I used to love the power I had over men. Walking down the street, my mandolin-shaped ass swaying and swinging to their backward eyes. How strange that I only completely knew this power when it was gone—or transferred to my daughter, all male eyes on her nubile twentyish body, promising babies. I missed this power. It seemed that the things that had come to replace it—marriage, maternity, the wisdom of the mature woman (ugh, I hate that phrase)—weren't worth the candle. Ah, the candle! Standing up. Burning for me. Full of sound and fury signifying everything. I know I should fade away like a good old girl and spare my daughter the embarrassments of my passions, but I can't any more than I can conveniently die. Life is passion. But now I know what passion costs, so it's hard to be quite so carefree anymore.

But was I ever carefree? Was anyone? Wasn't love always an exploding cigar? Didn't Gypsy Rose Lee say, "God is love, but get it in writing"? And didn't Fanny Brice say, "Love is like a card trick—once you know how it works, it's no fun anymore"?

Those old broads knew a thing or two. And did they give up? Never!

I'm not going to tell you—yet—how old I am or how many times I've been married. (I have decided never to get any older than fifty.) My husband and I read the obituaries together more often than we have sex. I'm only going to say that when all the troubles of my family of origin engulfed me and I realized that my marriage could not save me, I reached a point where I was just unhinged enough to put the following ad on Zipless.com, a sex site on the Internet:

> Happily married woman with extra erotic energy seeks happily married man to share same. Come celebrate Eros one afternoon per week. Discretion guaranteed by playful, pretty, imaginative, witty woman. Send e-mail and recent picture. New York area.

Talk about a woman on the verge of a nervous breakdown! It was autumn in New York—season of mellow mists, Jewish holidays, and five-thousand-dollar-a-plate benefits for chic diseases. A time of new beginnings (Yom Kippur), starting over (Rosh Hashanah), and laying in acorns against a barren winter (Succoth). When I placed the ad, I had thought of myself as a sophisticate coolly interviewing lovers. But now I was suddenly overcome with panic. I began fantasizing about what sort of creeps, losers, retreads, extortionists, and homicidal maniacs such an ad would attract—and then I got so busy with calls from my ailing parents and pregnant daughter that I forgot all about it.

A few minutes went by. Then suddenly the responses poured out of the Internet like coins out of a slot machine.

I was almost afraid to look. After a couple of beats, I couldn't resist. It was like hoping I had won the lottery. The first response showed a scanned Polaroid of an erect penis—a tawny uncircumcised specimen with a drop of dew winking at the tip. Under the photo, on the white border, was scrawled: "Without Viagra." The accompanying e-mail was concise:

> I like your style. Have always risen for assertive women. Send nude shot and measurements.

The next one began like this:

> Dear Seeker,
>
> Sometimes we think it's carnality we want when actually we long for Jesus. We discover that if we open our hearts and let Him in, all sorts of satisfaction undreamt of can be ours. Perhaps you think you are seeking Eros, but Thanatos is what you really seek. In Jesus, there is eternal life. He is the lover who never disappoints, the friend who is loyal forever. It would be an honor to meet and counsel you . . .

A telephone number was proffered: 1-800-JESUS-4U.

I threw all the responses in the virtual garbage can, deleted them, and shut down the computer. I must have been insane to give an authentic e-mail address. That was the end of it, I thought, deluding myself. Another bad idea aborted. I went about my wifelife like an automaton. I had always been impulsive, and impulsive people know how to back away from their impulses. Sex was trouble—at any age. But by sixty—oops, I gave it away—it was a joke. Women were not allowed

to have passion at sixty. We were supposed to become grandmothers and retreat into serene sexlessness. Sex was for twenty, thirty, forty, even fifty. Sex at sixty was an embarrassment. Even if you still looked good, you *knew* too much. You knew all the things that could go wrong, all the cons you could set yourself up for, all the dangers of playing with strangers. You knew discretion was a dream. And now my e-mail was out there for all the crazy phishers and pishers!

Besides, I adored my husband, and the last thing I wanted to do was hurt him. I had always known that marrying someone twenty years older put me at risk for spending my sunset years without sex. But he had given me so much else. I'd married him when I was forty-five and he was sixty-five and we'd had a great ride together. He had healed all the old wounds of my earlier marriages. He had been a great stepfather to my daughter. How dare I complain that something was missing in my life? How dare I advertise for Eros?

My parents were dying and I was growing unimaginably older, but was that a reason to pursue what my old friend Isadora Wing had called "the zipless fuck"? You betcha. It was either that or spiritual bliss. Apparently the creators of Zipless .com had ripped off Isadora without paying a penny. The company that bought her movie rights was sold to a company that owned publishing rights, which was sold to a company that exploited digital rights that was sold to a company that exploited well-known tags. Such is the writing life—as savage as the acting life.

Isadora and I had been friends forever. We met over a movie that was never made. We even got sober together. And I could call her for moral support whenever I needed her. I thought of her as my BFF, my alter ego. I really needed her now.

I am going over to my parents' apartment to visit them, and I dread it. They have deteriorated drastically in the last few months. They both spend their days in bed attended by aides and caregivers. They both wear diapers—if we're lucky. Their apartment smells of urine, shit, and medications. The shit is the worst. It's not healthy shit like babies produce. It seems diseased. Its fetid aroma permeates everything—the oriental rugs, the paintings, the Japanese screens. It's impossible to escape—even in the living room.

When I get there, to my great relief, I realize my mother is having a good day. She's her old feisty self. Lying in bed, wearing a lilac satin negligee and wiggling her yellow-nailed toes, she blurts out:

"Who are you going to marry next?"

"I'm married to Asher," I say. "We've been married for fifteen years. You know that."

"Are you happy?" my mother asks, looking deep into my eyes.

I debate this unanswerable question. "Yes," I say. "I'm happy."

My mother looks at my rings—the gold art nouveau disk, the carnelian signet ring from Greece, the Victorian pierced aquamarine from Italy.

"If you got married again, you could get some more rings," she says, and laughs uproariously.

My mother is deep into her nineties and her cheerful dementia is studded with piercing insights. She is also much nicer than she was when I was young. Along with the crepey neck, the sagging arms, the bunioned feet has come a sweetness interspersed with a fierce truth telling. Sometimes she thinks

I am her sister or her mother. The dead and the living are all alive in her head. But she looks at me with an endless love I wish I could have taken for granted when I was young. My whole life would have been different. Or so I think. The truth is she often terrified me when I was young.

People shouldn't get this old. Sometimes I think my mother's senescence is taking years off my life. I have to force myself to look at her. Her cheeks are sallow and crosshatched with a million wrinkles. Her eyes are rheumy and clotted with buttery blobs. Her feet are gnarled and twisted, and her thick, ridged toenails are a jagged mustard color. Her nightgown keeps opening to reveal her flattened breasts.

I think of all the times I've sat in hospital rooms with my mother in the last few years. I am praying fiercely for her not to die. But aren't I really praying for *myself*? Aren't I really praying not to be the last one standing on the precipice? Aren't I really praying not to have to dig her grave and fall in?

As you get older, the losses around you are staggering. The people in the obits come closer and closer to your own age. Older friends and relatives die, leaving you stunned. Competitors die, leaving you triumphant. Lovers and teachers die, leaving you lost. It gets harder and harder to deny your own death. Do we hold on to our parents, or are we holding on to our status as children who are immune from death? I think we are clinging with ever-increasing desperation to our status as children. In the hospital you see other children—children of fifty, of sixty, of seventy—clinging to their parents of eighty, ninety, one hundred. Is all this clinging *love*? Or is it just the need to be reassured of your own immunity from the contagion of the Maloch ha-moves—the dread Angel of

Death? Because we all secretly believe in our own immortality. Since we cannot imagine the loss of individual consciousness, we cannot possibly imagine death. I thought I was searching for love—but it was reincarnation I really sought. I wanted to reverse time and become young again—knowing everything I know now.

"What are you thinking about?" my mother asks.

"Nothing," I say.

"You're thinking you never want to get as old as I am," she says. "I know you."

My father is sleeping through all this. His wasted body takes up remarkably little space under the blankets. With his hearing aid turned off, he cannot follow our conversation and he doesn't want to. He prefers to spend the day sleeping. Just six months ago, before his cancer surgery, he was a different man. My sisters and I used to start the day with threatening missives from him, often in verse.

What do you do when your days open with this messily penned screed from your ninety-three-year-old father?

I feel like King Lear.
I have three daughters
beautiful and dear,
clever and cute,
already in dispute.
Who gets more?
Who gets less?
What a terrible mess
For an aging Lear
In geriatric stress.

So much for poetry. At the bottom of the page he has scrawled in a shaky hand: "Read it again and again—no disputes!"

How did our father go from Brownsville to Shakespearean tragedy?

Here's his version: "All my father ever said to me was 'Get a job.' I wanted to go to Juilliard. My father said: 'You're already making money playing the drums—why do you need it?' He threw away my admission letter. That was why I was determined that the three of you should get degrees."

My father said this in my mother's studio overlooking the Hudson. She was lying in bed like Queen Lear, nodding. (*Was* there a Queen Lear?)

The sisters Lear were sitting around their mother's bed. Their mother had just had stomach surgery and she was making the most of it. Occasionally she moaned.

"Your mother has Crohn's disease, coronary artery disease, a fractured vertebra at the base of the spine, two hip replacements, two knee replacements. I cannot continue my job as 'U.S. male nurse' "—my father's pathetic phrase for his status in the family. "If you three don't come here every day, there will be some changes made in my will."

"Don't you dare threaten me," my older sister, Antonia, said. "When we were living in Belfast at the height of the Troubles"—of course Antonia had to marry a poetic Irishman—"pulling the piano in front of the door to keep the paramilitaries out, shopping for bread during the early-morning hours before the shooting started, covering the windows with furniture so that your grandchildren wouldn't get hit by shrapnel—where were you? We were going through a

genuine holocaust and nobody came to rescue us. I'll never forgive any of you for that!"

Queen Lear suddenly revived: "What do you mean? We sent you money!"

"You sent us a measly twenty-five thousand dollars! What was I going to do with twenty-five thousand dollars with four children and a war going on?"

"Nobody ever sent *me* twenty-five thousand dollars," my younger sister, Emilia, said.

"No, your husband got the *whole* business. That's why you didn't need twenty-five thousand dollars!" Toni shrieked.

"Your husband didn't *want* the business! Nobody wanted it! We got stuck with it! You were both away gallivanting around the world and we were here, taking care of everybody! And Bibliomania—the shop itself. When Grandmama died, I was alone with her! The parents took off for Europe. Where were you two? I never got to go *anywhere*."

"That's not quite true," I said.

"Girls, girls, girls," my mother said.

"Nobody has any sympathy for me!" Emmy howled. "I felt I had to be the good daughter and stay home. I sacrificed my poor schnook of a husband on the altar of the family bookstore!"

"That poor schnook got everything! And so did you! We got nothing!" Toni wailed. "Some sacrifice!"

"I would have made that sacrifice."

"No way! You never would have done it. Your husband never would have done it!" This is Emmy, who shouted just as loud.

"Can't you try to see each other's point of view?" I asked.

"Not as long as she's a dishonest liar!" Toni yelled.

"My blood pressure's going up—I have to get out of here!" Emmy ran to the door. I dashed to her and coaxed her not to leave.

"Why shouldn't I leave? This is going to kill me! My heart's pounding!"

By then my father, the old King Lear, had gone to the piano and was playing "Begin the Beguine" by Cole Porter and singing along to drown out the roar in the other room.

I was where I always was—the meat in the sandwich, the designated peacemaker, the diplomat, the clown, the middle sister.

My sisters went into the kitchen to continue their altercation without a mediator. I went into my mother's room, where I found her leaning back on her pillows and moaning: "*Why* are they fighting?"

"You know perfectly well why," I said. "Daddy set it up that way."

"Your father would *never* do a thing like that," my mother said.

"Then make him undo it."

"I can't make him do anything," she said. And then she clutched her chest. "I feel faint," she said, rolling her head to the side. She moaned loudly.

My sisters ran in.

"Call the ambulance!" Emmy ordered me.

"I don't need an ambulance," my mother said, wailing.

My sisters looked at each other. Who would be the irresponsible one who neglected to call the ambulance on the ultimate day? Nobody wanted that onus.

"I really think it's unnecessary," I said, but my sisters' panic

was beginning to stir the old anxiety in me. What if it was not a false alarm this time?

Before long there was an ambulance downstairs and we were in it, bending over Queen Lear on a stretcher in the back. Our father was in the front seat with the driver, prepared to flash his big-donor card when we arrived at the hospital. We careened around corners, screeching our way to Mount Sinai. On one abrupt turn the mattress from the gurney went slithering into the attendant sitting behind the driver.

"Oops," he said.

"Be careful! That's the only mother I've got!" I said.

"She's my mother too!" said Emmy—always pissed off no matter what the occasion.

Our father sat by our mother's side as long as she was hospitalized, and when she came home, he began threatening us with being disinherited unless we came to visit her every day.

Now, only months later, he is too exhausted to threaten us and I yearn for his old truculence. Ever since the surgery for the blockage in his colon, he has been a shade of his former self. I sit on the edge of the bed, watch him sleep, and remember the conversation we had in the hospital the night before the operation that saved yet also ended his life.

"Do you know Spanish?" my father asked me that night.

I nodded. "A little."

"La vida es un sueño," he said. "Life is a dream. I look forward to that deep sleep." And then he went under and never quite came back. Three days after the surgery he was babbling gibberish and clawing the air. Six days after the surgery he was in the ICU with a tube down his throat. When he was diagnosed with pneumonia, I stood at his side in the ICU and sang "I gave my love a cherry" while his eyelids fluttered.

We never thought that he would emerge from that hospitalization. But he did. And now he and my mother spend their days sleeping side by side in their apartment but never touching or speaking. Round-the-clock shifts of aides and daughters attend them. Every day they sleep more and wake less.

The ancient Greeks believed that dreams could cure you. If you slept in the shrine of Aescalepius, you could dream yourself well. But my parents are not getting well. They are deep into the process of dying. Watching them die, I realize how unprepared for death I am myself.

It doesn't matter how old they are. You are never prepared to lose your parents.

Even my sisters have tried vainly to make peace with each other now that we have entered this final stage. We seldom go to an event where some aged acquaintance doesn't get carried out on a stretcher.

No wonder I was advertising for Eros. I was advertising for life.

2

My Father (Boy Wanted)

There is a dignity in dying that doctors should not dare to deny.

——Anonymous

There is no substitute for touch. To be alive is to crave it. The next day, when I go to visit my parents I decide I will not even try to talk to my father, I will only stroke him, rub his back, and try to communicate with him this way.

I ring the doorbell and am greeted by Veronica, the main day person. She's a Jamaican woman in her sixties with a lilting voice and a family history that could break your heart. Her son has died. Her daughter has MS. Yet she soldiers on, tending the dying.

"How's my father?"

"He's okay today," she says.

"Is he sleeping?"

"Not sleeping, not waking," she says. "But on his way somewhere . . ."

I go to his bedside and begin to massage the back of his neck.

"Who's there?" my mother says. "Antonia? Emilia?"

"It's me, Vanessa," I say. And I rub my father's neck until he stirs.

He mumbles: "I feel the love in your touch." This encourages me to go on until my arms are tired. As I massage him I am taken back to the time he sat on my bed when I was six and told me he would never leave my mother because of me. My parents had had a huge fight and I was terrified they'd divorce. My father quieted my fears.

"I would never leave you," he said.

My sisters have always accused me of being his favorite. But what good did that do me? A marital history of searching fruitlessly for him in the wrong partners until I married someone I thought could be his stand-in. And now we are all old and so is our story.

About a year ago, when my father was still robust enough to threaten us with being disinherited, I had come over to find him in an ebullient mood.

"Did I ever tell you about my first job?" he asked.

"No."

"Well, I walked around the neighborhood looking for signs in the windows that said 'Boy Wanted.' When I found one, I walked right in and said: 'I'm the boy you want.' I knew even then that your own enthusiasm had to carry the day. It was the same with show business. The reason I got the job in *Jubilee* when I auditioned for Cole Porter was because I had so much enthusiasm. I wasn't the best musician. I was only the most enthusiastic."

"Maybe he thought you were cute," my mother said. "He also had a sign out that said 'Boy Wanted.' Everyone knew that."

"You don't know what you're talking about," he said to my

mother. And then, in a burst of sheer bumptiousness, he began to do jumping jacks there on the bedroom floor. He did about thirty in a row.

"Look at your father," my mother said. "He thinks if he keeps exercising he'll never die." And it was true. My father worked out as if his life depended on it. All through his eighties, he walked to the bookstore every day, then came home to walk another five miles on the treadmill. He was full of contempt for our mother because of her sedentary life. He starved himself down to a skeletal weight.

"Learn to go to bed hungry," he told me. "The thinner you are, the longer you live. It's been proven." He ate sparingly but gorged on vitamins. The dining room table was full of seaweed extract and HGH and all manner of trendy supplements. But there came a day when he could barely eat at all because of the pain.

My sisters and I went with him for the CAT scan, the sonograms, the X-rays. He sat in a little dressing room in the radiologist's office shivering in his shorts and T-shirt. He looked so small, so scared, so reduced. Nothing showed up on the films. Finally they put him in the hospital and gave him a colonoscopy, which found the blockage.

He was avid for the operation. "Cut it out. Get the bastard," he said. He believed that if they got the cancer, he'd be good as new.

How many times have I seen that avidity for the knife? "Cut it out," they say, as if mortality were no more than a tumor. But if death can't march in the front door, it'll sneak in the back. They excised the cancer from his gut, but the anesthesia invaded his brain.

The first day after the surgery he was fuzzy but fine. As

in the old days on our family car trips, we sang our way through the alphabet from "All Through the Night" to "Zip-a-Dee-Doo-Dah." But the following morning he was holding *The New York Times* upside down in one hand and making up bizarre stories to explain the headlines. After that, two burly guards appeared in his room because he had bitten the nurse. I talked him down and stroked his hand and he went to sleep. But the day after he became even more agitated. First they thought it was the meds, Klonopin or Haldol or the anesthesia, but then a convocation of doctors decided it was "something physical" making him tremble, rant, shake, and grasp the air. They intubated him, catheterized him, and took him to a step-down, then to the ICU. There I prayed for him to come back, and in a way he did. Now I wonder about the wisdom of such prayers. Life, I now know, is the step-down unit of all step-down units. The only cure for the agitation of life is death. And the cure, as they say, is worse than the disease.

"Stop," he says now, "you're hurting me." Can he hear my thoughts? I think so.

"Veronica!" he calls. "I want to go to the toilet." And Veronica comes to take him. When he emerges, he seems exhausted and curls into the fetal position again.

"Is he sleeping all day?" I ask Veronica later. She takes this as a slur on her professionalism.

"I told you before and I'll tell you again. He doesn't want to wake because he's depressed and he doesn't want to sleep because he's afraid he'll die in his sleep. So whenever he feels himself drifting, he thinks he has to use the toilet. It only happens fifty times a day. He can't stay and he can't go. I told your sisters the same thing. Why do you all keep asking?"

"Because we love him," I say.

"I know you do," Veronica says. "So leave him alone."

"But we want to help him."

"How you gonna help him die?"

How indeed? If I could give him that final draft of painless poison, I would. Or would I? When my grandfather asked for sleeping pills at ninety-six, I didn't have the nerve to provide them. I have regretted my cowardice to this day.

How do you help anyone die? I read with amazement the stories of people who reached a certain point of illness or of age and decided it was time to die. It seems the height of both courage and cruelty. Courage because anything so counterintuitive takes courage. And cruelty because it leaves your children wondering if they did something wrong. There's no act you can initiate that doesn't involve other people. We are all interwoven. Even the most rational suicide may come as a blow to someone else.

"Vanessa!" my mother cries out. "Where are you?"

I go in to my mother. My father is curled up beside her, nearly motionless.

"He never talks to me anymore," she says, pointing a bony hand at my father. "All those years he was the closest person in the world to me and now he doesn't even talk to me. What can you do?"

Until his operation, my father was always complaining that my mother was senile, but now, despite moments of memory loss, she seems far saner than he. She lies by his side all day, enduring the most terrible rejection. Fortunately, she can only focus on it intermittently.

Abruptly, my father gets up. "Veronica!" he screams. Veronica runs in and takes him to the toilet again.

My mother looks at me. "I don't think he really has to go,"

she says. "I just think he wants to be alone in the bathroom with that woman."

"She's the nurse's aide," I say.

"Don't believe that malarkey," says my mother. "She's only pretending to be a nurse's aide so she can undress him. I'm wise to all her tricks. I wasn't born yesterday. But I pretend I don't know. One of these days, I'm going to throw her out of the house."

It wouldn't be the first time. When my mother was a little stronger last year, she fired people constantly. "Get out of my house, you big fat thing!" Sometimes: "You big fat black thing," she would scream—my mother, who had never been a racist in her prime. I told myself she was more rational now, but she was only weaker. She was biding her time. One of these days, she'd get up screaming like her old self and throw all the strangers out.

"If I should go with the High Class Angels, who'll take care of her?" my father used to rant in the old days when he was strong. The "High Class Angels" fascinated me. Whom did he mean? The Angel of Death? Or was he wrestling with angels as he slept, like Jacob?

And hearing about these mysterious angels, my mother would shriek: *"Nobody has to take care of me! I'll bury you all."*

Sometimes I think she may know more than she lets on.

"I've seen a lot of people die," Veronica says later, "but your father is one tough old bird. He's going to fight like hell before he leaves this earth. Your mother too. She never stops watching me. You know that time she fell out of bed and had to go to the hospital? She was worried I was doing something with

your father. Don't believe she's out of it. She's more together than she looks."

"How can you stand this work?"

"Who's gonna do it if I don't? You girls? You gonna clean up the shit when it runs down their legs?"

I go in to my mother again.

"When did you get here?" she asks as if we had not seen each other before, as if we had not just been talking.

I sit on her side of the bed. My father is there but not there, asleep, awake, and drifting in between.

"You know, when you get old, you see that everything is a joke. All the things you were so passionate about don't mean a thing. You only did them to keep busy. I used to think it was important that I could dance better than other people, but now I see I was only fooling myself. I only did it to keep busy."

"I don't think that's true."

"It is. Even if you're well known, what difference does that make? It doesn't keep you from getting old and dying. People see you come into a restaurant and they say, 'Isn't that so-and-so?' Well, what good does that do *you*? Or *them*, for that matter. It's all a joke."

"But you still want to live, don't you?"

"To tell you the truth, I'm bored. I'm bored with everything. Even the things I used to love—like flowers—bore me. Everything except my children. In the end, that's all that matters, leaving children behind on the earth to replace you when you go. Why do you look so sad? What's the matter?"

"You know what's the matter. I don't like you to say you're bored with life."

"Do you want me to lie to you?"

Actually, yes, I think. Please tell me that life is worth living. Please tell me that all the hassle of getting up, getting dressed, is worth the trouble. I don't want to believe that life is only a joke. I don't think parents ought to tell that to their children. Odd that I am still expecting them to be parents.

"You still look very young," my mother says.

"There's a reason for that," I say.

"Good genes," my mother says.

"Good genes and a face-lift."

"I don't believe you've had a face-lift," my mother says.

"Have it your way," I say.

Before I started to watch my parents fade away, the scariest thing I ever did was plastic surgery. A female ritual like childbirth. It stacks up there with all the other female rituals—genital mutilation, foot binding, whalebone corsets, Spanx. I know men do plastic surgery too now—voluntarily—but it's different for men. Women feel they have no choice. Age still equals abandonment for women. A man can look like he's a hundred, be impotent and night blind, and *still* find a younger woman who never got over her daddy. But a woman is lucky to be able to go to the movies or bingo with another old bag. I considered plastic surgery as mandatory as leg waxing.

First I sent the doctor a check so large I would not be able to back out. Then I spent five months in utter terror. (The last month was the worst.) Then I got on a plane and flew to Los Angeles.

Arrived in the midst of mudslides and heavy weather. (This was two winters before the century turned.) Took a room surrounded by fog in a skyscraper hotel. The floaty

fiftieth floor. (Maybe an earthquake would intervene and I wouldn't have to go through with it.) The next morning, early, after disinfectant ablutions, sans breakfast, I limo'ed to the clinic. My darling friend Isadora Wing came with me to give moral support. She waited for me.

The doctor's office was decorated in ice-cream colors and all the nurses had perfect *Mona Lisa* faces done by him. They smiled their half-moon smiles. They reassured me.

I was taken into a rose-colored room with soft lights and told to undress. I was given elastic stockings, paper slippers, a grasshopper-green gown, green cap. I had already prepared by scrubbing myself, my hair, even my *shadow*, with doctor-proffered potions. I garbed myself in these ceremonial clothes and lay back on a reclining chair, a sort of airplane seat for traveling through time. The anesthesiologist and surgeon arrived, also in grasshopper green.

I remember looking into the anesthesiologist's soft brown eyes and thinking, I wonder if he's a drug addict. . . . We talked about the methods by which unconsciousness would be achieved. He seemed to know plenty about them. Almost imperceptibly, a needle was inserted into one of the veins that branched over my hand. The colorless liquid carried me away like a euthanized dog.

I had picked my doctor because I had seen his work—or rather because I saw that his work was invisible. Most New York plastic surgeons specialize in the windswept look—*Gone With the Wind* face-lifts, I call them. You see them on the frozen tundra of the Upper East Side. Bone-thin women whose cheeks adhere to their cheekbones as if they were extremely well-preserved mummies. My doctor, born a Brazilian with a noble German name (my husband joked that his father must

have been the dentist at Auschwitz before hurriedly leaving for the Southern Hemisphere with bags of melted gold fillings), was famed for his tiny, invisible stitches. He was an artist, not a carpenter. He could look at the sagging skin around your eyes and see how to excise just enough, not too much. He could make tiny, imperceptible cheek-tucks that erased the lines of worry and age. He could raise your forehead back into your twenties. He smiled sweetly as anyone would smile anticipating gargantuan fees. This was a hundred-thousand-dollar three-procedure day for him. I drifted off to the Land of Nod.

Time collapsed on itself and died. I didn't. (But if I *had*, I would never have known, would I?) I woke up in a back room of the clinic with a nurse asking me how I felt. Parched. Trussed as a Christmas turkey. With a pounding headache. All over my head.

"Do you want to use the bathroom?"

"May I?"

"I don't see why not." She took my arm.

I lurched toward the bathroom, used the toilet but avoided the mirrors. I felt as if I had died and been embalmed. Now *I felt* mummified—as if my whole brain had been scooped out through my nose, as if the embalmers had also carved out my soul. Shuffled back to bed. Or the cot that served as a bed.

"How do I look?"

"Not bad, considering," said the nurse. "Are you hungry?"

"I think so."

"A good sign."

The tepid instant oatmeal tasted better than any breakfast I had ever had.

I thought to myself: I'm eating. I must be alive.

The next days—ice packs, immobility, a sense of suspended animation—were grim. The anesthesia lingered like a nightmare. I couldn't stay in. I couldn't go out. I couldn't read. All I could do was watch the Olympics on TV. I am convinced that long hours of TV-watching actually lower your IQ. Television isn't about content. It's about flickering light keeping you company in an empty room.

I recovered to the tune of double axel and triple Lutz. The figure skaters might as well have been skating on my face, given the way I felt. There was nothing to do but stare at the TV and change my ice packs. I ordered consommé and ice cream from room service. I had dreams in which I saw my skin (complete with muscles and blood vessels) being pulled back from my skull. One night, I was awakened in the hotel by fire alarms and a recording announcing, "There appears to be a fire alarm activated. Please stand by for further instructions." This was repeated for two hours at intervals of seven minutes while I madly called the front desk, getting a busy signal. When I finally got through to him, the concierge pronounced a false alarm. But it was all worth it. After all the bruises were gone, I noticed an uptick in passes made at me.

If life is nothing but a joke, why did I bother with the face-lift?

"I can't believe you've had a face-lift," my mother insists. "You're too smart to have had a face-lift."

"Apparently not," I say.

"And has it given you a new lease on life?" my mother ironically asks.

"What do you think, Mrs. Wonderman?"

"Don't Mrs. Wonderman me," my mother says. It was an old family line. My father would use it ironically when he was most furious with my mother. Their marriage was tight but occasionally cantankerous, not unlike my marriage to Asher. How did I get here? How did I get to be Vanessa Wonderman? And what did Vanessa Wonderman want? Love, sex, immortality—all the things we can never have. What is the arc of the plot of one's life? I want! I want!

But what did I want? I wanted sex to prove that I would never die.