

ACT ONE

North Jersey
Labor Day, 2002

LANEY'S FINGER TRACES HER BREASTS.

Up and around, down. She stops, glances at herself, pushes closer. What Laney sees in the mirror doesn't surprise her anymore. Her body is what it is, ravaged by childbirth, ravaged by too many years of pretending to be naturally thin. People have always told her she's beautiful. People still do, but less than they used to.

Laney starts again, lifting her right breast this time. It is heavier than she thinks it should be, but heavier compared to what? It's hard to remember them before the boob job. It's not like she had perky breasts to begin with. But these? She lets this one fall, and it does, with a nearly inaudible thud, a sound so hollow she wants to crumple up into the shag carpet of her dressing room and disappear.

She looks up and away, then back. There are no new wrinkles. Her mother had wrinkles by this age, but other than the fine lines that flank her mouth, Laney is wrinkle-free. She looks closer. There are, though, two discolorations on her left cheek.

A mole had settled between them, darker than the spots, but not black. She brings the tweezers to her face. Every month or so she finds the mole has sprouted a hair; she plucks the hair. She also grows a hair just under her chin. One dark hair, pubic in texture. She plucks that one too.

Interesting, she thinks, how they grow in a harmony of sorts,

the mole hair and chin. They mark the onset of her decline. One day, sooner than later, her kids will flinch when she kisses them. Laney cringes for a second, remembering herself as a little girl, her Aunt Edna's wiry whiskers scraping against her own cheek.

Laney looks closer at her face, then down. Her nipples were deformed. That much she remembers. After the babies they were larger than the silver dollar pancakes the kids eat at IHOP, brown, bumpy. These stand at attention, two bright eyes, ready to eat.

It's not her breasts. Her forehead's smooth, so it's not that either. Is it the liver spots on her face, the mole? Could it be her feet? What's making her feel so ugly?

Laney brings a glass of wine to her mouth, empties it. She checks her feet. No, her feet are okay, a deep plum on her toes. She reminds herself as she rubs the palm of her hand against the bottom of her heel, *soft, still soft*, that she should be happy for this. Some women her age have already lost their feet.

Laney sits, the carpet in her closet, ivory and loose, gathers around her thighs. She puts her still-nice feet out in front of her, stretches her legs, and slides an inch or so back from the mirror. Next to her a jar of rubbing alcohol rests on a lavender hand towel. She opens the jar, dips the tweezers into the liquid, pours herself a second glass of wine.

Laney locates another rogue pube tucked in the crease of her upper thigh. She pushes her thumbs together to loosen it, but the hair won't give. She takes the tweezers, turns its sharp point in the direction of her skin and scrapes. Just a slight sting. She likes to do it this way, dig neatly, draw just a hint of blood before claiming it.

She wipes the hair onto the hand towel, cuts four more times and then stops. She looks back at herself, hating what she sees: her scarred stomach, her fake breasts, the panicked look in her eyes.

Laney leans forward. She never much liked looking at it, not

even as a child. She inspects it, all trimmed and waxed. She is more manicured than her front lawn. But it is a used pussy. Stretched out and unforgiving.

Laney pushes herself up off the ground, walks over to the window, and watches her husband practice free throws. Night after night. Bounce. Aim. Shoot. Bruce stops, adjusts the volume on his . . . do you still call it a boom box? All these years later. Still with “Thunder Road.”

She remembers the moment she knew – cruising down the shore, T-tops off, *Born to Run* on the stereo. Buckled, high, wild about fucking on the beach. *Oh my gosh, on the beach, really!?* – this was the man she wanted to spend her life with.

She was silent, timid. Not Bruce. He moaned, keeping time with the waves. He didn’t worry about getting busted by some cop. *No one’s gonna ruin our good time. I’d never let anyone do that to you, beautiful.*

After, Bruce took her hand and walked her over to that dump of a restaurant that was built to look like a windmill. He ordered cheese fries, a Coke. Laney trailed him up the stairs, sat at the cozy table for two, black resin chairs.

The windmill turned above their heads, cars passed. Laney watched Bruce eat the fries, one after the other, the power in that. She even tasted one, one that he placed on her tongue, thick and hot with cheese. His sweatshirt wrapped around her shoulders. Salty air. Salty fries. She didn’t – She simply didn’t consider the future.

Laney turns away from the window and walks over to the sink. She opens the medicine cabinet and reaches for a prescription container. She shouldn’t but she does.

Her mother once asked Laney how Bruce planned to support them, but Laney ignored her. Choosing instead to fill cardboard boxes with trinkets, giving particular care to a wide and varied collection of colorful glass figurines, while that crazy little dog – the crazy Maltese Bruce gave her for her birthday, ran around

her bedroom. *Remember that room you grew up in, who you were back then, when you were a girl still, another girl from a lavender bedroom?*

Laney removes a cotton ball from a covered jar on her vanity, wets it with make-up remover, sweeps it across one eyelid then the other. She rinses, bit by bit, warm sudsy water.

I asked, how are you going to support yourselves?

I'm finishing college, Ma, and Bruce is going to sell insurance.

Please, he's a bookie.

It could be worse. He could be a drug dealer.

Laney kissed her mother on the forehead. She knew how to work her, how to kiss her in such a way that her mother would give her anything – even permission to leave.

You're only twenty-two.

You were nineteen.

And single before thirty.

Ma didn't question after that. Instead, knees firmly planted in carpet, she began folding Laney's winter sweaters.

That dog of yours is going to shit on the carpet.

His name is Jesse James.

Bruce liked those kinds of movies – *Butch Cassidy, Bonnie and Clyde, Josie Wales* – outlaw stuff. Laney liked them too, kind of dangerous, kind of fun.

Fine, Jesse. Jesse James is going to shit on the carpet.

Ma was busy organizing the pile of folded sweaters by color, light to dark, bluish tones to black.

It's August, Ma. It's not like I'm moving across the country. I'll be a half-hour away. I'll come home for these sweaters.

You don't know, she said, what you need.

Need?

Laney sinks into warm bath water, slides her neck down cool porcelain. It hadn't occurred to her. What she might need. That she –

It's Labor Day and Laney didn't barbeque. Neighboring beef surrounds them. She stops herself. The sky is clear. A

high-pitched whistle is followed by a crackle, then a boom. It used to be that she'd be sad when things ended, but Laney is ready actually, ready for this summer to be over, for the school year to start, for her bad behavior – *Is that what this is?* – to end. Nothing she can't, somehow, reverse has happened, Laney assures herself. She made a few errors in judgment; luckily she got away with them. After her rendezvous with Donny tomorrow, she'll simply stop. Stop with the diversions, no more drinking and drugging. No more fucking around. She will rededicate herself to being a good mom and wife – great mom and wife. There is no need to panic. She hasn't destroyed anything yet.

Tomorrow is the first day of second grade. There will be bake sales again. Everything is okay: her kids are okay – *Remember when I used to light fireworks?* – her husband.

In the fairy-tale there is a knight, a horse, a sunset. In the fairy-tale the princess holds on from behind, her face nestled into her knight's shoulder, the smell of him unmarked as is his character.

An easy clip clopping carries her away from the fortress. *Clip, clop. Clip, clop. Clip, clop.* She, the princess, is wearing a billowing dress, daisies in her hair. She is in white; he is in white, the horse.

Here, in the Garden State, the knight wears Nike t-shirts. Laney sat beside hers, halter-top, capris. She smelled like Fracas, he Paco Rabanne. The engine growled, then jerked as Bruce shifted into drive. He was tan and she was tan. The road stretched out before them, a smooth even tar and the future simply wasn't something she worried about, not with a new car lease every four years.

Bounce, bounce, swoosh.

Laney adjusts the temperature of the bath water with her toes. Her little girl is fast asleep but her boy, she suspects, her boy who should be sleeping isn't. He's standing by his bedroom window watching his father get the ball in every time. Amazing. He can

hear the music his father likes. *Dananana, Danananananana*. The boy watches in disbelief. Every time.

DananananananaNaNaNaNaNa.

The boy turns from the window, glances at the vintage Knicks poster above his desk: Reed, Monroe, Frazier. On top his desk is a folder, sharpened pencils, and a small box of crayons. On the chair a neatly folded t-shirt, khakis, underwear, socks, clean sneakers. His mother, as usual, has everything organized and ready.

Something isn't right, though. Eli won't be able to explain it, Laney knows. Not tonight. Not ten years from now. The din of it.

What he senses, would put money on if someone offered, is that his mom's crying. No evidence. Just a bouncing ball, Springsteen, and the muffled sound of a lone firecracker. But he'd bet, bet his entire allowance she's crying.

Eli climbs into bed, looks at the poster. They traded Ewing, then Spree. He rolls onto his side, bends his knees, squeezes his eyelids as tight as he can.

Bounce, bounce, swoop.

Laney wishes her boy could see them, the little white lights that are out there tonight, sprinkling themselves across the sky. She wishes, even more, she could show them to him.