wind picked up and sent dead leaves skittering across the pavement. I shivered and crossed my arms across my chest. I pushed my back harder into the wall, my eyes brimming as the spikes poked through my sweater.

I heard the side door open and a heavy set woman clutching a cigarette came out. I watched her light up and take a deep drag. She crossed one arm over waist, rested the elbow of the other on top of it and blew a stream of smoke into the sky. She sighed heavily, then, looked over at me.

“Hi,” she said.

I nodded once in her direction. I looked back up at the sky. I could feel her walk over to me and put her back against the wall. I hoped she would leave me alone.

“Heather.” she said. “It’s me, Lara.”

I looked back at her with surprise. Her hair was stringy and she wore a cheap black dress that stretched tight across her hips. I hadn’t thought about Lara since high school.

“Oh,” I said. “I’m sorry. I didn’t recognize you. It’s been a long time.”

She took another drag off her cigarette. “Yeah, I know,” she said, blowing smoke out the side of her mouth. “A lot has happened since you moved away.”

I didn’t know what to say. I wasn’t up for small talk.

“So, um, how’ve you been?” she asked, grinding her cigarette butt into the cement and lighting up a second one. “What have you been doing the last ten years?”

“Well,” I said, “after college I moved to New York. I’m in marketing. What about you?”

“I moved to L.A.”

“Really? What do you do there?” I didn’t care but it was better than thinking about everything else.

“I’m a waitress. I’ve been going to school there for a while now.”

“What are you studying to be?”

“I don’t know,” she said, blowing out more smoke. “Heather, I’m really sorry about your dad.”

“Really? I didn’t think you thought much of him.”

“I did, actually. A couple of years after high school my dad ran off with his secretary. He took all his money and my mom had to find a job.”

“Wow.” I studied the hard lines around her mouth, “That sucks.”

“Yeah, well, she needed help doing her taxes during the divorce and I remembered your dad so she went to him and he helped her. Anytime she needed advice about who to go to for help he would recommend someone he knew that wouldn’t charge us too much. He did my taxes for free even.”

“That sounds like him.” I tried to smile but my lips started to tremble and I knew I was going to start to cry. Even now I didn’t want to cry in front of Lara.

“Could I have one of those cigarettes?” I asked, wanting to steady myself.

“Sure,” She pulled one out and lit it for me. I inhaled timidly and tightened my throat, trying not to cough. We stood in silence for while, smoking with our backs against the wall. Finally, I threw mine on the ground and said,

“Well, I think I need to go back inside.”

“And I should probably start heading back out on the road.”

I opened the side door and moved to step inside when Lara stopped me.

“Heather?”

“Yes?”

“Your dad was a good man.” She reached over and touched my arm. I saw the lines soften around her mouth.

Inside the hallway of the funeral home people were getting preparing to leave. Mom and Jeff were putting on their coats. I told them I would catch up with them at home and walked back into the chapel.

I stared at my father for a very long time before I touched him. He wasn't wearing his glasses and the crinkle between his eyebrows was smoothed out. I reached my hand out slowly towards his face. I caressed his hair and was surprised to find it was still damp from being freshly washed. He still felt alive to

me. My hand traveled down the arm of his suit. Shaking, I put my hands on top of my father's hands. They were deflated, like the skin on the back of a dead frog. It was horrible, but I forced myself to keep touching them. They felt dry and papery. These were not the hands I remembered. These were not that hands that carried me to bed at night and clapped when I crossed the stage at graduation.

Standing so close I could see details I hadn't noticed before. His jacket gapped slightly at the waist and underneath the lid I imagined there probably wasn't a break in his pants above the ankle. Tucked in next to his arms were the mementos and gifts from all who had come, cards and flowers, even a coffee mug. Someone must have remembered how much he loved to drink coffee. I had finally got him into a suit, I thought to myself, and the cut of it was exquisite.

The Longitudinal Effects of Chronic Illness on Offspring

Leila didn't want to kill her mother, she just wanted her dead. For thirty years she had fantasized about her mother's funeral, calculated how long it would take to empty the rooms of the worthless knick knacks and use the money from the sale of the house to move to South America. She figured the easiest way would be to rent a large dumpster and pay a couple of kids to haul stuff out to it. If dreams came true she could be reading her in-flight magazine 35,000 feet above Santiago in less than two months.

Every time her mother called to tell her about the latest experience at the doctor's office Leila would get an adrenaline rush. Her heart pumped faster and faster while she waited for her mother to tell her the doctor's diagnosis. She felt in her chest the same feeling she used to have on Christmas morning. Counting down the minutes before she was officially allowed to open the presents, Leila would breathe faster, faster, faster, so that she could only feel the air going in her nose, her ribs expanding until she thought she would explode.

“So the doctor said it was just kidney stones, but they hurt so bad if they don’t pass in the next couple of days I’m going to go back and tell them to go in and take them out.”

Leila’s chest deflated at the disappointment of the non-fatal results.

“Well, that’s good news then,” she said, weakly.

“And now I’m coming down with some sort of cold. I wanted to feel 100% healthy when you come next week for Christmas, but I’m just so tired right now. I hate being sick all the time.”

“Me too, Mom.”

The following week she was rummaging through her mother’s medicine cabinet looking for the bottle of pills her mother had asked for. The cabinet was packed with old prescriptions her mother had never finished taking or forgotten to throw out. There were bottles and bottles of penicillin, some with dates as far back as ten years ago, nasal sprays, decongestants, Visine drops, current prescriptions for her mother’s high blood pressure, Xanax for her anxiety and panic attacks, testing strips for her diabetes. There was at least five half empty bottles of Advil. Leila reached farther back and accidentally stuck her hand in the slimy residue of a leaky Vick’s Vapor Rub tube. She held the fingers to her nose and instantly recalled the many nights she spent laying next her mother, listening to her labored breathing, half-hoping when her mother’s breath caught, it

wouldn't start back up again. She wiped her hands on her jeans and continued looking for the tall slender bottle with the little white pills her mother wanted.

Carrying the bottle and a glass of water, Leila walked up the stairs to her mother's bedroom. Years of running up and down, fetching the heating pad and carrying trays of food had worn the carpet down almost to its final threads. Leila carefully set her foot down before taking the next step, not wanting to spill the water. Many times before Leila's mother had not been so careful going up and down those stairs. Once, while wearing a pair of socks, her foot slipped on the carpet and she sprained her wrist tumbling down the stairs. Her mother had been quick to call the doctor and follow his directions with an ice pack and rest. Leila had tended to her mother's demands for special soups and glasses of water.

Her mother, propped up by pillows and swaddled in blankets, wasn't frail and tiny like one would expect of someone who was always plagued by one illness after the other. She was big-boned and sturdy, with hard little curls all over head, and clear blue eyes. Leila wondered how someone could look so healthy yet be so sick all the time.

"Here you go mother," said Leila, handing over the water and pills.

"Oh thank you dear."

"Are you feeling better?"

"A little, but I just can't seem to get over this chest cold. These pills always make me so drowsy."

“Well, do you want to watch a movie or something?”

“That sounds nice. I miss having you here all the time.”

Leila fought to keep down the bile in her throat.

Leila sat in the recliner next to her mother’s bed and not long after the movie started she heard the soft snoring of her mother as she dozed. She remembered the first illness her mother had. She was eight and it was not long after her father left. Her mother was having trouble sleeping and she told the doctor it was affecting her at work. She would cry all the time and sometimes she would yell at Leila for no reason. The doctor said it was pre-menstrual syndrome and told her to take some Midol, but when the crying and yelling didn’t go away after a year, he sent her home with a prescription for Prozac.

After that it seemed there wasn’t a time her mother didn’t bounce between one chronic illness and another. If it wasn’t strep throat it was sinusitis, the flu, a really bad head cold, bronchitis, or pneumonia. After her hysterectomy her mother told the doctor that she constantly had to go to the bathroom and she kept gaining weight. Leila listened to her mother for hours over the phone, describing the conversations with various doctors.

“Dr. Brown says my blood sugar is high so I have to cut back on the amount of sugar I eat and I have to test my blood sugar every day.”

“Dr. Gibbons said my thyroid has gotten all messed up since my hysterectomy so now I have to take thyroid medication on top of my hormone replacements.”

Only once had there been a reprieve for Leila. When she fourteen, there were a brief couple of weeks when her mother hadn't complained about anything.

“Why don't we go to the beach Mom?” asked Leila.

“I don't know honey.”

“Mom, you're feeling great and it's only two and half hours away. We could leave early and be home the same day.”

“Well, I guess it would be fine.”

Leila was ecstatic. She left her mother slathered in sun screen under an umbrella to go off into the water. She watched the surfers on their boards bob up and down.

“Mom, why don't you come in, it's so hot out and water feels good.”

“Leila, you know I can't swim.”

“You don't have to go far; you can just go up to your knees.”

“No, I'm fine. Just be careful of the rip tides.”

“Mom, you're such a worry wart.”

Leila swam out farther and farther. She liked ducking under the waves and feeling the current push her body back and forth, towards the shore, then away from the shore. Back and forth it rocked her. In the absolute silence and gentle rocking Leila felt a peace she had never known before. Always she was moving from one crisis to another. Will my mother be okay, or won't she, is it serious this time or not, yes or no, yes or no? Back and forth, back and forth rocked Leila underneath the sea.

“Oh Mom, I had such a good time. Can we go again next weekend?”

Leila's mother glanced at her from the steering wheel.

“We'll see Leila. I don't know how I'll feel next week,”

“You'll be fine, don't worry.”

“I didn't realize how foggy it gets off the coast at night,” said her mother. She leaned closer to the steering wheel and scrunched her eyebrows “I can barely see the road.” She turned her lights on low and slowed the car down. As they rounded a curve Leila could hear her mother inhale sharply.

“Mom, relax. Just go slow and we'll be fine.”

But they weren't fine. Two miles down the road a truck driver had missed a turn and had jack-knifed. They were going slow enough that they were able to stop their car before hitting the truck, but the car behind them wasn't. It slammed

into the back their car, throwing both of them into the dashboard. Leila and her mother both had whiplash, but her mother was permanently damaged. Even after the chiropractor told them they didn't need to see him anymore, Leila's mother suffered from migraines and developed a fear of driving. Leila had to take her mother to all her appointments and they never went back to the coast.

Leila sat in the recliner next to her mother's bed. It was Christmas, she was forty-two years old, and she was still taking care of her mother. She thought of all those years since the day at the beach and what had been her life until now. Doctor's appointments, physical therapy, the dates she had canceled, the friends who couldn't come over, the life that was real and the dreams that weren't. Forty-two wasn't old, but it wasn't young either.

Her mother lay on the bed, her breath ragged, and Leila stared at her intensely. When her mother's breath caught she held hers too. Will she keep breathing or won't she? Will this be the one time she doesn't wake up? Will she or won't she, yes or no? Leila held her breath, listening for any sound that might come out of mother. She clutched a pillow to her chest and squeezed. As the seconds went by her heart beat faster and faster. She stood up, still holding the pillow and put her head next to her mother's nose. Just when she thought it had been too long since she heard anything, her mother inhaled sharply. Leila thought

she would explode from the disappointment. Thirty years of MRI's and PET scans that revealed nothing, tumors that were benign instead of malignant, second and third opinions that confirmed there was nothing to worry about and how they should both be thankful. She stood there, staring at her mother and the beaches off the coast of Santiago faded in and out of her mind in rhythm with her mother's breath. She looked at the pillow in her hands. Now or never, yes or no?

Geisha Girls

I took the postcard out of my pocket and looked at the directions again. *Take the R, W, or N train to Houston Street, walk south two blocks then make a left.* I turned the card over. On the backside was a picture of geisha looking into a mirror. The reflection in the mirror showed her removing a mask. It was white and unsmiling. The eyes were empty. Behind the mask, in the reflection of the mirror, was the geisha's real face. I looked closely. Was she smiling? I couldn't tell. There was a crease in her face from where I had folded her in half and kept her in my pocket. A frigid wind blew outside the subway entrance. I shivered and put her away. I took my husband's gloved hand in mine and said, "Just two more blocks."

The entrance to the gallery was nondescript. The door was flush with the building and I thought it was a service entrance. Had it not been for the mask hanging on the outside of the door we would have passed it by. It was the same mask the geisha wore in the postcard. I hesitated. Was I supposed to knock? It seemed strange to knock on the door of a gallery, but then again, the artist had always been a little strange. I brought my fist down to knock when the door opened and I barely missed hitting the top of a bowing geisha's head. I quickly

snatched my hand back and stuffed it in my pocket. Joshua playfully poked me in the side. I was thankful the bowing geisha did not see the flush in my cheeks.

In the hallway she waited for us to remove our shoes and coats. From a secret pocket inside her robe she pulled out a mask. It was white with red painted lips. A geisha mask. She handed it to me and indicated with hand gestures that I was to put it on. I looked over at my husband. He shrugged his shoulders and made a face that said, "Up to you." I started to hand the mask back to the geisha but she said,

"The artist Hoshino-san requests each woman guest to wear this gift in the gallery."

"Did Hoshino-san make these gifts herself?"

"Hai," she said, with a little bow. "Please." She held up her hands, indicating she would help me put the mask on. I turned around and she deftly tied the ribbons at the back of my head. Snug against my face, my jaw was restricted. Only my eyes were free. My husband wiggled his eyebrows up and down at me. *Va-va voom* he mouthed. Once the mask was secured, the geisha led us down a long narrow hallway that opened up into a large reception area. From the eye holes in my mask, I could see many couples standing in the room. Each woman wore a mask identical to my own. Circulating between the couples were models dressed as geishas in colorful kimono. They carried trays of tea, sake and sushi. Once we stepped fully into the room our guide returned to her post. A geisha in a

rust colored robe approached us with a tray of sake. Both my husband and I reached for a glass. We clinked our glasses together and then I realized I could not drink with the mask on. I tried to lift the bottom of my mask with my free hand, but the rust-colored geisha shook a finger at me. I looked at my husband. Beneath the mask my eyebrows were scrunched together in annoyance, but he only saw the serene white expression of the mask.

“Don’t worry. I’ll make sure it doesn’t go to waste,” and he said, taking my glass. As he drank both our sakes I looked at the other people in the room. Those women who had come with dates stood empty handed while their male companions had their fill of sushi, tea or sake. Some of the women had a hand on hip accompanied by a tapping foot, others had their arms crossed over their chests, and some just stood next to their dates with their hands clasped in front of them waiting patiently. Their masks were identical copies.

“Do you see her?” asked my husband.

I pointed one finger to my mouth and with my other palm upturned, shrugged my shoulders.

“Oh, right.” He stopped a geisha in a yellow kimono. “Excuse me, but which one is the artist Alison Hoshino?”

“Hoshino-san will greet guests at end of show.” The geisha bowed slightly and pointed with an open hand to another hallway. My husband put the empty sake

cups on her tray and handed me his elbow. Together we walked through the doorway to the start of the exhibit.

The gallery was set up as a long snaking hallway with moveable walls. Three paintings were mounted on the left hand side and were accentuated by soft white exhibit lights. The largest painting, which was in the middle, depicted various women in kimono strolling through a garden. The pictures on either side were enlarged sections of the centerpiece. On the opposite side of the hallway were moveable walls which were covered with rattan-like matting. Large flat stones were arranged in a footpath with Japanese ferns, maples, and cherry blossoms gracefully arranged along both sides. The whole effect made it feel as if I were strolling through a garden. I looked closely at the smaller paintings. The first one was of a cat crouching in a bush. It was all black with green eyes. In the top corner of the painting I could see the sandaled foot of one of the geishas. The cat looked as if it were about to attack her ankle. I grabbed my husband's arm and pointed at the cat. I tried to tell him the cat's name was Orion, but it came out sounding like a muffled doorbell. I forgot I couldn't speak with the mask on. I pointed to the cat and then pointed to me, trying to indicate the cat in the painting had been mine, but he didn't get it. He moved on to look at the large painting in the middle. I stayed in front of the picture of Orion.

I remembered the first time I saw him. He was just a kitten someone had dumped at a convenience store. He looked so little, sitting on the steps and

wearing a tiny flea collar. I begged my mother and promised I would take care of him in my most responsible sounding six year old voice, but she said she would have to talk to my father first. I worried that in the five minutes it took to drive home and the ten minutes they spent discussing it that someone would take him, but when my father came home he had the tiny kitten in his hand.

Before school I would fill Orion's water dish and, when I had finished my homework, I would brush him and tease him with a string. He would curl up in a little ball on my pillow and purr me to sleep. I had only had him about a week when I came home from school and could not find him. I looked behind the sofa, behind the washing machine, and under my bed, but he wasn't anywhere. I thought maybe he had gotten into the garage when my father had come home. When I opened the garage door, I was horrified by what I found. My little sister was swinging Orion around by the tail. "Stop it! Stop it!" I rushed into the garage, my first instinct was to push my sister, but I was afraid she would let go and send Orion flying.

"I'm going to get Dad!"

She ignored me.

"DAAAAAAD!"

She stopped swinging Orion and gripped him hard around the belly. I slapped her hard across the face and she was so surprised that she loosened her grip on the cat. I grabbed him from her hand and ran into the house as she started

crying. I ran up the stairs to my room, cradling my kitten. A minute later I could hear my father's heavy footsteps coming up the stairs and he opened my door. I could see my sister behind him and I knew she had blamed the whole thing on me.

"Did you just slap your sister?"

"Dad, she was swinging Orion by the tail and she wouldn't stop."

He turned to look at my sister.

"Alison, is that true? Did you swing the cat by the tail?"

"No, Daddy. I was just petting him and she hit me."

"That's a lie. She hurt my cat."

"Ashley, you can't hit people, even if they do something you don't like.

You are going to have to stay in your room and no T.V. tonight."

"But that is so unfair, she hurt Orion!"

"Alison isn't going to get any T.V. tonight either."

He turned around and as he shut my door I mouthed the words to my sister,

"I hate you."

After that, Orion started to bite my sister's ankles. He stalked her from underneath the couch, or from a nearby bush, waiting for an unprotected ankle. He nipped with his teeth and swatted at her with his claws. She said I trained him to do that, but really I didn't.

My eyes were brought back into focus and I was shaken out of my trance by Joshua pulling at my elbow. We walked to the end of the hallway and discovered a little bridge that took us around the corner. At the end of the bridge a doorway entrance had been built with a sliding door. Joshua opened the door and I slid it shut behind me. The second hallway was similar to the first with the paintings on the left, but instead of being decorated like a garden, the scene was an entry way of a home. There was a coat stand, a console table, a shoe rack with three pairs of slippers and a child's book bag. On the table there was a dish with a set of keys and some Japanese coins in it. There was also a vase with a delicately scented vanilla orchid. I turned to look at the paintings on the wall.

There were more paintings on this wall than in the first hallway. They were crowded together. It looked like the hallways I had seen in my friend's homes, which had been covered with family portraits, vacation photos and awards. Some of the paintings were tiny landscapes. There was one of a black and white dog. The first one I stopped to examine was of a man dressed in ragged white pants. His face and body were painted white and the background was black. His body was distorted and his face set in a grotesque scream. Underneath the painting was a caption. It said "*Haru Hoshino.*"

I tugged at Joshua's sleeve. I pointed to the picture and the caption. Then I pointed to my wedding ring.

"Oh, so that must be her husband. He's a good looking guy."

I lazily slapped my knee twice.

“What?” said Joshua, pretending to be confused. I put my hands on my hips and shook my head.

“Oh, did you mean to say ‘Ha, ha, very funny?’”

I nodded yes.

“For someone who can’t speak, your sarcasm still comes through loud and clear.”

I looked back at the painting.

“Do you think he will be wearing this tonight when we meet him?”

I playfully punched him in the arm. So this was my sister’s husband? Joshua could be a tease, but I thought maybe Haru Hoshino was the type of person to come dressed up in full Butoh costume. I had never met Haru. I had only heard about him from my mother when she called me three years ago to tell me that my sister had eloped with some Japanese dancer. I only learned her new last name when mother had sent me the postcard announcing her art show in New York.

The elopement did not really come as a surprise. Alison never really shared her secrets with me and rarely with my mother. I did not even know she had moved to Japan until the first Christmas after she graduated from college. When she hadn’t come home my mother told me that she had moved to Japan over the summer to pursue her art. By that time we were so distant I didn’t get

upset that she hadn't told me. It was like hearing the news about an old neighbor you once lived next to.

I left the painting of Haru and strolled down the hallway to where Joshua was examining another portrait. This painting consisted of three women. The woman in the center was slightly older, her black hair streaked with gray. Her face did not have any of the white paint of the geisha. She held a calligraphy brush in her hand. Slightly below her, there were two women side by side dressed in matching kimono. Their faces were white and had the same shaped red lips. The one on left had green eyes and was holding a delicate paint brush. The one on the right had blue eyes and held a dagger. The title of the piece was "*Ladies of the House.*" It was clear to me who the ladies were supposed to represent.

People always thought Alison and I were twins. Despite the fact that I was three years older and our eyes were different colors, our faces shared an uncanny likeness. Our mother used to cut our hair exactly the same and Alison often wore my hand-me-downs. People couldn't tell who was in the photograph until they looked at the name on the back. Our grandmother would sometimes get us confused and call us by the other's name. When people asked if we were twins my reply was an offended "no." We could not have been more different if we had been born to different parents. As the oldest child I tried hard to please others. I studied hard and was respectful to my teachers. It was not a surprise when I had gotten into medical school. Alison was just the opposite. She was loud and

obnoxious. Teachers had many conferences with my parents over her. I could not believe I was related to her. She broke my toys, snuck into my room and read my diary. When I was thirteen I caught her listening in on my phone calls.

“You are such a brat!” I yelled.

“You are such a brat!” she copy-catted me.

“Mooooooooom!”

“Both of you go to your rooms RIGHT NOW.”

I slammed my door and fumed in bed. My mother walked in, a look of total exhaustion on her face.

“Why can’t you be nice to your sister?”

“Mom, she is so annoying. She’s always getting into my stuff.”

“It’s just because she likes you and wants to be around you.”

“But she is such a brat.”

“She doesn’t have a lot of friends at school. She needs you. You don’t how important it is to have a sister. I want you to include her more.”

“But Mom...”

“I don’t care, just do it!”

I sighed. I laid in my bed in the dark. We were just too different. I didn’t see how, nor did want to be friends with my own sister.

By the time I got to high school and Alison was in junior high she had stopped wanting to hang around me. We despised each other and my mother gave

up trying to make us like each other. We had our own lives with our own friends. At least I thought we did. I never really saw my sister's friends. Mostly I saw her closed bedroom door. I didn't really wonder what she did in there all night. I was just glad she was not bugging me anymore.

There was one painting that interested me. It was of a little boy with black hair and green eyes. He held a frog in his hands and his eyes were squished closed by a big smile. I looked at the child's backpack in the hallway. It had a little charm in the shape of a frog dangling from the zipper. I suddenly wondered if this boy in the painting, the one titled "*Tomo*", was Alison's son. The thought that I might have a nephew brought an instant rush of exhilaration to my heart that quickly turned into anger. How could she have kept *this* a secret from me?

I did not have time to let the anger build up in me because Joshua suddenly said from the next hallway, "Hey, I think this is the one from the postcard."

I joined him in what was made up to be a lady's dressing room. There was white face paint, brushes, hair combs, black wigs carefully arranged. Above a sink, where a mirror would normally hang, was a single painting.

"I think this is the one from the postcard," said Joshua. He looked over at me, "Do you have it?"

I put my hand in my pocket and nodded. I pulled the postcard from my pocket and gave it to him. He held it up next to the painting and we looked back and forth between them, comparing.

They were almost identical. Both had on the same kimono and were looking at their reflections in a mirror. They were removing white masks and I could see their secret faces in the mirror. I realized they looked like the women depicted in *Ladies of the House*. The reflection of the woman on the postcard showed she was removing a mask that was unsmiling, but the crease from the fold obscured her face. I looked closely at the painting. The image of the mask was reversed in the painting on the wall; she was removing a mask that was slightly smiling, but her real face was blank and almost cold. Her eyes were blue. This was not the woman on the postcard. Alison had called this piece “*Yin*.” I tugged at Joshua’s sleeve. I pointed to the mask in the postcard and then at the mask in the painting and shook my head.

“No,” he said. “They look the same to me.”

I shook my head more vigorously.

He shrugged his shoulders. “I think they look the same.” I looked back at the painting as Joshua went through another sliding door. If this was supposed to be a painting about me, why she would call the piece *Yin*? I didn’t have time to decipher the meaning because I heard Joshua calling my name.

“Ashley, you have to come with me on this one.”

I stepped sideways out of the dressing room, keeping my eyes on the painting and then slid the door shut. When the door closed the hallway went almost completely black. At the end of a long narrow footpath, framed by two tiny tea lights, I could just make out another door. It was like being in a tunnel. We walked slowly and quietly towards the door. Unlike the other doors, which just slid open, this one had a knob and a sign on it. It was a cheap plastic sign that you could get at any gift or joke shop. I remembered it because it was the same one my sister put on her door not long after I had caught her reading my diary. The sign on this door said “Alison’s Room, KEEP OUT!”

I remember one morning, I must have been about fifteen, I walked past Alison’s door on the way to the bathroom and I noticed that it wasn’t shut. Ever since the diary incident she had been hiding in there and had stopped trying to get into my room. As I walked past I could hear my mother in there with her. I thought Alison was just being a pain again and was refusing to get up. I got ready for school and was having breakfast when I realized that she still hadn’t come down. “Great,” I thought, “now she is going to make me late for school.” I ran up the stairs to yell at her but mother was still in her bedroom.

“Mom, is Alison coming to school today?”

“No, there is something wrong with your sister. She’s sick.”

“What’s the matter?”

“I don’t know. She can’t move her face. I have to take her to the hospital.” She looked at me. “You better get going. You’ll be late for school.” I took one last look at my sister before closing the door. Her face looked normal to me.

When I got home got home from school I asked my mother about what had happened at the doctor’s. She said Alison had Bell’s palsy.

“What’s that?”

“It’s when one side of your face gets paralyzed.”

“How did she get that?”

“They don’t know. They said sometimes people just get it. They wake up and they can’t move their face.”

“Is it going to last forever?”

“No. But they don’t know when she we will be able to move her face again. They said it usually clears up in a few weeks, but sometimes it can take longer.”

“Where is she?”

“She’s in her room, but I wouldn’t go in there. She’s upset.”

I went upstairs anyway. I knocked on her door. There wasn’t any sound. I opened the door and poked my head inside. The room was dark, but I could see my sister was lying in bed, facing the wall.

“Alison, can I come in?”

She grunted. It sounded like a no, but I came in anyway. I hardly ever went into her room. It was a mess. Clothes piled everywhere. I kicked a path to her bed and sat down.

“Alison?” She ignored me. I put my hand on her shoulder. She didn’t move.

“Alison,” I tried again. “I’m really sorry about what happened to you. I know it must be hard, but it will go away. You’ll get better.” It was the first kind thing I’d said to her in years that my mother hadn’t made me say. She rolled over and looked at me. Her eyes glittered with tears.

“Go away.”

I heard her say the words but it was like a ventriloquist was saying them. Her lips opened, sound came out, but her face didn’t move. It really was paralyzed.

“Go away!”

I stared at her. Her left eye was slightly droopy. I realized it must be the left side of her face that was paralyzed. She sat up.

“Get out!”

But I couldn’t move. I suddenly wanted to hug her. I reached to put my arms around her when she shoved me off the bed. She tried to scream but her lips couldn’t move and instead it came out like a moan. I got up off the floor and got out of her room.

“Shut da door!”

I looked at my sister, sitting in dark room, alone. I felt a pain in my chest.

“Alison, I really am sorry.” But she just lay down and faced the wall again. It was too little, too late.

I shut the door quietly and went to my room. I got into my bed and stared at the ceiling. I thought of my sister in her dark room. I thought about her face and what it must feel like to wake up one morning and not be able move. How could she go to school like that? How would it feel to not know when you would ever be able to smile again?

She didn't go to school the next day or the day after that. I tried going in to see her, but she either locked her door or faced the wall until I would leave. She never said anything to me except “get out” or “shut the door.” In the second week of her palsy my parents said she had to back to school or she would get too far behind. She didn't say anything, but would go straight to her room and shut her door when she got home. Sometimes I would walk by and put my ear to the door, wondering what she was doing in there. She never said anything at dinner, if she came down for it all. I worried what the kids were saying about her at school, if they were teasing her and if her friends were sticking up for her. By third week she was starting to regain some control of her face and some hope that it would not be permanent. Her eye was not drooping, but she still could not

smile properly. I could not tell if she thought my jokes were funny because only the right side of her lips could curl up.

Just as it had appeared, one day she woke up and the palsy had gone away. It was strange, but even after she gained control of her face she always kept it still. I thought she might be afraid to move it, afraid the palsy would come back, or that she had become so used to not being able to move her face that it had become a habit. Her face was like the door to her bedroom. I could never tell what was going on behind either of them.

It wasn't until years later, not long after I had gotten married, that I found out what she had been doing in her room all those nights. She had been drawing, and she was good. She had gotten a scholarship to art school and was going to become a painter.

Standing in front of the fake door in the gallery, I felt inside my chest what a burglar must feel when he was about to pick the lock on an enormous treasure. I turned the knob and this time led Joshua in. It was the first time I had been inside "Alison's room" in almost twenty years. There was a bed, a dresser, and a chair with a robe thrown across it. Books and photographs were littered on top of the dresser. I recognized several old stuffed animals lying on the bed. The real treasure, however, was on the walls. Instead of one wall displaying pictures, this room had four walls and a ceiling and they were covered with paintings. Their colors glittered.

“Whoa,” said my husband. We started with the wall closest to us. This wall was completely covered with portraits of men. Some were quite large. Some were so small they only contained a close-up of a body part, such as a mustache or a foot. The biggest ones were labeled with titles like “*Lover #1*” or “*Lover #3*.” On the next two walls were portraits of women. Some were by themselves and some were in groups of two, three, or more. The women were various colors and were dressed in traditional Eastern or Western clothing. The portraits were labeled with names, and the group pictures with places or dates.

I finally noticed the painting centered above the bed. It was the geisha removing the unsmiling mask. I stood on the bed to get a closer look. Her eyes were green and her name was “*Yang*.” I sat down on the bed I looked at the stuffed animals arranged on the pillows and picked up a white stuffed teddy bear. *I know you*, I thought to myself. *You’re Lucky Luke*. My sister had named this teddy bear after one of her favorite cartoon characters and she had carried him everywhere. I turned around and lay down on the bed. I put my head on my sister’s pillows and hugged Lucky Luke to my chest. Joshua noticed me lying on the bed and came over to me.

“Hey, I don’t think you are supposed to get on the display,” he said. I reached for his hand and pulled him gently onto the bed with me.

“Uh, Ashley, someone could walk in.” I put one finger over the lips of my mask and pointed to the ceiling. Looking up he saw that the ceiling was covered

with large canvases. The paintings were done in a surrealist style and looked like they were part of several dreams. We lay on the bed for a while examining each one until we could hear people in the dressing room. We got off the bed quickly and shut the door leading out of the bedroom. A model dressed in green Kimono guided us back to the reception room where we had started.

“Hoshino-san will be here very soon,” she said.

I grabbed a ribbon at the back of my mask and pretended to yank it. It tightness was giving me a headache and I wanted a drink.

“Please, leave it on until Hoshino-san comes.” She turned and took quick tiny steps back to her post.

We waited and watched the green geisha bring more people from the bedroom. Finally, when the room was quite crowded, all the geishas in kimono came into the center of the room and made two columns. From the columns a man dressed in traditional Japanese kimono escorted a woman in a white kimono. She was wearing a white, unsmiling geisha mask. In her left hand was the tiny palm of a little black haired boy.

“This must be her,” said Joshua. I nodded in silent agreement.

She handed her little boy over to the man. She carefully removed her mask and handed it to one of the geisha's. Her eyes green eyes scanned the crowd as she spoke about her show, thanked the man next to her, Haru, for his support, and the gallery for their generosity in letting her display her work. She

then invited the guests to ask questions. As people began speaking, Joshua said under his breath towards me,

“Wow, you two really do look like twins.”

Because of the mask I could not respond. I just shook my head. Alison and I may have shared a striking resemblance, but we were not twins. Someone from the audience asked, “Geisha paint their faces so why do some of your geisha’s wear masks?”

“The paint acts like a mask and I believe everyone, particularly women, wear various masks throughout their lives. The masks that people wear can change them, become them, and it can change how others view them.” Alison paused for a minute and her eyes scanned the crowd. There was no pause of recognition when she looked at Joshua.

I stood, fingering my mask, while the audience moved on to questions about the materials she used in her paintings, her inspiration, and other aspects of her work. I liked being able to spy on my sister without her knowledge. Her answers seemed confident and mature. This was not the same person I had grown up with. Of course I was different now too. I wondered if the changes were enough to overcome the distance we had held between us for so long. The little boy ran up to Alison and said something in Japanese.

“Attention, please. My son Tomo has informed me that it’s past his bed time. I must leave, but please stay until you’ve bought something.” The audience

tittered. I watched Alison reach for little Tomo and then she did something I had not seen her do in many years. Both corners of her lips curled into a smile that spread all the way up into her eyes.

After Joshua and I retrieved our coats and shoes and stepped outside the gallery, I took the mask off and put it in my purse.

“Why didn’t you go say hi?” Joshua asked.

“It’s been so long since I’ve seen her and I thought it would be better to do it without all those people around.” It wasn’t the truth but it was easier to say.

As we rode home on the subway, Joshua continued to talk about the paintings and how good an artist my sister was. While he talked I nodded and made little sounds of agreement, but in the back of my mind I thought about Alison, of the little nephew I had never met, and how I could still feel the pressure of the mask on my face.

Splitting Hairs

Image was important to Stacey's company. It was one of the largest trading firms in the country and there was a lot of competition to get in. Stacey went through twenty rounds of interviews to get hired, even though she'd already worked there for a year as an intern. The pressure didn't let up after she got hired either. Every year the company fired the bottom five percent of their producers. During their annual reviews employees were rated not just by their supervisors, but by their peers. They called it the three hundred and sixty degree review process.

Supervisors were rated by their subordinates and vice versa. Peer ratings were combined with supervisor reports so that in the end each person had feedback from seven different people. No one was supposed to know who their rater was. This was supposed to provide a more accurate review of the person's total performance, but the system had a flaw. Everyone was so paranoid about their reviews that they went out of their way to be nice. The more friends one made within the company the more likely he or she would end up having a friend as rater.

Stacey couldn't tell who was a real friend and who was just looking for an advantage. The lunch time outings and happy hours were just more ways people

could examine each other's weakness and figure out ways to exploit them. Word choice, facial expression, and body language were all carefully thought out before a person did or said them. Nothing was ever simple or straightforward. A simple question about what one did over the weekend turned into a game of mental gymnastics. If her answer was too short she would appear rude, if it was too rambling she seemed inarticulate. She had to be careful not to say "nothing" too many times to avoid appearing lazy and boring, nor could she say she had gone to the bars every night lest she seem like she had a drinking problem. All of this had to be considered in split second because if she waited too long to respond she would seem mentally slow.

Stacey had never been good at social politics. In seventh grade she had lost her best friend due to a power struggle between her and another girl named Blake. Blake had wanted to be Karen's best friend and so she lured Stacey into a conversation in which she admitted she didn't like something Karen had done. The next day Karen, with Blake by her side, marched up to Stacey and slapped her across the face. Stacey was shocked. She had never been hit by anyone before.

"I heard you were talking shit about me behind my back!" said Karen.

“No, never! What are you talking about?” said Stacey. The nearby kids crowded around, eager for a fight.

“Blake told me what you said about me,” said Karen, shoving Stacey in the chest. Stacey stumbled back a few steps.

“What are you talking about?” she asked, pushing Karen’s hands away.

“You told Blake I was a bitch.”

“That’s not what I said! I’m your best friend, I wouldn’t say that.”

“I was there and you did say it,” smirked Blake.

“She’s lying!” Stacey yelled. She threw down her bag and pushed Blake.

“Bitch!” yelled Karen, shoving Stacey to the ground. Stacey tried to get up when Karen punched her in the face, splitting her chin open. Stacey sat on the ground, feeling blood seep through her fingers and embarrassment as everyone watched.

A teacher saw the crowd and ran over, separated the two and tried to disperse the crowd. Stacey had to go to the hospital to get her chin stitched up and the next day at school she had a meeting with the guidance counselor and Karen. Despite crying and begging, Karen refused to believe Stacey was telling the truth. It wasn’t until months later, when she saw Karen and Blake walking with the

popular crowd that she realized why Karen refused to believe her. Karen wanted to appear tough so the popular girls would take her in. Blake had known this and purposefully caused a fight so that she could be Karen's best friend and enter the popular group by proxy. Stacey had felt so humiliated by being beat up in front of her classmates that she became a loner, fearful of being betrayed again.

As an adult, Stacey declined most of the lunch invitations and happy hour parties her colleagues attended. They weren't fun and they left her mentally exhausted. Every interaction with her colleagues was measured against the elite standards of the company's image. Did she smile at the right time? Was she speaking intelligently and clearly? Was her voice the right tone? If she were found socially inept it could cost her during the annual review. She used going to the gym on her lunch break as an excuse to avoid them. She told her colleagues she was training for a triathlon that raised money for cancer research. She knew her aloofness might come up as a negative against her in her annual review but she thought her charity work might counter that.

Stacey was in an important meeting but she couldn't pay attention. She was distracted by a hair she discovered on her chin and she couldn't stop

fingering it. It was long, dark, and curled under slightly. She'd looked around the table, wondering if anyone had noticed the hair on her chin.

Joe and Sumeet were listening to the director, who was talking about the upcoming deadline for their quarterly statistics report. Colleen sat diagonally across from Stacey. Colleen always arrived at the office in an impeccably tailored suit, sleek hair and polished shoes. She was so perfectly clean Stacey imagined her sending her entire body to the dry cleaners and arriving in the lobby encased in plastic wrap. Her blond, blunt cut hair framed a gorgeously made-up face.

Stacey was never perfectly clean. There was always a loose hair, cat fur or dandruff to be brushed off. Her stocking never lasted more than one day without her finding a run in them and her nails seemed to need constant filing. She kept an emergency kit in her locker at work. It held two lint rollers, extra nylons, a set of nail clippers, clear nail polish, tweezers, a travel size toothpaste and toothbrush, deodorant, and an extra set of black heels. She also kept a hair brush, hair spray, extra bobby pins and makeup in a separate bag on the top shelf of her locker.

Lauren looked like she was typing the deadline into her blackberry, but Stacey suspected she was really texting a guy named David who worked on the tenth floor. She'd overheard Colleen and Lauren talking about him while they were in spin class at the company gym.

A week prior Stacey had been sitting on a bike in the front row, near the teacher, when Colleen and Lauren walked in. She had never seen Colleen and Lauren use the gym on their lunch break before. She smiled, just to be polite, and their smiles back to her were brief. They were always going out to eat with people from the group. Sometimes they'd invite Stacey, but only if she was in ear shot of them making plans. They didn't pick the empty bikes next to her.

The spin instructor turned on the music and walked over to them.

“Hi, is this your first spin class?”

“Yes,” they both said.

“I'll help you set up your bikes. Class, go ahead and start peddling to warm up.”

During the class Stacey could hear them groan and whisper to each other while the instructor was busy yelling at other students.

“Oh God. I'm so hung over from last night!” said Lauren

“Did you go to Stone Street for Happy Hour?” Colleen panted.

“Yeah, I went with Joe and Sumeet.”

“Keep going newbies,” the instructor yelled at Colleen and Laura, “you can do it!”

“So... how was it?” asked Colleen.

“I made out with Joe’s friend David.”

“Oh, so that’s why you didn’t want to go out with the gang today.

“Less gabbing and more peddling!” the instructor shouted over at Colleen and Laura. Stacey watched them lower their heads and pretend to bear down on the bike.

“Isn’t he a trader on the tenth floor?” asked Colleen.

“Yeah.”

“Shit! Did anyone see you?”

“No, thank God. Joe and Sumeet only stayed for an hour.”

“You better hope David keeps his mouth shut. You know how rumors get started.”

“I know, I know.”

“One kiss and suddenly you’re the company slut.”

“Stacey,” called the instructor, “stop daydreaming and push!” Stacey hadn’t meant to eavesdrop but both Colleen and Lauren looked her through the reflection in the mirror. Stacey buried her face in a towel, trying to look she had been engrossed in the task of wiping off her sweat and not listening to their conversation.

Back in the meeting Stacey was weighing the consequences of anybody noticing the hair on her chin. She knew nobody would ever get fired over a hair, and a rater would be called unprofessional for citing it in an annual review, but subconsciously people would downgrade, if ever so slightly, their overall impression of her. In other work environments something as small as hair would not make a difference, but here the level of competition was so high that even something as small as a hair could give the advantage to someone else.

Busy all day Stacey had to wait until she got home to pluck out the hair on her chin. She went to the bathroom and leaned into the mirror, pulling the skin of her chin up to get a better look at the hair. It was growing out of an old scar line on the underside of her chin.

She remembered the first time she had ever found a hair on her chin. She must have been thirteen or fourteen, and she thought that the hair was actually the thread from her scar. She thought if she plucked the thread her chin would split open again. She left the hair untouched for a month until her mother attacked her with a pair of tweezers.

“Let me get that for you!” her mother said.

“Mom! Get off me!”

“Honey, you’re a woman now and chin hair is not attractive.”

“What happened to loving me for my insides?”

“No one is going to get close enough to know your insides with that giant witch hair growing from your chin.”

“Gee, thanks Mom.”

“Hold still”

“OUCH!”

“Stop being so dramatic.”

“You stabbed me with the tweezers!” She ran to the bathroom and examined herself in the mirror. Her chin was splotchy pink. She came out of the bathroom and pointed at her face.

“Yes, that looks *so* much better now.”

“Stacey, cry all you want but sooner or later you’ll have to accept reality.”

“What, that my mother’s a sadist?”

“Very funny, but you know that’s not what I’m talking about.”

Stacey rolled her eyes. “Whatever, Mom.”

“You can fight society’s rules but you’ll suffer the consequences.”

“I’d rather have my integrity.”

“It’s just a hair Stacey. Save the integrity for something really important.”

“I want to go to business school, not beauty school. I only have to worry about being smart.” Stacey stomped down the hall to her bedroom.

“I don’t recall Goldman Sachs hiring any bearded ladies,” her mother called after her. Stacey slammed the door.

In the bathroom Stacey looked at the dark black hair that had been growing, unnoticed for weeks, and she wondered why women had to grow a hair there at all, and why it was always one hair, not a dozen or more. She thought Colleen and Lauren must grow hairs there too, but why had never seen them? Either they were the type of women who checked their faces daily or they were blessed with perfect skin. She spread the skin tight with two fingers and plucked the hair, then dabbed it with cotton ball soaked in astringent to help with the pain. She looked at her reflection in the mirror. Her rough brown hair stuck out in a few places. It would never lay flat and sleek like Colleen's. She dabbed some Vaseline around the creases by her eyes, which her dermatologist recommended she start doing daily. She turned off the light and went to bed.

A few days later rumor had spread through the interns and up to the full-timers about Lauren's make out session with David. Stacey was standing in her underwear in the locker room when Colleen and Lauren walked in.

"Hi Stacey," said Colleen.

"Oh, hi." Stacey quickly pulled a shirt on over her sports bra and bent down to rummage in her gym bag for her shorts.

"So, are you taking spin class today?" asked Lauren.

“No, today I have to run. I’m training for a triathlon and today is my run day.”

“We were going to run too. Mind if we join you?”

“Of course not,” said Stacey, but internally she tensed. They probably think she was the one who spread the rumor about Lauren. It felt like she was back in seventh grade, accused of something she didn’t do, although this time it was going to be on a more sophisticated level. They would never come right out and accuse her, that would make them seem immature, but they would find ways to probe her without exposing themselves. She quickly finished tying her shoes and tried to say cheerily,

“I’ll see you out there!”

The gym was packed during lunch. All her corporate citizens were hard at work perfecting their bodies in keeping with their company’s image. She found a couple treadmills by a window that looked out over the Hudson River and picked one on the end so that at least Colleen and Lauren couldn’t surround her. She started the treadmill and began walking, taking deep breaths to try and release the tension in her shoulders. If she looked afraid they would think really think she was the one who started the rumor. Be cool, she told herself.

In the window she could see the reflections of Colleen and Lauren come out the locker room and head towards her. She had to explain how to work the controls to get the machines started since they'd never used them before.

"How long do you usually run for?" asked Lauren.

"About forty-five minutes. I'm trying to work up to an hour," said Stacey. She upped the pace on her treadmill to start her jog.

"I don't think I can run more than ten minutes," joked Colleen. Stacey looked at Colleen's toned legs in the window. She may not be a runner, she thought to herself, but she definitely worked out. Stacey knew what they were doing. They were trying to flatter her, make her feel at ease so she would talk more.

"So when is your triathlon?" asked Lauren.

"Next month."

"I'm sure you'll be glad when it's over," said Lauren.

"Yeah, you've missed a lot of the group's social activities for your training," said Colleen.

"I know, but it's for a good cause."

"Well you can't be all work and no fun," said Colleen, "we're going out Thursday night for happy hour drinks down on Stone Street. You should come."

“You should come” was an order. If Stacey refused she would look disagreeable or guilty.

“You’re right,” she said. “It does sound like fun.”

“Yeah, it’s a good stress reliever,” said Lauren.

“Are you stressed?” asked Stacey.

“Oh, just the usual, work, life. You know how it is when you work on Wall Street.”

“Yeah,” said Colleen. “The only time I see my boyfriend is on the weekends.”

“My boyfriend is my blackberry,” joked Stacey, trying not to seem nervous.

“Same here,” said Lauren, “but every once in a while you’ve got to blow off some steam.”

“Yes, that’s why you should come out with us,” said Colleen.

“Who all is going?” asked Stacey.

“The usual group. Joe, Sumeet, us, and some of their friends.”

“What about the new intern Shelly?” asked Stacey.

“We aren’t inviting interns this time,” said Colleen.

“Why not?” said Stacey.

“Well, we just thought it would be a good chance for everyone to get together before annual reviews. The interns don’t have to go through that so they don’t understand.”

“Plus, you know how the interns like to gossip,” said Lauren. “We don’t want anything we say to get back to the directors.” Stacey had to be careful. If she confronted them directly on the issue she would look paranoid and insecure, but she also had to show she could stick up for herself.

“I used to be an intern you know,” said Stacey, “and they don’t all gossip.”

“We didn’t mean you,” said Colleen quickly.

“Of course not,” piped in Lauren.

Stacey didn’t believe them. “Well,” she said, “I’ve got pick up my speed now. I hope you won’t think I’m ignoring you but it’s hard for me to talk and run at the same time.”

“Go ahead,” said Colleen, pressing the buttons on her treadmill to slow down. “I think I’m done anyway.”

“Yeah, me too,” said Lauren. The two women slowed their treadmills to a stop. “So we’ll see you Thursday night then?” she asked, patting her cheek with a towel.

“Sure, I’ll be there,” said Stacey, and she spent the rest of her run thinking about what she was going to talk about Thursday night.

In the evening Stacey was getting ready for bed. She was in the bathroom, washing her face and thinking about what would happen tomorrow night. She had read the Huffington Post to catch up on the latest political gossip because she knew Joe was really into politics. She read the entertainment section and memorized the latest movie reviews and museum exhibits in case anyone asked her what she was going to do over the weekend. The last thing she had to do was read an article about the CEO of her company in the Wall Street Journal. She would do that on her commute in the morning.

It was Thursday. The time read 5:58PM on her computer screen. She looked up from her desk and saw that most of her colleagues were putting on their jackets or straightening up their desks, preparing to leave for the day. A reflection of a woman appeared on her monitor.

“So, you about ready to go?” asked Colleen. Stacey swiveled her chair around.

“Yes, just shutting down now,” she said, faking a smile.

When Stacey was an intern she had gone to a couple of happy hours with her colleagues. She would drink to fit in, and to relax, but she didn't like the feeling of being out of control. One night, years ago, she had stayed a little bit longer than usual at the bar. Brian, one of the other interns who started at the firm the same time she did, was flirting with her. He bought her drinks, his fingers lightly touching hers as she took the glass from him, and she thought she caught him looking at her breasts. She hadn't seriously dated a guy since she was a freshman in college. She was average looking, although her mother pointed out she could look better if she tried harder, but Stacey was always focused on her career. She thought dating someone from work was a serious mistake, but she was a little drunk and it had been a long time since she'd been close with anybody. She excused herself to use the restroom. She tried to freshen up what little make-up she had on. When she came back, Brian was talking to another woman at the bar. She stared at them until he noticed her.

“Oh, Stacey, this is Alison. My fiancé.”

Stacey felt her cheeks redden with embarrassment. She should have known better. He was just talking to her until his fiancé showed up.

“Nice to meet you,” she said. She hoped her disappointment wasn’t obvious.

“You too,” said Alison. She smiled and shook Stacey’s hand.

“You know, I was just getting ready to leave,” said Stacey, reaching for her jacket.

“Really?” asked Brian.

“Yes, I have to go home and feed my cat.” She cringed at how bad that sounded. Once home she started vomiting in the toilet. It was alcohol mixed with tears of humiliation and loneliness. When her stomach had calmed she fell asleep on the tile floor, numb and exhausted.

At the bar Joe was telling a story about a problem he was having with the IT department and Stacey tried to look interested, but she was bored. She knew where this conversation was going. Every time people from work got together the conversations were always the same. They would start out talking about

something that happened at work which would lead into a brief session of people complaining about their jobs, or about the industry they worked in, which then turned into a discussion of politics and world events, with everyone trying to show off how much they knew. As the hours went by, someone usually got embarrassingly drunk.

Stacey wasn't drinking. She was sipping on club soda pretending it was a mixed drink. Her colleagues thought people who didn't drink were abnormal or ultra-religious, two qualities that clashed with their company's image. If anyone had asked her what she was drinking she wouldn't lie, that went against her views on integrity, but if people assumed she was drinking alcohol she wasn't going to go out of her way to correct them.

“So I was thinking we could arrange a whitewater rafting trip,” said Sumeet. “Nothing brings people together like a little danger.”

“Plus we could get out of the office,” said Joe.

“Would everyone be up for this?” asked Sumeet. He looked around the bar at everyone. The last thing Stacey wanted to do was spend a weekend in a swimsuit with her colleagues, but she had to seem agreeable without committing herself. When Sumeet made eye contact with her she said,

“Sure. Sounds like fun. I just have to make sure it’s not on a weekend that conflicts with my training schedule.” Stacey knew it wasn’t the answer he wanted to hear, he wanted to hear an enthusiastic yes from everyone, but it was the most honest answer she could muster given the circumstances. She waited another half hour before she made her excuses to go home.

“I’ll see you guys tomorrow,” she said.

“Sneaking out early?” asked Colleen.

“Yes. I know it sounds lame but I have to feed my cat. If I wait too long he starts scratching the furniture.”

“Sure, understandable,” said Colleen, a smirk on her face said anything but.

Stacey said her goodbyes to the rest of the group and tried not to sprint out the door. When she got home her cat was waiting for her by the door.

“Oscar,” she said, “you’re a life saver.” Oscar rubbed body against her leg. She picked up him up and hugged him, his whiskers tickled her face.

Stacey was in the conference room. She didn't know why there having a meeting, she'd just gotten a message on her blackberry to meet in the conference room. Her director was in front of the white board, writing on it with a green pen. Colleen, Joe and Sumeet were there too, all dressed in pressed blue suits. Their hair was neatly brushed and there was subtle hint of expensive perfume in the air. There was not a speck of lint, loose hair, or dandruff on any of them. Stacey had lint-rolled herself before entering the room but she ran her hands over her shoulders anyway, paranoid she'd gotten dirty. She took the empty seat next to Colleen. She was startled out of her thoughts when all eyes in the room turned on her.

“Stacey,” said her director, “we are going to start with you first.”

“Me?” she asked, confused.

“Yes, it's time for your 360 review,” he said.

“But those are supposed to be private,” she said, alarmed.

“Didn't you read the email we sent out? Policy changed last month.”

Stacey tried not to look panicked.

“Joe, why don't you start?” asked the director.

“Stacey is a good producer. Her projects are either turned in early or on time and she usually has a good handle on company policies, however she could improve on her communication skills.”

“Can you give a specific example?” asked the director.

“In the last quarterly report meeting she was a little dismissive of the group’s suggestions and people didn’t feel like she validated or respected their ideas. This might lead people to not offer their suggestions.”

Stacey wasn’t totally surprised by Joe’s response. He frequently made suggestions that weren’t completely thought out and she was always the one to correct the flaw in his logic. She *might* have been a little mocking in her corrections.

“Sumeet,” said the director, indicating Joe’s turn was done.

“Stacey is one of our top producers and she consistently delivers positive results. I agree with Joe about a need for improvement in communication.”

“Can you give a specific example” he asked, “other than the one Joe used?”

“When the group wanted to have a team-building meeting after hours she seemed a little stand-offish. She may have legitimate plans, but she could have

declined our invitation without giving the impression she was too good to hang out with us. It can bring group moral down.”

Stacey was starting to get upset. It wasn't the feedback that bothered her, she knew what her flaws were—it was the public nature of it. It took every ounce of self-control to act nonchalant.

“Colleen?”

“I want to reiterate what Joe and Sumeet said about Stacey's productivity. She's great at what she does, but I also think there are other areas of improvement that weren't addressed by the others.” Stacey felt the bottom drop out of her stomach.

“Occasionally,” continued Colleen, “Stacey's professional appearance falls below company standards.” Stacey was surprised. This was not something she expected to be brought up. She opened her mouth to protest but suddenly the conference room door opened and everybody from the group, about ten more people, filed into the room.

They stood shoulder to shoulder or sat in chairs facing her. All were dressed in dark suits. Their faces were impassive. What was going on? She tried to keep her outward appearance calm. No matter how bizarre things got, if she could just play it cool she might be able leave without embarrassing herself.

She tried to get up out of the chair but when she did suddenly Joe and Sumeet were standing next to her, pinning her arms behind the chair. She tried to speak, to tell them to get off of her, but she had no voice. Her mouth opened and shut but no sound came out. Someone grabbed her hair and tilted her head back against the chair. Stacey looked up. It was Lauren. She had a slight smile on her face. She tried to yell but it was as if an invisible sock had been stuffed down her throat. She looked back at Colleen, who was walking towards her with a pair of tweezers in her hand.

Now Stacey was surrounded by everyone in the room. They formed an impenetrable circle of blue around her. Colleen leaned over with the tweezers and plucked the hair off Stacey's chin in a quick movement. She held the hair up by the tweezers for everyone in the room to look at.

"Everyone gets a hair now and then," said Colleen. She opened the tweezers and let the hair fall into Stacey's lap. "But you..." she said, reaching with the tweezers again, "don't seem to care."

She bent over pulled again. The hair on Stacey's chin did not break off. Instead, as Colleen took a few steps backward, the group opened the circle as she stretched the hair stretched across the room like a thread. Colleen put down the tweezers and started pulling the hair with both hands. Stacey could feel a tingling

pain in her toes. It reminded her of what it felt like when her arm or leg had fallen asleep.

She looked down at her feet. As Colleen pulled the hair the tips of her toes started to disappear. Another tug and the arch of her foot was gone. She looked back up at Colleen, then at the faces of her peers.

“You’re just not corporate material,” said the director. Colleen pulled again. The tingling went up her leg.

“You’re not well rounded,” said Joe. Another tug. The pain was at her shins.

“You’re always *dirty*,” said Lauren. She wrinkled her nose. Stacey’s legs were gone. The hair was piled into a mound next to Colleen’s feet.

“You just don’t belong.” The group closed in on her as Colleen came back into the circle. Colleen climbed up onto the chair and into Stacey’s lap, leaning back slightly as she pulled the hair. The tingling crawled up her spine and she knew her body was still disappearing. She looked into Colleen’s eyes with her own, tried to plead with her despite the tears in her eyes.

“What? Are you going to cry now?” said Colleen in a mocking tone.

Stacey felt a dull throbbing in the back of her skull.

Colleen leaned in close, her mouth hovering over Stacey's lips. They stared intensely into each other's eyes. She saw her face reflected in Colleen's eyes and for a second she thought she felt Colleen's lips brush against her own before the hair snapped and everything disappeared.

Your #1 Fan

American Idol—My Prediction

I have never been impressed with the selection of so-called talent American Idol had forced on the American public over the last six years and used to make fun of the Idol fans with their websites and blogs, but the opening of this season's American Idol has forced me to change my opinion.

On the morning of March 12th I broke my ankle when some bike messenger going the wrong way ran a red light and ploughed into me. I have never injured myself with anything requiring more than a band-aid, but a minor infection when they set the bone required an overnight stay. My hospital roommate was a middle-aged English professor with a horrible case of gas who was obsessed with American Idol and had happened to get hold of the remote while I was unconscious. I woke up with my leg elevated at a 45 degree angle and to the most horrendous singing I have ever heard.

A poor kid was butchering Ricky Martin's "She Bangs," which is a horrible song to begin with, but he seemed to take it to a new low. Simon Cowell, whom I now know to be a famously caustic critic, unleashed the most brutal

criticism on this kid, enough to make a drill sergeant cry. The kid seemed totally unfazed and said with total conviction said he would be back. The next singer was just as bad. I took another pain pill and prayed to be put out of my misery, but before I could fall asleep the most beautiful girl I have ever seen stepped in front of the judges.

Her name was Tabitha Nash, she was 17 years old, and she came from little town called Sanger, CA. Maybe it was the combination of the terrible singers before her and the Vicodin, but when Tabitha Nash sang her audition song I was amazed. Her voice was clear and powerful and when she finished I was in love. So were the judges and when they said “You’re going to Hollywood” I knew I would have to follow Tabitha Nash on her journey to become the next American Idol.

So, now you have it. I am officially a converted American Idol fan. I predict that the beautiful and talented Tabitha Nash will win and I plan to use this blog to chronicle her journey.

P.S. Tabitha, if you are reading this I just want you to know that you have already won one viewer’s heart.

Blog posted 3/15/2009 11:03pm by TabbyFan

Round 2—March 19th

I hate to tell America I told you so, but I was right. Tabitha Nash is best contestant on American Idol. I couldn't agree more with Randy and Paula's assessment of her singing. Simon could have been a little more enthusiastic, but he can't show favoritism this early in the game. I do agree, however, with his judgment to get rid of Amanda. She was TERRIBLE. I don't know how she even made it past the audition. It must have been Paula, she's way too nice. Seriously, the lack of talent that makes it to this stage is appalling.

Blog posted 3/19/2009 11:48pm by TabbyFan

Round 3—March 26th

It's hard to say who Tabitha's biggest competition is going to be this early in the game, but if I had to guess I would say Zach and Sarah. Neither of them is as talented as Tabitha, but the judges and most of America don't seem to have as good as taste in music as I do. I will admit they don't suck, but overall they just don't compare to the beautiful Miss Nash. I strongly disagree with Randy Jackson's comment that Tabitha wasn't on top of her game. She was superb, as

always. Randy must have been smoking something before he went on the show to make that kind of comment.

Tabitha,

Don't listen to those imbeciles! You were great!

Blog posted 3/26/2009 10:49pm by TabbyFan

Round 4—April 2nd

I can't believe it. America, you are a bunch of idiots!!! How could you vote Tabitha in the bottom three? She was way better than any of the other losers that pranced around on that stage. Zach's performance reminded me of that kid who got kicked off with his Ricky Martin song. It was like listening to seals being clubbed to death. He should have been the one in the bottom three!

Blog posted 4/2/2009 11:00pm by TabbyFan

Tabitha,

Don't worry about it. Almost everyone gets voted into the bottom three. Even the past Idol winners have and still made it back to win. Don't listen to the critiques, listen to your fans. You are the next American Idol.

Blog posted 4/3/2009 7:36am by TabbyFan

Round 5—April 10th

Glad to see you have come to your senses America. My prediction proves true once again. Tabitha Nash is the best singer on this show. She completely outperformed all the other competitors. What sets Tabitha apart from all the other contestants is her soul. You can see it when she's performing. She puts everything into her performance and leaves nothing back. She truly puts her heart into it.

Blog posted 4/10/2009 11:11pm by TabbyFan

Tabitha,

Aren't you glad you listened to me and all the rest of your fans? You came back in the top three. I even got some people from work to vote. They

don't watch the show but I kept telling them over and over how important it was until they finally voted. It's hard work sometimes to convince the non-believers, but eventually they come to see things my way.

Blog posted 4/10/2009 11:57pm by TabbyFan

Round 6—April 16th

I haven't been able to get out much because of my ankle, but it has given me more time to strategize. I've reviewed past seasons of American Idol on the internet and I've discovered that the judges favor guys, but girls who come from a disadvantaged background or seem really wholesome can win. This is where Tabitha can beat out the other contestants. She is the quintessential girl next door. You never see her talking bad about the other contestants. The only thing that could hurt her is if she succumbs to the "makeover" pressure that happens as the competition gets closer. They always makeover the contestants with new hairstyles and clothing, trying to make them look like the type of market they are trying to reach. In season two they tried to jazz up Rueben Studdard's sports jerseys in order to make him acceptable to the mother's of 13-year-old white

girls. He ended up looking like a teddy bear in gangster sweats and nobody was fooled. His record sales were abysmal.

Blog posted 4/16/2009 11:05am by TabbyFan

Tabitha,

I hope you remember that you're a good girl. Don't let them put you in too short a skirt or put tons of makeup on you. Don't let them cut your hair either. It's so long and it looks so soft. Remember, you're the next American Idol and you have to set the right standard!

Blog posted 4/16/2009 11:13am by TabbyFan

Round 7—April 23rd

Once again Tabitha proves she should be the winner. She listened to her fans, which is what all stars should do. She took my advice and didn't let them make her over too much. This helped keep her in the top three.

Blog posted 4/23/2009 10:02pm by TabbyFan

Final 5—April 30th

I'm sure you'll all be glad to know that I finally got my cast off. My ankle is a little stiff from being immobilized the last six weeks but I've been going to the gym the last couple of days. I've put on a little bit of weight in my stomach from sitting around so much but I'll get back into shape soon. My wife tried to get me to throw away the cast but I couldn't. You're probably surprised at how sentimental I am, but if it hadn't been for that cast I never would have watched American Idol and realized who my true love is.

P.S. I'm sorry I didn't tell you about my wife earlier, but I didn't think it mattered. I'm not in love with her anymore. I haven't been for a long time.

Blog posted 4/31/2009 9:59pm by TabbyFan

Final 4—May 7th

I did it. I confessed to my wife about us. I told her I was in love with you and she laughed and said I was crazy. She said I was living in a fantasy world and that you didn't even know who I was. I showed her the signed photograph

and the letter you sent me. She said that was the same letter you sent every fan. I knew she would say that. She just doesn't want us to be happy.

When I told my wife I was leaving she went berserk. She started threatening me and saying she was going to send me to the loony bin. She said they would lock me up and I would never be able to see you. She said you would never know where to find me. She kept taunting me, pushing me. She said she was going to the kitchen to call 911. I don't know what happened after that. I just remember that as I left with my suitcase I saw her on the kitchen floor. She had a strange mark around her neck.

Never before have I met someone as beautiful and innocent as you. Oh Tabitha, you generate real warmth, something I can feel across the TV. I feel as though you are singing directly to me, as if you are trying to send me a message across the air waves.

Blog posted 5/9/2009 8:00pm by TabbyFan

Final 3—May 14th

I had to spend last night watching American Idol in some shabby motel room, but it's okay because I was able to watch Tabitha advance another round. After the show I was excited so I went to the coffee shop attached to the motel. Most of the people sitting next to me weren't interested, but I did find one woman who was a fan of the show. She was an idiot however. She was convinced that Zach was going to win.

I asked her if she knew anything about Zach, about his history, if he was an honorable person, if he was as pure as Tabitha. She said she didn't know anything like that about him. She said she just watched him on the show and thought he was good. I couldn't believe it.

People just don't understand the importance of American Idol. American Idol searches the country for the most talented individuals, people who are the epitome of class. The winners of American Idol are supposed to be role models our children look up to. Who we vote for says what kind of country we are, what our values are. If we pick the wrong person we are sending a devastating message to the world.

I told her about the research I did on Tabitha, how I went to the school and talked to her friends. The woman asked me if I thought it was strange to go to Tabitha's high school. I told her it wasn't out of my way since I was already driving 600 miles to see her in Hollywood.

Blog posted 5/15/2009 1:43am by TabbyFan

Season Finale—May 21st

America, I hope you're ready. Tonight is the night. I am sitting in hotel lobby across from the American Idol studio. I have my front row ticket and I am writing my final blog entry in the hotel's business center.

Tabitha,

I hope you realize how much I have supported and loved you throughout this experience. Every Wednesday night I have faithfully turned on my television and spent an agonizing hour listening to those no-talent wannabes. I have been with you every time you went on stage, held my breath with you as you awaited the judges' decision, and felt the righteous indignation when you were wrongfully criticized.

I finally know what you've been trying to tell me through your songs. It came to me last night in a dream. You need me, Tabitha. You need me to protect you. I know I am not talented like you, and I don't have anything to offer in the way of money, but I'll give you something worth more than that. I'll give you my

hands. My two strong, devoted hands that won't let anything get in the way of our love.

I'll be sitting in the front row. I'm sure you'll recognize me from the picture I sent in my last letter. It cost me a lot of money to get the ticket, but you are worth it. I have waited a long time to for us to be together.

Love,

Your #1 Fan

Blog posted 5/14/2009 7:38pm by TabbyFan