

Like Shards of Rainbow  
Frolicking in the Air



# Conversation Pieces



A Small Paperback Series from Aqueduct Press  
Subscriptions available: [www.aqueductpress.com](http://www.aqueductpress.com)

1. The Grand Conversation  
Essays by L. Timmel Duchamp
2. With Her Body  
Short Fiction by Nicola Griffith
3. Changeling  
A Novella by Nancy Jane Moore
4. Counting on Wildflowers  
An Entanglement by Kim Antieau
5. The Traveling Tide  
Short Fiction by Rosaleen Love
6. The Adventures of the Faithful Counselor  
A Narrative Poem by Anne Sheldon
7. Ordinary People  
A Collection by Eleanor Arnason
8. Writing the Other  
A Practical Approach  
by Nisi Shawl & Cynthia Ward
9. Alien Bootlegger  
A Novella by Rebecca Ore
10. The Red Rose Rages (Bleeding)  
A Short Novel by L. Timmel Duchamp
11. Talking Back: Epistolary Fantasies  
edited by L. Timmel Duchamp
12. Absolute Uncertainty  
Short Fiction by Lucy Sussex
13. Candle in a Bottle  
A Novella by Carolyn Ives Gilman

14. Knots  
Short Fiction by Wendy Walker
15. Naomi Mitchison: A Profile of Her Life and Work  
A Monograph by Lesley A. Hall
16. We, Robots  
A Novella by Sue Lange
17. Making Love in Madrid  
A Novella by Kimberly Todd Wade
18. Of Love and Other Monsters  
A Novella by Vandana Singh
19. Aliens of the Heart  
Short Fiction by Carolyn Ives Gilman
20. Voices From Fairyland:  
The Fantastical Poems of Mary Coleridge, Charlotte Mew, and  
Sylvia Townsend Warner  
Edited and With Poems by Theodora Goss
21. My Death  
A Novella by Lisa Tuttle
22. De Secretis Mulierum  
A Novella by L. Timmel Duchamp
23. Distances  
A Novella by Vandana Singh
24. Three Observations and a Dialogue:  
Round and About SF  
Essays by Sylvia Kelso and a correspondence  
with Lois McMaster Bujold
25. The Buonarotti Quartet  
Short Fiction by Gwyneth Jones
26. Slightly Behind and to the Left  
Four Stories & Three Drabbles by Claire Light
27. Through the Drowsy Dark  
Short Fiction and Poetry by Rachel Swirsky
28. Shotgun Lullabies  
Stories and Poems by Sheree Renée Thomas

29. A Brood of Foxes  
A Novella by Kristin Livdahl
30. The Bone Spindle  
Poems and Short Fiction by Anne Sheldon
31. The Last Letter  
A Novella by Fiona Lehn
32. We Wuz Pushed  
On Joanna Russ and Radical Truth-Telling  
by Lee Mandelo
33. The Receptionist and Other Tales  
Poems by Lesley Wheeler
34. Birds and Birthdays  
Stories by Christopher Barzak
35. The Queen, the Cambion, and Seven Others  
Stories by Richard Bowes
36. Spring in Geneva  
A Novella by Sylvia Kelso
37. The XY Conspiracy  
A Novella by Lori Selke
38. Numa  
An Epic Poem by Katrinka Moore
39. Myths, Metaphors, and Science Fiction:  
Ancient Roots of the Literature of the Future  
Essays by Sheila Finch
40. NoFood  
Short Fiction by Sarah Tolmie
41. The Haunted Girl  
Poems and Short Stories by Lisa M. Bradley
42. Three Songs for Roxy  
A Novella by Caren Gussoff
43. Ghost Signs  
Poems and a Short Story by Sonya Taaffe
44. The Prince of the Aquamarines & The Invisible Prince: Two  
Fairy Tales  
by Louise Cavalier Levesque

45. Back, Belly, and Side: True Lies and False Tales  
Short Fiction by Celeste Rita Baker
46. A Day in Deep Freeze  
A Novella by Lisa Shapter
47. A Field Guide to the Spirits  
Poems by Jean LeBlanc
48. Marginalia to Stone Bird  
Poems by R.B. Lemberg
49. Unpronounceable  
A Novella by Susan diRende
50. Sleeping Under the Tree of Life  
Poetry and Short Fiction by Sheree Renée Thomas
51. Other Places  
Short Fiction by Karen Heuler
52. Monteverde: Memoirs of an Interstellar Linguist  
A Novella by Lola Robles,  
translated by Lawrence Schimel
53. The Adventure of the Incognita Countess  
A Novella by Cynthia Ward
54. Boundaries, Border Crossings,  
and Reinventing the Future  
Essays and Short Fiction by Beth Plutchak
55. Liberating the Astronauts  
Poems by Christina Rau
56. In Search of Lost Time  
A Novella by Karen Heuler
57. Cosmovore  
Poems by Kristi Carter
58. Helen's Story  
A Novella by Rosanne Rabinowitz
59. Liminal Spaces  
Short Fiction by Beth Plutchak
60. Feed Me the Bones of Our Saints  
Short Fiction by Alex Dally MacFarlane

61. If Not Skin: Collected Transformations  
Poems and Short Fiction by Toby MacNutt
62. The Adventure of the Dux Bellorum  
A Novella by Cynthia Ward
63. People Change  
Short Fiction and Poems by Gwynne Garfinkle
64. Invocabulary  
Poems by Gemma Files
65. The Green and Growing  
A Novella by Erin K. Wagner
66. Everything is Made of Letters  
Short Fiction by Sofía Rhei
67. Midnight at the Organporium  
Short Fiction by Tara Campbell
68. Algorithmic Shapeshifting  
Poems by Bogi Takács
69. The Rampant  
A Novella by Julie C. Day
70. Mary Shelley Makes a Monster  
Poems by Octavia Cade
71. Articulation  
Short Plays to Nourish the Mind & Soul  
by Cesi Davidson
72. City of a Thousand Feelings  
A Novella by Anya Johanna DeNiro
73. Ancient Songs of Us  
Poems by Jean LeBlanc
74. The Adventure of the Naked Guide  
A Novella by Cynthia Ward
75. Sacred Summer  
Poems by Cassandra Clarke
76. Disease  
Short Fiction by Sarah Tolmie
77. Goddess Bandit of the Thousand Arms  
Poems by Hal Y. Zhang

78. Resistance and Transformation: On Fairy Tales  
Essays by Mari Ness
79. The Silences of Ararat  
A Novella by L. Timmel Duchamp
80. Cabinet of Wrath: A Doll Collection  
Short Fiction by Tara Campbell
81. The Adventure of the Golden Woman  
A Novella by Cynthia Ward
82. Fricatives  
Short Plays to Nourish the Mind & Soul  
by Cesi Davidson
83. We've Been Here Before  
Poems by Anne Carly Abad
84. Bilabials  
Short Plays to Nourish the Mind & Soul  
by Cesi Davidson
85. When Home, No Need to Cry  
Short Fiction by Erin K. Wagner
86. Apollo Weeps  
A Novella by Xian Mao
87. To the Woman in the Pink Hat  
A Novella by LaToya Jordan
88. From Voyages Unreturning  
Poems by Deborah L. Davitt
89. Numinous Stones  
Poems by Holly Lyn Walrath
90. Tales from Mnemosyne  
A Novella by Dennis Danvers
91. Feraltales  
Short Fiction by Couri Johnson
92. Cul de Sac Stories  
Short Fiction by Tamara Kaye Sellman
93. Sinking, Singing  
Short Fiction by Gwynne Garfinkle



94. Stop Plosive  
Short Plays to Nourish the Mind & Soul  
by Cesi Davidson
95. Stone Martyrs  
Poems by Erik Hofstatter
96. Like Shards of Rainbow Frolicking in the Air  
Short Fiction by L. Timmel Duchamp

## About the Aqueduct Press Conversation Pieces Series

The feminist engaged with sf is passionately interested in challenging the way things are, passionately determined to understand how everything works. It is my constant sense of our feminist-sf present as a grand conversation that enables me to trace its existence into the past and from there see its trajectory extending into our future. A genealogy for feminist sf would not constitute a chart depicting direct lineages but would offer us an ever-shifting, fluid mosaic, the individual tiles of which we will probably only ever partially access. What could be more in the spirit of feminist sf than to conceptualize a genealogy that explicitly manifests our own communities across not only space but also time?

Aqueduct's small paperback series, *Conversation Pieces*, aims to both document and facilitate the "grand conversation." The *Conversation Pieces* series presents a wide variety of texts, including short fiction (which may not always be sf and may not necessarily even be feminist), essays, speeches, manifestoes, poetry, interviews, correspondence, and group discussions. Many of the texts are reprinted material, but some are new. The grand conversation reaches at least as far back as Mary Shelley and extends, in our speculations and visions, into the continually created future. In Jonathan Goldberg's words, "To look forward to the history that will be, one must look at and retell the history that has been told." And that is what *Conversation Pieces* is all about.

L. Timmel Duchamp

Jonathan Goldberg, "The History That Will Be" in Louise Fradenburg and Carla Freccero, eds., *Premodern Sexualities* (New York and London: Routledge, 1996)

Conversation Pieces

Volume 96

Like Shards of Rainbow  
Frolicking in the Air

by

L. Timmel Duchamp





Published by Aqueduct Press  
PO Box 95787  
Seattle, WA 98145-2787  
[www.aqueductpress.com](http://www.aqueductpress.com)

Copyright © 2025 by L. Timmel Duchamp  
All rights reserved. First Edition, June 2025

No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without prior permission in writing from the author.

ISBN: 978-1-61976-276-3

“Motherhood, Etc.” first appeared in *Full Spectrum* 4, ed. Lou Aronov, Amy Stout, and Betsy Mitchell (Bantam 1993)

“Welcome, Kid, to the Real World” first appeared in *Tales of the Unanticipated* 16, 1996

“When Joy Came to the World” first appeared in *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*, January 1994

Cover illustration copyright © iStock.com/golubovy

Original Block Print of Mary Shelley by Justin Kempton:  
[www.writersmugs.com](http://www.writersmugs.com)

Printed in the USA by Applied Digital Imaging

*To the magnificence and persistence  
of queer culture past, present, and future.*



## Contents

Motherhood, Etc.....	1
The Last Nostalgia.....	48
Welcome, Kid, to the Real World.....	88
When Joy Came to the World .....	112





## Motherhood, Etc.

The room has a long, glass-topped conference table. The room's windows look out on the ocean, but the chair to which they direct her puts her back to the view. The man wearing a black and white polka-dotted tie identifies himself as "Wagner." He introduces the bald man facing her across the table as "Dr. Johns." Wagner asks most of the questions. The other man stares moodily over her shoulder, at the ocean.

"He called himself Joshua," she answers the first question. And: "I liked him because he was different," she answers the second.

The man across from her jerks his gaze off the ocean to stare at her.

She blushes. "Different, I mean, from all the other guys I've ever gone out with," she amends. "He liked to talk about real things. And he listened, too. A lot. He had a cute laugh." She looks down at her hands, folded tightly and whitely together. "And the most wonderful brown eyes."

She gets stuck there, does not want to go on. Her eyes skim the walls, looking for the video camera. They are clever about these things, but she thinks she has found it, embedded in a metal sculpture. The bead of red light gives it away.

An “interview,” is how they’d billed this ordeal. No one used the word *interrogation*. And no, they said, she was not under arrest. Though she cannot of course go home. If she were reasonable, she would understand why.

They keep telling her to be reasonable. To consider “the implications.” They say that the interview...would help. Would help them, the “authorities.” Who would know best what to do, much better than she. Who is only an inexperienced, nineteen-year-old...female. Who is in no position to judge the danger, to understand the stakes. She must trust them.

Right.

Wagner prompts her. He has moved to her side of the table. He perches on it uncomfortably close to her. One of his feet rests on the chair to her right. The cuff of his somber black pant-leg is rucked up. The black sock underneath looks as though it could be silk. Probably, she guesses, it goes all the way up to his knee. Certainly it covers his calf. She’s sure that the skin of his leg is dead white and crawling with coarse red hair. The hair on the backs of his hands and knuckles is coarse red. And plentiful. Probably it covers his body.

“We saw one another just about every other night for a month before I first stayed over with him,” she replies to the next question. She looks away from Wagner’s looming bulk; she wishes to god she could get away from him. He wants all the details. “Everything,” he says. Like the prurient evangelist con-artist who corners the timid into “confess[ing] all sin, all filth, all wickedness in your heart.” So, she elaborates, “Yes, we slept together when I stayed over. In pajamas. Both of us. And wearing underpants.”

*God, Ulrike, he's so weird. I mean, he said I couldn't sleep with him unless I'd keep my underpants on and wear at least the bottoms of the pajamas. He says he doesn't want to spoil our emotional relationship, which is what he says will happen if we rush ahead with the sexual side of things. He says he knows from past experience. And that I have to trust him.*

Telling it to Ulrike had (at the beginning, at least) made it seem all quite wonderful, an exemplar for what “normal” *should* be. But it hadn't *felt* “normal.” It would be middle-of-the-night dark when Joshua's lips and fingers woke her. She'd hear his breathing, and her own, and other noises she knew involved her (or his?) genitals—*sexual* noises she couldn't identify. And little sounds coming from her own throat that she couldn't mute because of the explosive sensations rippling in wild, lingering streams of movement through her body. All the while a small observing part of her would try to visualize—as though to watch—what was happening, trying to fit it all into the fictional and theoretical ragbag that constituted her “knowledge” of Sex. His hands are now *there*, doing *this*, the detached observer would note. His right thigh is *there*. And his genitals are... But little of it fit. And his genitals... “Are you saying,” the bald man grates, tapping the closed manila folder on the table before him, “that you never saw his genitals? Even once? That you never felt them with your hands? And that you didn't think it abnormal that after five months' sleeping together you still had not had intercourse with him?”

He sounds incredulous.

There is no way she's going to tell these men that only now and then had she managed to cop a feel, a

vague fleeting touch to his genitals before Joshua had maneuvered them out of her reach. Joshua claimed that her touching him there would turn him on too much. Timidly, she suggested that since he used his fingers (etc.) to bring her to orgasm, that she should do the same for him. How can she explain? In the night, she did think it weird. But she couldn't know for sure, because she'd never slept with a man before. And Joshua always made her feel, well, *weird* for wanting more. Isn't it enough? he'd ask her. How can you miss what you've never known? Don't you enjoy what we do?

Sometimes they spent half the night coming. She recalls that one night he got up three times to change his underpants. It is unreal remembering, with Wagner looming over her and Dr. Johns looking cold and dissatisfied and writing in a small thin script on the yellow pad to one side of the manila folder. They keep saying they want her to tell them everything. Imagine having them write *that* down. *Three pairs of underpants*. They'd probably ask her what his come smells like. And whether it leaves stains.

He made her feel that wanting to touch his genitals was...immodest. Or at the least premature. Which was totally weird, considering all their discussions about freedom and Being and the need to find Meaning in the face of an utterly random Universe... These men, she thinks, would feel comfortable with the archaic terminology she and Ulrike had used to discuss it. "Virginity," "hymen," and an "unnaturally prolonged state of innocence." And "clitoral versus vaginal orgasm..." They giggled when they used such language. But it was the only way she knew how to talk about it with Ulrike.

Now Wagner presses Dr. Johns' incredulity. She knows he must have figured out he's found one of her most vulnerable spots.

"Look," she says. "I'm nineteen. I'd never been with a man before. Sure, maybe I thought something might be a little strange. But hey, when you're new at it, *all* sex is weird."

Wagner lays his freckled hairy paw on her neatly (but tensely) folded hands. The touch of it, even the *sight* of it, makes her want to throw up. Talking with these creeps about sex in general and about her and Joshua in particular is obscene. "You're making me feel like an old goat, young lady," he says with one of those man-style chuckles utterly unlike Joshua's frank crackups.

"But intercourse, you must have known that vaginal intercourse is the normal point of sexual relations," Dr. Johns lectures her. He raps his knuckles on the manila folder. "It says on your transcript that you've had three psychology courses. You can't expect us to believe you didn't know something was wrong!"

She is blushing again. And not only can she not stand a second longer of Wagner's touch, but her hands have started trembling. Chagrined, she snatches them away and buries them in her lap. Then she scoots her chair back from the table and glares up at him, though he's definitely too close for comfortable eye contact.

But what distance would be comfortable? A thousand yards?

"What are you accusing me of?" she demands. "I've never heard that people have a legal obligation to report men who don't take every available opportunity to fuck a willing woman! I have a right to know what you think

I've done wrong," she adds, though without faith that they're going to be willing to grant her any "rights" whatsoever, however de rigueur they were supposed to be.

"Now, Patty," Wagner says. "You know we're not accusing you of anything. We're talking public health, public safety here. We're talking *viruses*, Patty, *communicable* viruses. We're talking a virus that this guy whose name you won't tell us passed to you." He leans forward so that his thickly freckled face is right up in hers. "Now I thought your doctor explained all that to you. Am I right?"

*Patty.* On top of everything else, their calling her that just about made her want to scream. But no way was she going to tell *them*. They'd probably just go on calling her that to bug her. And besides, as she'd long ago figured out, if adults you didn't know called you something you didn't ordinarily answer to, a name that was basically alien to you, it meant you were just that much more private from them and that every time they used the hated name it reminded you of what jerks they were to call you something without first finding out what it is you wanted to be called.

Now the bald man in the navy silk suit opens the manila folder he's been persistently fingering. *Dr. Johns*, she sneers to herself. *Wagner*. Prurient jerks extraordinaire. Much, much worse than the doctor at the hospital. Whether they are as bad as the federal official who'd coerced her into submitting to the exam and photography remains to be seen. The vibes she is getting off *Wagner*, though, make her feel, in her gut, that they might be worse.

"I told you," she says. "If he mentioned his last name to me, I don't remember."

Wagner shakes his head and sighs. “I can’t believe a bright young lady like you could be so careless. You know you can’t tell these days what you might be getting into, don’t you? There’s some pretty nasty STDs out there, raging out of control. Besides AIDS. You do know that, Patty, don’t you?”

The doctor, now standing, leans over the table and arranges half-a-dozen or so photos— all 8” x 11”—down the center of the table. Pat stares at the little tuft of gray, like feathers, gracing the top of his shiny pink dome. He sits down and glares at her. “You’ve got a problem with denial,” he announces. “But you can’t deny *these*.” He takes a stapled sheaf of pages from the folder and waves them at her. “Your DNA has mutated. Your blood doesn’t match any known type, even though your medical records say you are type O. And your sex chromosomes now have three Xs and one Y. Which is to say, strictly speaking you’re not a woman.” He points at the photo nearest her. “And take a look at the eruptions of tissue, there.” He forces his words through his teeth, as though he’s almost too furious to unclench his jaw enough to talk.

She stares at the image of her pubic hair in larger-than-lifesize glossy black and white. Face aflame, she jumps out of her chair and grabs wildly at the photos. “How *dare* you! How dare you slimeballs turn my body into sleaze!” She wants to rip the photos to shreds and burn them. *Her* genitals, on public display. For creeps like these!

The doctor goes for the photos to protect them, and Wagner for her—to slam her back into her chair and

keep her pinned there by the shoulders. “Now Patty, I want you to calm yourself,” he says.

“Take your filthy hands off me!” Fueled by the urge to spit into his face, she struggles to twist out of his hold. He has gravity on his side, though, and though his breath comes fast, his weight on her shoulders bears down with bruising strength.

“You’re not going to get hysterical on us, are you?” he says.

The cold spot of fear inside her—that first appeared yesterday—spreads. When she refused to let them examine her, the federal guy also warned her against “getting hysterical,” saying that if she did they’d have to give her something to calm her down. Totally cowed, she went along with everything, the crowd of masked witnesses, the cameras, *everything*.

“These photographs are the property of the federal government, young lady,” the doctor scolds. “Perhaps you weren’t aware of it, but intentional destruction of government property is a very serious offense. One you could go to prison for.”

Wagner’s grip on her shoulders lightens enough that she’s able to fold her arms across her chest. “Government property,” she sneers. “Of sleaze. I can just imagine.”

“Important scientific evidence.” The doctor is losing his cool: he snaps the words at her as if he’d like to leap over the table between them and slap her face.

“Sleaze,” she repeats, feeling superior for not flinging the characterization back at him like the taunt it could be. “Made and distributed without my permission—and definitely against my will.”



The doctor looks over her head at Wagner. “People used to say that about Sigmund Freud, you know. But then there have always been people with minds too small and narrow to accept Science.”

“And maybe Freud really was just a dirty old man,” Pat mutters. She glares at the doctor and ignores as best she can the again increasing pressure on her shoulders. “Consider, after all, whose side he took in rape and incest cases.”

The doctor’s eyes lift, presumably to exchange knowing looks with Wagner. “This is intolerable,” he says through his teeth. “We have about two dozen important questions it is essential she answer. And she hasn’t answered even one of them yet.”

The room is suddenly so quiet that Pat thinks she hears the surf of the ocean through the double panes of glass behind her. The doctor’s eyes are still focused over her head, so she guesses the men are involved in some sort of silent communication.

“It’s really, you know, that Patty here doesn’t yet understand just how serious this situation is,” Wagner finally says. His hands lift from her shoulders. For a few seconds she hears him moving around behind her. “And, you know, girls her age are sometimes painfully embarrassed about anything to do with sex.” His manly chuckle rumbles briefly. His face is suddenly right next to Pat’s. “Am I right, Patty?”

*Embarrassed, right. You stupid boob.*

But fear is gaining on anger. She’s too exhausted to shove his face away, or scratch it, or do any of the other things popping into her head every second he’s bent over her. “Yeah,” she says, “that must be it.” She coughs delicately and scoots her chair to the right. “No offense, but I think I must be allergic to your cologne.” And she puts her

hand to her mouth and hacks loudly, to disguise the giggles suddenly shaking her.

Wagner's breathing gets considerably heavier, but he moves out of her face. She wonders how he's going to get back at her. There's no doubt in her mind that he will: he's just that kind of guy. A scenario involving drugs starts playing through her mind. Is there, she wonders, really something called *truth serum*? Can they shoot her up with a drug that will make her babble indiscriminately?

She just can't stand the idea of reviewing her sexual relations with Joshua for creeps like these. And she doesn't believe they have valid reasons for prying inside her head. What she does with another person is none of their business. It's her body. Which is sacred ground. Off-limits. And no one's concern but her own.

The walls and window resonate with a fast rapping on the door.

"The CDC has arrived," Wagner mutters (presumably to Dr. Johns).

The door swings open and a blond giant fills the threshold. The thought flicks through Pat's head that the blond has been imbibing a Wonderland cocktail labeled **DRINK ME**. "Elliott Hardwick, CDC," he booms. "Apologies. My plane was late."

Though blonds are not Pat's type, she has to admit the man is a knockout. ("A pretty boy," Ulrike would call him.) He exudes energy and good health. You can see it rippling beneath his soft loose Pima cotton shirt, shining out of his purest of thick-lashed blue eyes, bursting out from his smile. She watches him shake hands, first with Baldie, then—leaning across the table—Wagner. She loves his salmon pink suspenders; she thinks they're perfect for

the black jeans and pearl gray shirt. She only wishes he wore at least one gold ring in his ears.

“And this,” the knockout says, crinkling his eyes in a major heat-storm of a smile, “must be Patricia Morrow.” He thrusts his hand at her. “How do you do. I’m Elliott Hardwick. Everyone calls me Sam, I hope you will, too.”

He’s overwhelming her. On purpose, she thinks. But she gives him her hand to shake.

“And what do you go by?” he wonders. “Patricia, Pat, Patty, or something entirely different?”

The blue eyes are like something out of a book, of the trashy romance sort. Amused, knowing, powerful... Also, he’s still holding her hand after shaking it. She blushes and clears her throat. “Pat,” she says. “I go by the name Pat.”

He nods, squeezes her hand and lets it go. It’s almost a relief when he takes his eyes off her to swing his attaché case onto the table and open it.

Wagner walks to the end of the table, rounds it, and walks back up the other side to the center. “If I could have a word outside, Sam,” he says, jerking his head at the door.

Elliott “Sam” Hardwick flashes his smile all around. “Sure, Bill,” he says in such an easy way that Pat wonders if he has a West Coast background. “But you know, before we settle down to the hard work of eking out the story, what say we take a little break. My working style is just a little bit different.” He winks at Pat. “I’d like, for one thing, if it’s okay by her, to stretch my legs for a bit on the beach.” He beams at Pat. “I bet you’re up for a walk, Pat, am I right?”

Baldie makes a nasty sound in his throat. Pat shoots a quick glance at him. He looks as though he’s swallowed something disagreeable, but though he tamps together the sheaf of photos with undue violence, he says nothing.

Pat shoves back her chair, grabs her bag, and stands up. “Damned straight I’m up for it,” she tells Sam.

He nods at her bag. “You don’t need that.”

Pat looks at Wagner, then back at Sam. She slings the strap of the bag over her shoulder in open defiance. Somebody ransacked her house last week. Her doctor was indignant when she suggested he might know who had done it. They’re all sleaze, even Gorgeous Sam. And she knows she’d be a fool to forget it.



While Sam “snatches a quick briefing” from the Dynamic Duo, Pat waits outside. Scanning the beach, she wonders if there’s any point in trying to run. Her guess is that most of the homes (if that’s what they are) overlooking this beach are encased in heavy-duty security fences. But supposing she did get up to the street. She doesn’t know the terrain in this La Jolla neighborhood. Buses aren’t frequent. And taxis simply don’t cruise residential areas looking for fares at 10 a.m.

A sudden gust of wind makes her full skirt balloon up. *Surely you must have noticed*, her doctor had chided her for not having come in “at once.” And now she’s afraid to wear pants or any close-fitting skirts except with a long, loose shirt or sweater that could be counted on to keep the line of her crotch well-disguised. As for what is *there*...it makes her queasy every morning when she wakes and finds all of it there, between her legs, crowding and sweat-making, scary because if you move or touch yourself the wrong way it can hurt, and making it so damned involved to pee, every morning its presence inexorable, something to be gotten used to all over again, like a bad dream about losing a body

part that on waking turns out to be true... It can all be removed, quite easily, they say. Only they want to wait, to see just how far "it" develops... Every morning she's nauseated with revulsion, yes... But sometimes, especially in the evening, after a day of having accepted it, a perverse excitement breaks out of her, and she knows that though she wants it removed so that she can at least *look* normal (even if her blood and DNA will never again be), there's something powerful about the experience, too. And sometimes a secret voice in her head says there's something neat about being a freak. (If only she hadn't gone to the doctor in the first place.) And sometimes that voice whispers to her that there's a reason, there's a *meaning* in it all, that it's not just an accident of nature but a special event, fated to her in particular... And of course Joshua hadn't thought the changes in her genitals in the least bit odd. (Though of course he'd only seen the early stages.) And so she had in turn thought that maybe so much stimulation and excitement just naturally caused certain (small) changes, which she thought of as swellings. (But that was before everything had gotten out of hand.) It had made a weird kind of sense to her when she thought of all that blood suffusing those tissues for hours and hours and hours.

Such matters had always been mysterious to her. And so she told herself that just because people didn't talk about the enlargement of the urethra and swelling just below it didn't mean such things weren't commonplace. It's not as though she ever read any sex manuals or descriptive pornography that could be counted on to reveal such mature-audience side-effects. And ever since she had been a little girl, she's been discovering that where sex and reproduction

are concerned, the weirdest, most unthinkable things often turn out to be true.

There still lurks in the back of Pat's mind the weird superstitious thought that the cause of the virus is to be found in the hours and hours of "messing around." A book that Ulrike showed her, warning about such perversity, claimed that sexually stimulated women suffer "congestion" when they fail to achieve "deep vaginal orgasm," which (it claimed) can come only from "proper heterosexual intercourse." Ulrike's concern was so embarrassing. It had gotten so that Pat hated to come home mornings and face the question *Well, did you finally do it? Have you lost the Big Vee?* And so she had mostly let Ulrike think they didn't do much besides, well, cuddle and *sleep*.

After about fifteen minutes Sam opens the door above and comes out onto the top deck. He waves at her, then starts down the stairs, past the middle deck and the hot-tub to the deck set on stilts in the sand. There he stops to remove his Birkenstocks and the beautiful salmon socks that match his suspenders. When he straightens up he gestures her to join him. Pat sighs, but heaves the bag back onto her shoulder and trudges over the bit of beach between them and up the bottom flight of stairs to the deck.

"Gotta say that after twenty days of Atlanta's temperature inversion, this is purely fantastic," he says, tossing a tube of sun-block at her.

She catches it, looks at the label, then up at the sky. "The sun isn't hitting the water yet," she says. "I really think this is overkill."

"If you knew the stats that I know," he remarks, "you'd never be caught out in UV rays without it."

She nods at his golden-tanned face. “But you go in for *tanning salons*?”

His eyebrows shoot up, and then he laughs. “Oh, you’re referring to my face. Believe me, it only goes down as far as my neck. From the slopes. Got this great package deal for weekend skiing this winter.”

Pat sighs and rubs some of the #12 cream into her face. She will humor him. But she wishes she weren’t so attracted to him. On top of Joshua, it makes her feel like a nymphomaniac. Sam may be a dish, but pretty boys aren’t ordinarily her type.

They walk for a while along the water line, then pause to look out at the lusciously turquoise water. They may not have as long a stretch to walk as they would at Torrey Pines, but this beach is certainly a lot more private. “I gather,” Sam begins, “you’ve gotten into a pretty adversarial relation, shall we say, with my colleagues.” When Pat snorts, Sam grins at her. “Right. You don’t have to say anything. But what *I* want to say about that is that all that’s just a problem of communication. We’re basically on the same side, Pat. Now I’m not saying it’s *all* their fault, but my guess is that your, well, negative reactions are probably due to their not leveling with you, not explaining what we do and don’t know and what you know and can tell us that we need to know—and, maybe most important, *why* we need to know.”

Pat’s heart starts racing. “Look, I just don’t think any of this is anybody’s business but my own!” she exclaims. “Okay, my body’s fucking up. I understand that. But I’m not a danger to anyone. I haven’t done anything wrong. Whatever my relationship with Joshua is is my own damned business!”

Sam puts his back to the surf. The sun that pours onto his face makes his eyes sparkle the same lush blue of the water. “Pat, can I ask you to do something for me?”

He gazes down into her eyes, and Pat has to swallow several times. Even in the throes of so much magnetism she’s practically squirming at her own reaction. She’s convinced she’s so transparent he’s deliberately manipulating her. She wishes she could say *Fuck you!* and stomp off down the beach. But she can’t. She’s too interested in milking every second out of him she can. Instead, she says, “Will I be allowed to go back to classes when the new quarter starts next week?”

It makes her mad to hear the childish, pleading anxiety in her voice. Sam, damn him, touches her shoulder and says: “I’ve just been brought in on this, so I can’t begin to guess how things are going to go. Certainly we’ll do everything we can to keep from disrupting your life any more than necessary. But I also have to add, Pat, that the answer depends a great deal on you. On how quickly we can get the most important questions answered...”

Blackmail.

Pat drops her bag to and shoves her hands into her skirt pockets. Would all this have been avoided if she’d gone home over break? But she and Joshua had planned to have an entire week together, and she hadn’t been able to bring herself to tell her parents he’d (apparently) canceled... Better yet if she hadn’t gone to the doctor to get an IUD in the first place. Then it would be just her—and Joshua’s—little secret.

“No, Pat, please,” Sam says quickly, seemingly reading her face if not her mind. “It’s not going to help if you get pissed at me for telling you the truth. As I said before, what we have here is a mystery. A serious mystery. And though



some of the answers will be hard to find, others of them, of almost equal consequence, are there, inside your head, if only you would give them to us.”

Pat’s hands, still in her pockets, ball into fists. “You *say* they’re important. But what I *know* is that everybody wants me to surrender my privacy, just like that.” Her face burns as she remembers the photos and Wagner’s questions and sly innuendo. “Because to you people, it’s nothing. Like I have no rights. Like I’m this pornographic *object* you’re all screwing over!”

Her outburst both embarrasses her and further fuels her rage. She can’t remember ever talking to an adult this way before, except of course her parents and their co-members in the collective. Close to tears, she picks up her bag, flings herself down the stairs, and taking big rapid strides resumes her progress up the beach. If the water weren’t so cold she’d walk straight out into the surf, to hide.

“Pat, wait, please!” The wind whips Sam’s words at her. “Please, if you would just stop for a minute and let me tell you what we need to know and why.” He’s caught up with her and has her by the arm. “I know it would put a whole different spin on what you’ve been perceiving as a reckless invasion of your privacy.”

Pat stops. Her breath is coming fast. She stares down at the sand. The man talks like the baby-boomer he is. “Right,” she gasps. “I’ve heard it all already from those goons up there.” She jerks her head back up the beach. “They’re grossed out. And they *think* I might be contagious!”

“Listen, I’ve seen your transcript. There’s not a doubt in my mind that you can understand the specifics.”

She looks at him, then twists her mouth into a derisory smile. *He* probably thinks he’s being flattering. All her A’s,

and Advanced Placement, and a double major in biology and English. Adults are always pretending that sort of thing is “impressive.” Right. But she’s still just a nineteen-year-old *female*. Which is to say, she’s somebody to be browbeaten and manipulated and sidetracked from everything important.

His eyes scan the beach fronts, and he lifts his hand to his brow to shield his eyes from the sun. Pat wonders whether he sacrificed wearing shades on the walk—protection from the wicked UV rays bombarding them—so as to seem more accessible. He points to a concrete bench at the foot of some stairs not far from them. “Shall we sit?” he proposes.

Pat is glad for the chance to get the bag off her shoulder, so she shrugs and follows him into dry, loose sand. When they are settled, well above the high-tide mark (toward which the dirty-foamed water line is inexorably creeping), Sam, staring out at the water, begins: “I’m not sure how much you’ve been told. So what I’m going to do is tell you the story as it unfolded in the file they faxed me last night.”

Pat thinks of the photos, and her throat closes painfully. The very existence of such a file and the fact of its being faxed who knows how many times to who knows how many people...

Sam continues. “That there was a problem first became apparent during your office visit to your gynecologist to be fitted with an IUD.” He looks at her. “It occurs to me from the things you’ve been saying that you might feel more comfortable talking with a woman, Pat. But I have to say that I assumed you wouldn’t mind my being a man for the simple reason that you chose a male gynecologist.”

Pat snorts. “Do you have any idea how hard it is to get a woman? Everybody wants them. And there aren’t that many of them. So if you’re in a hurry, you don’t have much choice. You know?”

Sam nods. “I see. Well, the problem is, we’re in something of a hurry here, too, and all the principal investigators in this case are men. And like women gynecologists, women epidemiologists are hard to come by in a hurry, too.”

Pat crosses her arms over her chest. She has to bite her lip to keep from flinging at him her own intention to become a medical researcher.

“But to continue.” Again Sam gazes out at the water; Pat does the same. “It seems your doctor initially diagnosed you as having a case of what is known as androgen-dihydrotestosterone deficiency. Which, in plain English, is a genetic condition that often does not become apparent until adolescence, in which the male sex organs make a late appearance in an individual that had previously been mistaken for female.”

“That’s interesting,” Pat remarks. Some of the waves are coming in crooked. It amuses her to see them crash into one another from odd angles. “And I have to say it’s the first time I’ve heard it.” She smiles bitterly. “You see, my doctor never bothered to *share* his diagnosis with me.”

“Well there were tests he was having done,” Sam says. “I’m sure he was just waiting for confirmation. But then when both the chromosomal analysis and blood chemistry reports came in, everything got much more complicated. Because, you see, the first startling thing was the discovery that your sex chromosome was polyploid.” Sam looks at her. “To be specific, instead of having an ordinary diploid chromosomal pair, you’ve somehow got a quadriploid, a

double pair. Given all the biology you've had, I assume you understand what I mean by *that*."

Pat frowns. "Except that it sounds like gibberish. I mean, how could I possibly have four sex chromosomes?"

"That's one of our mystery questions," Sam says drily. "Of course polyploidism is not completely unknown—in nonhuman species. Mostly in plants. Often engineered. And in such cases the mechanisms of reproduction are asexual. But that's neither here nor there."

"So I can think of myself as becoming like a plant?" Pat retorts.

Sam clears his throat. "I'm going to assume you mean that as a joke." His folded hands tug isometrically against his right black jean-clad knee, which he's raised a little above his left. "To continue. Your doctor had good reason to doubt his diagnosis, even before seeing the first batch of lab reports. For one thing, he knew from his examination that your female sexual and reproductive organs were all fully developed and morphologically normal. For another, because you were being fitted with an IUD, you were menstruating at the time of the examination. So right from the start there were reasons to doubt the diagnosis." Sam glances at her. "But one can hardly blame him for the mistake. Intersexes are usually discovered at birth and forced into one sex or the other. An ob/gyn would be understandably fuzzy about the possibilities. So. Your test results start trickling in. The tissue sampled is indeed discovered to be male genital cells. Which seems to confirm the diagnosis. But your blood chemistry shows something else. First, that your sex chromosomal pair is not a pair, but one pair of each sex. Second, that your blood is no longer type O, as it had been when you donated blood in a drive at UCSD last

fall. So, given all these mysteries, your doctor takes more blood from you, orders more tests, and seeks consults from colleagues in three different fields of specialization. And the new tests show estrogen in your blood.” Sam grins at her. “And you know what that means, don’t you?”

Pat snatches a quick look at him, then concentrates again on the water. “Sure. It means that my ovaries are working. Because estrogen is produced primarily in the ovaries, just as testosterone is primarily produced in the testes.”

“Right. So your doctor sees there’s a problem, but a rather intriguing one. He—and one of the three specialists he’s consulting—decides that you have two separate problems, unrelated. His idea is that you’re an odd, hitherto unobserved case of intersex, a *true* hermaphrodite, manifesting organs of both sexes that are not only morphologically correct, but—as we now think will be the case—*functionally* correct. Which would be quite an interesting phenomenon, since intersexes on the whole tend to be sterile.”

“But there’s the problem of other cellular changes,” Pat says when he pauses.

“A coincidence, your doctor believes.” Sam chuckles. He has a pleasant, not unduly “manly” chuckle, Pat decides, though it doesn’t compare with any of Joshua’s so-infectious giggles, chortles, and belly-laughes. “But, needless to say, not what the hematologist thinks.”

Pat crosses her legs and catches herself mentally bracing for the squashing of her balls. She has half-a-dozen times in the last two weeks, on moving incautiously, been afflicted with horrible abdominal cramps. This time, though, the shift goes off safely, and the sensation of that extra bit of flesh pressing against sexually sensitive places is strictly pleasurable.

“The endocrinologist is also not so certain. And the oncologist is positive it’s not.”

“Oncologist! Are you saying this growth is cancerous?” The thought has not before occurred to her, for no one has said anything about changes other than in her blood type, her chromosomes, and her genitals. But she sees now that she should have been worried about such a possibility all along.

Sam lays his hand over hers. “The indications are good that this is a controlled, directed growth, Pat. We can’t be sure, of course. But the theory everyone’s going with now is that the new genetic material is directing the growth.” He sighs. “But that leaves open the question as to whether there have been other chromosomal changes. And, most important, what caused the change in your DNA to start with.”

Pat snatches her hand away. “Well it just burns me up that that damned bastard never mentioned any specialists, any doubts, any problems. Until yesterday I thought it was some kind of freak endocrine problem. That’s what he led me to believe! And that once the so-called ‘new tissue’ had ‘fully developed’ it would be removed, and everything would be hunky-dory!” Her hands clench into fists. He’s one of *them*, even if he is finally telling her *some* of the truth. To manipulate her! And it only makes matters worse that she’s feeling *excessively* attracted to him. And so what if he knows how to dress? That proves nothing. Her parents’ generation’s mania about judging people by hair and dress attests to that!

Sam raises his legs; staring at his bare toes, he wriggles them. Even his feet are strong and shapely (though white white). “He’s older, isn’t he,” Sam says. “Well his generation was taught that women want doctors to be God. That you don’t tell patients more than you have to, especially when

you're not 100% certain of what you think you know." He sighs and lowers his legs. "You want to get your blood pressure up sometime, you should read through the ob/gyn journals of the 1950s and '60s." He sweeps the air with his hand. "But to continue. On-going, intensive work is being done on your blood. The leading theory currently is that there's a virus operating." He shrugs. "The big breakthrough, though, came last week when it was confirmed that your blood is infectious." Frowning, he looks her in the eye. "Did they tell you this part? That every blood sample put into contact with yours showed the same signs of alteration? Namely, the blood type altered and an extra chromosomal pair added. An XY pair for female blood, and an XX pair for male blood."

Pat gasps. "That's *incredible!*"

Sam snorts. "You could say that."

Which explains why they hauled her off to the hospital yesterday and wouldn't let her out of their sight.

"But of course the next mystery—beyond etiology and the like," Sam resumes, "is how the thing was transmitted to you. According to your file, when questioned yesterday you swore up and down that the only needles ever stuck into your body were of legitimate medical provenance. And we know from visual examinations that your hymen is still intact, that you have no vaginal or anal tearing..." Sam clears his throat. "Don't you see, Pat. We need to know if this thing was transmitted sexually. Or if not, just how it *was* transmitted." He presses his lips together. "Your roommate's blood test has come up negative, so we know it can't be entirely casual, say through aerobic or dermal contact."

Pat thinks of how he put his hand on hers a few minutes ago. "I don't understand what you're asking me." Her

voice comes out small. And her cheeks, damn them, are burning again.

Sam executes a long elaborate ritual of cracking all the joints on his knuckles one at a time. “You were being fitted for an IUD, presumably because you intended to have sexual intercourse.” He frowns fiercely as he finishes the knuckles on the right hand and starts on the left. “You know, Pat, I feel compelled to interject here that if you’re going to be having sexual intercourse you should be using a condom. Since there’s more than simply contraception at stake.”

“I told them all already,” Pat snaps (wanting to ask him whether *he* uses condoms every time he has sex). “I was only seeing one man, Joshua. And I decided to get fitted just in case we did decide to...have sex. It wasn’t that we were necessarily going to. But that I wanted to be prepared in case we did.”

“Your roommate says you were out most nights over the last five months.”

Pat swallows. It drives her nuts that Ulrike has been dragged in. Testing her. Asking her questions. And telling her what? That she, Pat, is carrying some new plague virus no one has ever seen before? The thought enrages her. “Yes.” Saying the word with a hiss, she begins to absolutely seethe. “Yes, yes, I slept with him. As I already told the others, *with pajama bottoms.*” She glares at him. “Pretty damned funny, isn’t it. That a man and woman who aren’t married would sleep with one another without screwing. A real pair of freaks, right?”

Sam rises and plants his bare foot on the concrete bench, just at the edge of her skirt. “Why do you say that?” he wonders. Pat stares out at the ocean. The waves, it seems



to her, are getting smaller. “What I’m really asking is, was there anything sexual? Did you, for instance, *kiss*?”

Pat’s eyes fill with tears. “Yes,” she answers. “Yes, we kissed.” A *lot*.

“And petted?”

Her throat chokes with emotion. “Yes, if that’s what you want to call it.” Even though she’s so furious she wants to destroy something, tears overflow her eyes.

“Genital petting?”

She stands up and crosses her arms over her chest. “I don’t want to talk about it anymore,” she announces.

“Pat. You know how sexually transmitted diseases are passed. You have to know what I’m asking and why. Don’t you?”

She turns her back on him and the ocean. For a few seconds she listens to the surf beating on the sand and distant rocks. When she closes her eyes she can almost imagine she is on Torrey Pines beach. She can almost imagine Joshua is nearby, his fingers ready to touch hers, his arms ready to enfold her when she presses herself close.

But Joshua is gone. And she is here, on this private beach, with an “investigator” wanting to know the details of her sex life with him. She hates them, all of them, for picking at her, prying into her private self, frightening Joshua away. A month ago everything was beautiful and life was a constant high.

She opens her eyes to the glare and turns and faces him. “His semen never touched my lips,” she spits out. “I never even *saw* his penis. Okay? But he...we had...cunnilingus.” Her tongue trips over the word, so technical, so nothing to do with the real thing. She stares out at the water. “And I

had no cuts or sores in the pubic area at any time. Is that what you wanted to know?"

The world is silent, except for the surf and the cry of a gull circling overhead. Then: "Yes, Pat. And I thank you. You can be sure now that no one's going to ask you any more questions about sex."

Pat hefts her bag to her shoulder, and they head back to the Institute. Sam tells her about how backwards he was, compared to her, doing his required premed courses as an undergraduate (Princeton, '72). As they walk, Pat watches the waves rip crookedly to shore. Never has she missed Joshua as much as she does now.



The four of them pile into the shiny gray Mercedes parked in the circle drive just outside the entrance. Pat and Sam sit in the back. Wagner drives. And Shelley, introduced as "support" (the designation given on the Institute photo-badge pinned to her dress), rides shotgun with a laptop in her lap and a radio clipped to one shoulder. (Overkill, Pat thinks, noting the cellular phone on the dash.) It is Sam's idea that Pat would feel more "comfortable" with a woman present during meetings that are not "one-on-one." At lunch he told the story of how he had had his "consciousness raised" a couple of years back, when, dining out, he had overheard a group of women talking at a nearby table. One of them had told how she had been in an elevator that morning with six men, the lone woman for a twenty-floor ascent, and of how creeped-out she had been. The others had then chimed in with similar tales. The conversation, Sam said, had "struck" him. He said that before then he had always assumed women felt unsafe with single

men rather than a crowd, since by his logic a woman could always count on at least one man to come to her rescue against the depredations of another... Wagner and Johns rolled their eyes but agreed to assign Shelley to “chaperon duty” (as they keep calling it). Shelley looks and acts so Vanna White, though, that Pat has so far taken little “comfort” in her presence.

The car is comfortable and she knows she should be glad for the chance to get out, but Pat is in such an aftermath of confusion that all she can think is that (a) it is weird to be going out driving when she is really basically a prisoner, and (b) her parents would not approve of the car. As they pass through the outer set of gates, she fantasizes flinging open the door and running, yelling that she’s being held prisoner against her will. But at once the idea strikes her as crazy. She imagines that anyone who happened to be around to hear (and there are only cars in this neighborhood, certainly no pedestrians that she’s yet spotted) would assume her to be a paranoid schizophrenic and simply ignore her claims. She thinks that is how she herself would likely react were she in their shoes.

They drive south down La Jolla Boulevard. Pat snatches glimpses of the water as it repeatedly enters and leaves their line of vision. They are going to Hillcrest, they told her. Supposedly to look for Joshua.

She has the feeling that what just happened on the top deck was important. Certainly it upset Wagner. If only she could have some time to herself to *think*. But the wine at lunch and all these *people* constantly surrounding her make real thinking impossible.

Lying on the chaise longue after lunch, headphones feeding her a much-needed hit of Sinéad’s power passion,

she fell asleep. Stuck in that hospital isolation unit, she hadn't slept much during the night. And she wasn't used to drinking wine at lunch. The Big Boys were all inside, having a meeting. (She could just guess about what.) Shelley, nearby, sat at a white metal table under an umbrella, tapping a keyboard—presumably keeping her under surveillance. Still, closing her eyes and listening to Sinéad, she could almost believe she was lying in the sun at Torrey Pines beach. The wind felt the same on her skin, and the air smelled of the same salt sea. It was, therefore, *natural* that she fall asleep and dream...about Joshua.