The Good Life

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Extract

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In middle age there is mystery, there is mystification. The most I can make out of this hour is a kind of loneliness. Even the beauty of the physical world seems to crumble, yes, even love.

—JOHN CHEEVER

Cataclysmic events, whatever their outcome, are as rare and transporting as a great love. Bombings, revolutions, earthquakes, hurricanes,—anyone who has passed through one and lived, if they are honest, will tell you that even in the depths of their fear there was an exhilaration such as had been missing from their lives until then.

—ANA MENENDEZ

PART ONE

Indian Summer

1

Summer used to be as endless as the ocean when she was a girl and her family rented the gray shingled cottage on Nantucket. Now, she found it hard to believe she was already back in Manhattan and the kids were in school and she was already racing home, late again, feeling guilty that she'd lingered over a drink with Casey Reynes. The kids had been home for hours after their first day in first grade, and she had yet to hear about it.

Women blamed themselves; men blamed anything but.

This was Corrine's interpretation of the guilt nipping at her high heels as she cantered up Hudson Street from the subway, passing the hand-lettered sign in the window of their Chinese takeout: FRESHLY GROUNDED COFFEE. Guilt about leaving the kids for so long, about not helping Russell with dinner, about attempting to restart her long-dormant professional life. Oh, to be grounded herself. Seven-fifteen by her watch. Still attuned to the languorous rhythm of the summer—

they'd just closed up the house in Sagaponack four days ago—she'd barely had time to kiss the kids good-bye this morning and now the guests would be arriving at any minute, Russell frenzied with cooking and child care.

Bad mother, bad wife, bad hostess. *Bad.*

When she had yearned to be a mother, imagining what it would be like to be a parent, it had been easy to conjure the joy . . . the scenes of tenderness, the Pietà moments. What you don't picture are the guilt and the fear that take up residence at the front of your brain, like evil twins you didn't bargain for. Fear because you're always worried about what might go wrong, especially if your kids were born, as hers were, three months early. You can never forget the sight of them those first few days, intubated under glass, veined eggshell skulls and pink writhing limbs—the image stays with you even as they grow, reminding you of just how fragile these creatures are, how flimsy your own defenses. And guilt because you can never possibly do enough. There's never enough time. No matter how much love and attention you lavish on them, you're always afraid that it will never be enough.

Corrine had become a connoisseur of guilt; not for her the stabbing thrust of regret for an ill-conceived act—but, rather, the dull and steady throb of chronic guilt, even as she'd done her best to rearrange her life around her kids, quitting her job to take care of them and, over the past two years, working highly flexible hours on a screenplay and on a project that was the obverse of a busman's holiday—a start-up venture called Momtomtom.com, which had been on the verge of a big launch this past spring, when the Internet bubble started to deflate and the venture capital dried up. This afternoon, she'd spent four hours making a presentation to a possible backer, hustling for seed money for the Web site. As these prospects dimmed, she'd been trying to set up meetings on the screenplay, an adaptation of Graham Greene's *The Heart of the Matter*. And here were the theoretical bookends of her existence, the maternal and the romantic—the latter submerged and almost extinct. In fact, that had been her secret intention in writing this script: to try to rekindle the romance and fan it back to life.

Corrine hadn't wanted to be one of those mothers who paid someone else to raise her kids; for the first five years, to the astonishment of her friends and former colleagues, she'd stayed at home. Manhattan was an existential town, in which identity was a function of professional accomplishment; only the very young and the very rich were permitted to be idle. The latter, like her friend Casey Reynes, had their charities and their personal assistants and inevitably managed to convey the impression that all this constituted an exhausting grind. Russell had initially supported her maternal ideal, though, as the years went by and their peers bought vacation homes in the Hamptons, he couldn't consistently disguise his resentment over their straitened finances, or his sense that his stay-at-home wife had become translucent, if not invisible, within the walls of their loft—a nanny without salary.

Writing a screenplay was, in their circle, code for being unemployed; finishing the first draft failed to produce the sense of accomplishment she'd expected. A screenplay, after all, was a kind of theoretical object, a recipe rather than the meal itself. And thus far she hadn't had much luck in assembling the ingredients. So when the kids entered preschool last year, she had tried to turn her obsession with child rearing into a profession—formalizing the body of knowledge she'd acquired as a full-time city mother into a viable on-line resource. If that plan didn't work out, she would have to return to the job marketplace, as much for her own self-esteem as to defray the $34,000 tuition for the kids.

A homeless man was encamped in the shadow of construction scaffolding across the street from her building—a rarer sight than it would have been ten years ago. A young, dirt-caked slacker with a ragged goatee, a bull terrier on a leash, and a paper coffee cup at his feet. As Corrine hurried past, he said, "Hey, beautiful. I need a blow job. I need a place in the Hamptons. I need a movie role."

She paused, registering the humor—and her husband would have loved this, storing it away with all the other anecdotes he used to illustrate his wife's hilarious singularity—but instead of laughing, she was thinking about *needs*. What we need in order to make life bearable.

Suddenly coming to her senses, the panhandler gaping at her.

"I need romance," said Corrine, dropping a dollar in the wishing well of his cup. "Whatever happened to the romance?"

She burst into her apartment, aching for her children, who over the course of the interminable afternoon might have died, dashed their heads against the edge of the coffee table she kept vowing to replace, been kidnapped, or forgotten her entirely. Corrine would have been less surprised at any of these scenarios than she was to see Hilary on the sofa, playing with the kids.

"Mom, guess what. You won't *believe*! Aunt Hilary's here."

Her daughter, Storey, loved to deliver news and make announcements.

It's true—she wouldn't believe. Last Corrine knew, her little sister had been in L.A. She'd tried calling as recently as last week, only to be told the number had been disconnected. And now here she was in TriBeCa, reclining on Corrine's couch with Jeremy in her lap. No matter that Corrine had seen her dozens of times in the intervening years: Hilary was preserved, in Corrine's mind, semifrozen at the age of fifteen, the last year they'd shared a domicile, so that it was always a surprise to see her as a woman, and a pretty convincing one at that. Only a few evanescent lines at the corners of her eyes hinted that she'd passed thirty a few years before.

The first thing Corrine did, pure reflex, was to scoop Jeremy up into her arms and hug him, but instead of clutching her, he squirmed.

"Hey, sis." Hilary rose from the couch, stretching lithe and catlike in her leopard top. As if to preserve Corrine's illusion of her youthfulness, she still moved and dressed like a teenager, and had the body to carry it off. "Thought I'd surprise you."

"I'm . . . I *am*." Corrine belatedly hugged her sister with the arm not holding Jeremy—a sister sandwich, with her son—their son?—in the middle. Surprised, yes, Corrine thought . . . although at some point unpredictability becomes a pattern. "You look . . . great," Corrine said.

"Thanks."

"Aunt Hilary's been in *Paris,*" Storey said.

"Paris?"

Jeremy squirmed out of Corrine's grasp and dropped onto the ottoman.

"Well, actually I came from London today, but I've been in Paris for the past two weeks."

"She met Madeline," Storey said, holding up her favorite book. "Can you *believe* it, Mom? Aunt Hilary *knows* her. Why didn't you tell us she knows Madeline?"

"I had no idea," Corrine said, casting a reproving glance at her sister. "Although, actually, now that I think about it, I'm not surprised at all. Your aunt Hilary knows just about everybody in the whole world."

"The *whole* world?"

"Your mom's just making a little joke."

It was true—you couldn't watch a movie or open a magazine without Hilary dropping intimate remarks about the two-dimensional icons therein. Why shouldn't she know Madeline?

"Aunt Hilary saw her at the Eiffel Tower with Miss Clavel and the other little girls."

"What's so great about Madeline?" Jeremy asked. "She's just a little girl."

Just like Hilary to tell Storey she was acquainted with a fictional character, fiction being her great specialty. Corrine didn't want Storey getting mocked for relating this triumph at school. She was feeling ambivalent enough about the Fluffies—the fairylike creatures that she had conjured up for the kids when they were three, who had their own biographies and their own little house in the kids' bedroom. They'd been through this once before when Hilary claimed to be great friends with Barbie—to whom she bore more than a passing resemblance.

"Corrine," Hilary said, "why are you looking at me that way?"

"What way?" Storey demanded. "What way is she looking at you? Mom, what does she mean?"

Jeremy was bouncing up and down on the sofa.

"Have you got a place to stay?"

"Collin has this loft in SoHo? But I have to call his neighbors for the keys. I think I may have the wrong number or something."

As if, Corrine thought, she was supposed to know who Collin was. Some fucking drug dealer, minor English aristocrat, or bass player, if experience was any guide. She gestured toward the couch. "You're welcome to the guest suite." Theirs was one of those old tunnel-style TriBeCa lofts, shaped like Manhattan itself, long and skinny, the most space they could find for the money back in 1990, when the area was still considered remote—an eighteen-by-eighty-foot rectangle with a single bathroom carved out of commercial space in the seventies. They'd walled off first one bedroom in the back and then another when the children were born, and kept telling themselves, as the years slipped past, that they'd probably move by the time the kids needed separate bedrooms. Which they did now. The experts said six was the age, but somehow all of the possible solutions seemed to require more cash than they commanded.

Russell was calling out from behind the kitchen counter. She wondered how he was taking this.

"Can Aunt Hilary give us our bath?" Storey asked. "Please please please."

"I suppose so," said Corrine.

"Race you to the bathroom," Storey told her brother.

"We will *walk* to the bathroom," Corrine said, grabbing hold of the back of Jeremy's shirt. Last week, he'd slipped and bruised his forehead—so Corrine reminded herself as she tried to justify the note of irritation in her voice.

Russell, meanwhile, was in his cooking frenzy in what they called the kitchen, retaining the nomenclature of residences with discrete rooms, flailing away with his ten-inch German chef's knife, juggling his beloved copper pots and French steel pans, which weighed as much as the unused dumbbells in the bedroom closet, the heft of which seemed to her to have as much to do with the macho aesthetics of amateur chefdom as with heat distribution. Cooking was a new sphere of masculine competition; Russell and Washington and his chef friend Carlo

had lately taken to comparing notes on butchers and cutlery the way they used to deconstruct stereo equipment, garage bands, and young novelists. For fifteen years, Russell had been perfectly happy with their Calphalon pots, a wedding present from Macy's, until Washington told him the sous-chef at JoJo said they were for pussies.

She kissed him on the cheek."I promise I had no idea," she whispered. "I haven't spoken to her in weeks—months, probably. You're not furious, are you?"

"Don't worry, she exonerated you."

She put a finger to her lips. Russell seemed incapable of speaking at any volume but loud, a characteristic ill-suited to loft living.

"At least she didn't show up with some head-banger or felon in tow." She put her arms around her husband's ribs. "Is she going to spoil your perfect seating chart? I don't see how we can—"

"No big deal," Russell said, chopping away at a leek.

Corrine could hardly believe her ears. Russell was a maniac about his dinner parties. He was capable of throwing a tantrum if Corrine added someone at the last minute. It was one of the few areas of life in which he was prissy. When he put on his chef/host hat, everything had to be just so. Not to mention the fact that he'd grown tired of the saga of the prodigal sister-in-law, although he wouldn't admit it.

She shook her head. "You mean you won't have a heart attack if there's an uneven number at the table?"

"Actually, Salman canceled this afternoon. And then Jim called and said Cody Erhardt was in town and would I mind if he joined us."

Now she understood. "Did Salman have an excuse?"

"He's got a deadline and he leaves on his book tour tomorrow."

Corrine could tell he was disappointed, though he liked to act as if having Salman Rushdie over to dinner was no big deal. That was one of the things she hated about New York, how you were supposed to be cool and take for granted the awe-inspiring people and events you'd fantasized about back home in Altoona or Amherst. By the time you were behind the velvet ropes or sitting at the front booth, you were probably too jaded to admit how lucky you felt or to enjoy it the way you once imagined you would have.

Corrine was actually relieved, since in the absence of their illustri-

ous guest, the evening would be more relaxed. It wasn't just Salman and his heady aura of celebrity; his new girlfriend was absurdly beautiful, to the point of being a socially disruptive force. The last time they'd had dinner together, Russell made an ass out of himself trying to amuse her; and besides, they'd been friends with Salman's wife, the mother of his youngest child. Corrine didn't believe everything she read in the tabloids and she refused to take sides in marital disputes, but this one hit a little close to home. And she was still worried that a bomb might go off in his vicinity, although supposedly the fatwa had been lifted. The people who wanted him dead weren't the forgive-and-forget type. She'd always been nervous when Russell hooked up with him in London, and she could never quite relax when they saw him in New York. In the early days, when he was holed up in London, surrounded by armed guards, Russell had had a fax number that went through Scotland Yard or MI5. It was all very James Bondian, which, of course, appealed to Russell's sense of adventure, but after spending a week with him in London a few years ago, making the rounds of book parties and running into Salman almost every night, she found it kind of absurd. If the Iranian secret police or whoever the fuck they were had any clue, all they would have to do would be to stake out the fashionable cocktail party circuit for a few nights and they'd have him. Martin Amis's launch party? Hello? It was lucky, of course—and made you feel a little safer, like maybe these fanatics weren't that dangerous outside their own countries. Salman had certainly been very conspicuous around New York in the last year, and nothing bad had happened yet.

"I'm sorry, honey. Are you terribly disappointed?" She kissed his cheek as he squinted at an open cookbook.

"It'll be nice to see Cody," he said. At least Erhardt's films hadn't alienated any Muslim fundamentalists, as far as she knew, although she recalled Christian fundamentalists had picketed one of them. Russell had published a collection of three of his screenplays a few years back. He was a hero to those who believed that his peers from the class of 1969, those legends responsible for the brief renaissance between *Easy Rider* and *The Deer Hunter,* had sold out and succumbed

to the demands of the marketplace and the debt maintenance on their houses and wineries. Or died, if not young, then in the full flower of excess. Among the cineasts who could name three Japanese directors other than Kurosawa, those for whom the modern indie era began with *sex, lies and videotape,* Erhardt was revered as much for his intransigence and his noble failures as for the films he had actually written or directed, although at least one of these was acknowledged to be a classic.

It suddenly occurred to her that he'd be a great director for her screenplay of *The Heart of the Matter.*

In what seemed like one of those moments of semipsychic marital communion, Russell said, "I think Jim said he'd sent him a copy of your screenplay."

"That would be—he'd be great," Corrine said. Not that she was about to bring it up at dinner . . . not unless he did. She had a horror of appearing pushy or mercenary, a legacy she blamed on her WASPy New England heritage—a worldview in which business and pleasure were strictly segregated. She knew that this was a quaint notion and thoroughly contradicted the very essence of social life in Manhattan.

These dinner parties were always preceded by Sturm und Drang—Corrine almost wondered if it was worth it. Tonight's suspense had begun to build when Washington had called to say that his wife, Veronica, was sick. So Russell had invited Carlo, who, besides being a chef, a fact that could only increase the level of angst and adrenaline, belonged to that class of gregarious New Yorkers with phantom spouses. "Married singles," Corrine called them.

"Since we know Carlo won't bring his wife, why not invite Martha Stewart," Corrine said, "and really make yourself fucking crazy?"

"Carlo will love Hilary," Russell said. "Hard to say which of them is more likely to start groping the other. Actually, she seems fairly sane and balanced for a change. Plus, she's keeping an eye on the kids. And you should've seen how happy they were to see her."

"She hasn't even spoken to them in three months."

He paused in his chopping and looked up. "A little testiness there?"

"Just an observation." The subject of her sister was fraught with . . . well, with being fraught.

"Maybe she's sensed some, I don't know, ambivalence on your part."

"What's *that* supposed to mean?"

"I don't know. It's just . . . I think we're *all* still trying to figure out the dynamics of this particular extended family."

She watched his hands, wincing at each stroke of the glistening blade. Russell was such a klutz; he shouldn't be allowed to wield this ruthless German cutlery—witness the scars from his culinary adventures. "Are you saying I'm insecure?"

Russell put down the knife and embraced her, holding his wet hands away from her back. "Actually, it's the typical family drama. You love your little sister, but she happens to drive you insane."

Corrine allowed herself to be mollified, even as she tried to remember the last time Russell had hugged her. She should mark it down on her calendar, along with her increasingly infrequent periods.

"Do we have any thyme?"

She checked her watch. "Almost seven-thirty."

"Not *time*," he said. "Thyme."

"What are you trying to say?"

"The herb? *Thyme?*"

She glared at him. God, she hated how tense and snippy he got before a dinner party. Why did he bother? Why not just order in Chinese like normal people or expense-account something preprepared from Dean and DeLuca?

"How the . . ." She lowered her voice. "How would I know? *Thyme*—I'm not even sure what the hell it is. The kitchen's your domain. Gourmet cooking is part of your recipe for the good life, not mine. And don't blame me because you invited your chef friend and now you're all wigged-out."

Thyme? The only thing she knew about thyme was that it was part of the title of that Simon and Garfunkel song.

"Sorry," he said.

"In other words, you're not asking me a question. You're telling

me that we don't have any *thyme* and hoping I might fetch you some."

"Do you think you could pop around the corner?"

Corrine sighed. She supposed this might be preferable to witnessing the escalating panic of the home chef, but she wanted to explore the subject of Hilary a little further.

Actually, no, she didn't. "So who's coming, exactly?"

"Carlo—"

"I still don't understand why you invited him. Unless you can only entertain under pressure."

"Carlo doesn't expect a four-star meal. He's just grateful to be invited to someone's home. Everyone else is too scared to cook for him."

"Well, I'm glad you're so relaxed."

"I'm fine."

"Who else?"

"Nancy Tanner—"

"I like Nancy." Nancy was the perennial single girl of their set. Five years ago, Russell had published her first novel, a story about a perennial single girl, and it had become a surprise best-seller. Corrine had become nostalgic for the days when Nancy's anecdotes about disastrous dates had seemed less like material she was trying out for her next book or talk-show appearance, but she always said, when called upon to defend her, that she'd earned it. Scrapping for years, jammed into a walk-up studio in Yorkville, blue-penciling articles about acne and dating and diets for young women's magazines as her twenties turned into her thirties, surviving on canapés and cigarettes, intermittently investing her hopes in some wildly inappropriate suitor. Even lying about her age, which had become a gossip-column tempest—who could blame her? Women like Casey hated Nancy because she was pretty and thin and refused to play by their rules and because they assumed she must be after their husbands. Finding her own life increasingly circumscribed by the rituals of middle age and motherhood, Corrine liked knowing somebody who was still running around drinking too much and screwing strange men. Some of them

might be married, but Nancy never poached on her friends. And she could always be counted on to say or do something embarrassing at the dinner table—nearly a lost art here at the beginning of the new century—particularly since Washington Lee had quit drinking. A few months ago, at their last dinner party, she'd told Paul Auster that he ought to read John Grisham "to bone up on plotting."

Actually, Nancy was a lot like Corrine's little sister, except that Hilary hadn't yet written the book, or made the transition to act two—still the party girl at the age of thirty-whatever: the girlfriend, the traveling companion, the bit-part actress with the movie-star social life. If Corrine wasn't mistaken, Hilary would be thirty-five on her next birthday—the scariest one for single urban women, what Nancy had called in a recent article "the female equivalent of the two-minute warning in football." Time left, but not all that much. Bio clock ticking away.

"And of course the birthday boy and his dragoness—Jim and Judy. And Washington, and now your sister."

"Don't seat those two together—Washington and Hilary, I mean. They'd probably go at it right under the table."

"Where's the phone?" Russell asked, his head whipping around the wreckage of the kitchen. "I've got to ask Carlo about the meat." Sometimes she wondered how he didn't hurt his neck jerking his head around like some demented robin frantic for worms.

"What are you cooking?"

"Poitrine de veau farcie."

"Sometimes you can be such a fag. What's that in American?"

"Stuffed veal breast. It's kind of a retro dish."

"Sounds a little heavy. It's, like, seventy degrees outside."

"Hey, summer's over."

"Then why are you wearing a polo shirt?"

When Corrine stuck her head in the bathroom, Hilary was in the tub with the kids. She opened her mouth but found herself speechless, unable to think of an appropriate response. If her talk with Russell had made her self-conscious about her feelings for her sister, she nonethe-

less had a sudden terrifying premonition that Hilary had come to take her children away from her, and she wanted, needed, right *now,* to lift Jeremy up out of the tub, away from his . . . *aunt* was the word that had formed in her mind. But, of course, Hilary was more than his aunt—and that was the crux of the problem.

She tried to narrow her indignation to focus on the inappropriateness of Hilary's body, which wasn't the body of an aunt or a mother, but that of a starlet, of a fantasy object in a magazine. Would it be any less inappropriate if her six-year-old son were in the tub with a figure more boyish? Jeremy, however, seemed oblivious, his back to his naked aunt's tits, holding a Pokémon figure in each hand. And what about Russell, who might at any moment walk in to check on things? *Things.* That was what they were—she was seeing through Russell's eyes now—like objects with a separate existence from the owner's. She felt she had some sudden insight into the male psyche—the objectifying power of their lust.

She tried to remember the last time she'd seen her sister naked. Were her breasts always so *pronounced*? So *there*? She caught herself looking for scars. Living in L.A. all these years, of course she must've had them done. Something Hilary was likely to do anyway. As if she could read her sister's mind, Hilary began to soap her breasts and looked up at Corrine, innocent and unself-conscious, or provocative.

"I thought I'd better clean myself up for your company."

Will they be treated to a glimpse of your breasts? Corrine wondered.

Storey, who'd been humming, broke into a warbling song:

When you say good-bye
It doesn't mean you'll die
So don't cry
When you say good-bye

"That's a nice song," Corrine said.

"I just invented it."

Where did she come up with this stuff?

"This is Pikachu," said Jeremy, holding up a Pokémon, an obsession that had killed off the dinosaurs.

"How do you do, Pikachu?"

"Mom," Storey said. "Aunt Hilary knows the Backstreet Boys."

"I'm sure she does," Corrine said. "I'm sure she does."

Corrine was dressing when Russell, wearing his Chez Panisse apron, barged in to announce the arrival of Washington Lee.

After all these years, she still thought of Russell's entrances as being abrupt, almost slapstick. Crash Calloway. She usually found this endearing, though, Russell's physical lurchiness offsetting some of his more effete pretensions. She looked at her watch. "Remember when Washington always arrived two hours late?"

"That was before he stopped drinking. Now he wants to eat at six-thirty and be home by ten."

It was kind of sad, the extinction of that bright genie that came out after Washington had had a few. Corrine didn't particularly go for black guys as a rule, but the glimmer in his eye was when he was hitting his stride, the naughty confidences he drew you into, the outrageous and obscene comments always delivered with dry aplomb, his way of playing on your fear of being an uncool white person but then letting you off the hook at the last minute, allowing you to laugh *with* him at *them*. . . . She missed the bad old Washington, the one who wobbled to his feet as the dessert was served to quote swatches of poetry in a variety of languages before screwing one of the guests in the bathroom. It was all highly amusing, until the moment it became merely sloppy, a moment that came earlier and earlier in the evening as time went by and which became less and less charming after he married Veronica and they had a baby. Then he'd finally stopped, cold turkey, and while he was a less unpredictable element, she missed that spark, the demonic gleam. . . . The lights grew dimmer as they hit their forties and some of the lights had been extinguished altogether.

Russell pulled off the apron and rummaged in his closet. "Any idea how long Hilary's staying?"

"Haven't had a chance to ask." She glanced over at him. "You don't *really* mind, do you? God knows we owe her."

"I *like* Hilary," Russell said. "I'm crazy about Hilary." He held up one of his stripy English dress shirts. "What do you think? With a blazer and jeans."

"Very Upper East Side at home for the evening," Corrine said, smiling at the pride Russell took in his slightly fuddy-duddy, contrarian form of dress, particularly since they'd moved downtown. He was one of the few humans south of Fourteenth Street who didn't own a pair of black jeans.

"Maybe she can do some baby-sitting," he said. "I mean, not that I think of her as a natural in that department. On the other hand—"

"Let's not get into the other hand," said Corrine, nodding to indicate Jeremy, who was suddenly in the door.

"Hey, Dad," he said. "What's faster—a Ferrari or a Porsche?"

"It depends," Russell said.

"Jimmy Clifton's dad has a Ferrari, but Asher Gold's dad has a Porsche."

"Ferrari," Russell said.

"I thought so. Thanks, Dad."

This was one of the perils of raising kids in New York, she thought, at least if you were trying to subsist on less than two hundred and fifty grand a year. Ferraris and Porsches. When they had first moved to TriBeCa, it was a frontier village populated by artists, musicians, and families that couldn't afford space uptown and didn't mind traveling ten blocks for groceries, but in the last few years it had been overrun by Wall Streeters and celebrities and Kennedy princes. If they'd owned their loft, they at least would have profited from the gentrification, but by renting, they had missed out on the boom. Although their rent was for the moment stabilized, they lived in fear of paying market price for the space. She'd tried to persuade Russell to look at houses in Brooklyn or even Pelham, a not-too-distant refuge of the middle-aged culturati that had some unrestored houses and decent public schools, but he was determined to make his stand in Manhattan, claiming he was too old for Brooklyn and too young for Pelham—a typical Russell observation.

"How do I look?" Corrine smoothed her hair back and faced him.

"Great," he answered without looking.

"How would you know?"

He turned away from the mirror, where he was fixing his collar. "That dress isn't my favorite."

"What's wrong with it?"

"Too stretchy across the top. It makes you look flat."

"I *am* flat." She pictured Hilary's breasts, their volume and thrust.

"No you're not." He seemed to take this personally, as if she were devaluing marital property. For her part, Corrine was quite happy with her endowment and secretly believed that cup size had an inverse ratio to IQ. "Well, thirty-four barely B doesn't exactly count as stacked."

"You asked my opinion, my love."

"Go see if Storey's in her pj's yet. Since I've got to change."

While she didn't necessarily share Russell's opinion on the dress, she now felt self-conscious—a bad way to start out an evening. Suddenly, it was all about tits.

"Hey, Mom," Jeremy said. "Can humans transform themselves?"

"What do you mean, honey?"

"I mean, can they change into other things?"

Puzzled, she finally looked away from the vanity and saw he was playing with one of those Transformer robots that can be converted into trucks and tanks and planes. "That's a very good question, honey."

"Well, can they?"

"Better ask your father."