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THE CALOPAR FACE

SHE UNDERSTOOD AT AN EARLY AGE that there was something wrong with her face, but she wasn't sure what it was. It seemed to her that the face was there, harmless and unspectacular, and then one day suddenly it wasn't. The mirror sizzling in the sink. Blood in her pants. Her mother on her hands and knees, painting every inch of exposed chrome with shoe polish to keep it from melting beneath Emma's gaze. For a long time after that, she believed that she didn't have a face. That this was the nature of her particular deformity. A sudden and unbearable anonymity that melted mirrors and turned knives and spoons into quivering silver puddles on the Formica. An apocalyptic facelessness. Some essential part of her had vanished and been replaced with a terrible secret.

She remembered the day her face disappeared. One minute she was looking into the mirror and the next minute the charred metal socket of the medicine chest stared back at her, the sink filled with drops of molten glass. She heard her mother whispering into the telephone.

That night, the fat father arrived with a carton of fish dumplings and a box of disposable faces. Her mother removed one from the box and showed her how to put it on. Emma impaled a dumpling on her plastic fork and guided it through the hole in the new face. The father winced. Her mother said, "Don't." Her mother said, "Like this," and leaned forward with her fingers to tear the corners of the mouth wider. When they were finished eating, her mother sent her into the bathroom to change the face. "You're dirty. Go."

Years later, during the Labour War, witnessing the dismantled faces of freelancers who'd been beaten to death and left in dumpsters up and down Harbour Street, she would recall with a vague sense of shame mingled with revulsion how her own stained faces had accumulated in the wastebasket beneath the sink in that tenement kitchen—as if that private childhood trauma had merely been the premonition of some larger cataclysm.

They called her Aimee then: her mother, the fathers. Aimee Doe. It was the name on the certificate that her mother kept in the drawer with the needles and the spoons. Mother: Jane Doe. Father: Unknown.

When she looked in the mirror and saw the paper face, that was Aimee. Aimee's face was the face that the fathers saw without their special glasses on, the face she wore when she went out into the city at night on errands for her mother. If you turned that face inside out, you would see the other face, the secret face—and it would be the last thing you ever saw. At night, in her room, she turned her name inside out and found another there: a secret name for the secret face. Aimee into Emma. It was the name she called herself in bed at night with the last of the day's paper faces crumpled in the wastebasket beside her bed like a dirty Kleenex...the name she called herself in the dark as she ran her fingers over her features. Sometimes she would hold a mirror up in the dark, inches from her face, imagining she could see herself, half hoping that her mother would accidentally stumble into the room on her way to the toilet and switch on the light, allowing Aimee one glimpse of Emma before the mirror melted and the bed burst into flames.

Her mother spent weeks in her room, sprawled amid the dirty sheets. The father came and went in his various faces, shutting the door behind him. He stayed for an hour and left money on the kitchen table. Sometimes he brought groceries or bottles of squink. Once he left her mother moaning on the floor and pulled everything out of the drawers before leaving with the radio, two lottery tickets that had been taped to the refrigerator, and a bottle of coins. Without a face of her own to keep her company, Emma felt more alone than ever. The disposable faces were no consolation. Each one was the same and none were hers. Noises came through the wall from her mother's room. Sobs, coughs, laughter, moans, heated words. The dull rhythmic slap of skin on skin.

"I got no money," her mother said through the wall. "They'll take her from me. I heard what they do. These special rooms without windows, trying to fix them with some kind of bomb. It's like murder."

Emma took her mother's lipsticks and eyeliners from the charred medicine chest and drew faces on the paper masks. She tried on half a dozen, but somehow the same anonymity bled through all her efforts and left her feeling even more faceless than when she began. She held conversations with the voices that seeped through the wall. When the father was gone, she cooked tea for her mother on the gas ring or heated cans of soup in the tin saucepan. But mostly her mother drank her dinner out of a bottle or cooked

her own meal in bed with a needle and a spoon.

Every so often her mother suffered temporary bouts of sanity in which she would emerge from her room with her hair combed, furiously scour the apartment, set pots boiling, and sit Emma down at the kitchen table to teach her numbers and words. Days sometimes went by with no fathers and the rooms relatively clean and her mother standing over the stove or sitting beside her pointing out words with one raw finger.

Then it would all end abruptly with a knock on the door.

There was an ex-monk on Carp Street who constructed special eye-glasses for viewing faces like hers. A defrocked Carnite with a knowledge of lenses: the way a properly ground piece of glass could bend light in such a way that it counteracted the spell of the face so that the fathers could look at it without going blind or tearing out their hair or carving the face to ribbons in some inexplicable fugue of desire and rage.

The father with the aluminum suit came and sometimes he brought another father with him. The other father always wore a new face, and Emma decided that this was because he was rich and could afford to buy more faces than the father in the aluminum suit who'd been wearing the same face for so long that it was creased and ragged and blotched. If she were rich, she would buy herself a new face and then she would be able to see herself. The fathers could see each other. They sat on the couch with the mother, drinking out of a bottle. Her mother had a face, but it was missing something. The aluminum father tied a rubber tube around the mother's thigh and took something out of a satchel while the mother buried her face in the other one's lap. Her mother's face was like an unfinished puzzle.

When the fathers were finished with the mother, they came into Emma's room. They gave her a bag of gum and let her chew it all at once. They wore the special glasses and made her lie on the bed and they unwrapped her carefully as if she were a bomb that had been sent through the mail.

Then they touched her with their tongues and took turns putting themselves inside her.

Years went by like that. A long, dull smear of television, takeout, and men in custom-built eyewear who peered into her face while they fucked her as if they were viewing an apocalyptic event, some phenomenon trembling on the verge of revelation.

Her mother retired into a delirium of squink and cooked powder as if she were trying to obliterate her own face by first dismantling what was

behind it. The men kept coming, but they came only for Emma now. The glasses rendered her beauty breathtaking but bearable. At night, she put on a paper face and took a taxi down to Kale Street where prepubescent dealers sold skag in paper envelopes and Ziploc bags. Then she came back to the flat and cooked the powder on the gas ring. She tied off the mother's leg and poked for a vein that hadn't yet collapsed. Her mother's face was almost gone by then, as if someone had been sneaking into the apartment during the night and working at it with an eraser.

At some point Emma began to understand that there was a secret connection between the unbearable perfection of her own face and her mother's vanishing features. With the money she earned from the men, she bought a small television set that she propped up on a milk crate in the kitchen. It told the stocks and the weather and the sports scores and the murder statistics and spoke of a pill that had rendered its users temporarily beautiful before gradually obliterating their faces. Calopar. The beauty drug, the television called it. Developed by Carney Pharmaceuticals, Inc. fifteen years earlier and then pirated by underground labs and peddled on the street before it reached FDA stage-two trials. Thousands of women had taken the black-market version of the drug in the hopes of landing jobs in the high-end skin houses by improving their aesthetic ranking. By the time the adverse side effects began to surface in the data stream, it was too late. The FDA rejected Calopar, but its street version persisted despite public warnings. After nine or ten months of steadily increasing beauty, users experienced a brief aesthetic plateau before the drug began the long process of destroying their faces. There was no effective treatment.

Emma soon realized that almost everyone but her had known this for years. Calopar was like cancer or rain or taxes. It was yesterday's news. The only reason it had resurfaced now was that the passage of time had recently revealed a secondary side effect. Women who had taken the drug during pregnancy had given birth to daughters whose faces bloomed like poisonous flowers at the onset of menstruation, as if the excessive beauty that had visited and then abandoned the mothers' faces had lain dormant in the daughters until the blood's secret clock set it free. Prolonged viewing of the daughters' faces had been linked to violence, blindness, dysphasia, sexual compulsion, psychosis, and suicide. Reflective surfaces were reported to liquefy on contact with the image. The Calopar daughters themselves suffered from poor self-delineation resulting from the inability to view their own reflections after the onset of puberty. Nobody knew why no sons were born. Nobody knew why Calopar had obliterated the faces of the mothers or why

it had etched a lethal beauty on the faces of their daughters.

Nobody knew whether the daughters' faces too would in time evaporate.

Her mother died in her sleep in December. Vatch came in his aluminum suit. Broken teeth. Face full of sores. Gout gimping his leg.

"Something's happened," Emma said.

He sat on a stool in her mother's room. He was in there for hours. Emma could hear him weeping through the walls. He hadn't touched her since she was fourteen. She tried to hate him. Snow fell outside the window, erasing the city from North Harbour to Barksdale. "We have to call someone," Vatch told her. He had the night-table drawer open and was filling a paper bag with spoons and sharps, half a gram of powder in a Ziploc bag, cotton balls, rubber tubes, two sets of works wrapped in an old pair of bloodstained panties. He looked old and feeble, disoriented. She sensed that a fundamental shift in their relationship had occurred, some Rubicon crossed without benefit of words or gestures.

"You want this stuff? Cops're gonna ask questions."

She shook her head: "Get it out of here."

"They'll ask questions anyway. When they figure out the face, they'll call in the capital letters: DSS, DCW, DEA, DFC. You're a problem. A minor. Illegal face. It's not like you're working for some blue-chip house with a shitload of shysters to keep the city suits tied up in court. Rocheaux, he gets a fuckin' dispensation from the Pope. Me, I'm nobody. I can't protect you. They'll want to take you into custody, make you what they call a ward of the city. You know what I'm saying? Your ma, she didn't want that. Listen. You need to disappear. We clean the place up like she never had a daughter. You know what I'm saying. Without you, she's just another junkie to them—no disrespect, Aim. The face, yeah. But they file that shit away in some carton long as there's no daughter. I know about it. There's what they call case-loads. Conviction ratios. Cops've gotta wrap it up and move on to the next one. They don't got time to dick around."

"The neighbours."

"Buncha fuckin' freelancers and dustheads."

"They'll stick her in some freezer downtown."

"A week tops. I know this shyster."

"No," Emma shook her head. "No police. I don't want them taking her."

"Okay, okay. Fine. You stay here with her tonight then. Lemme talk to

Bickerman. We'll need papers. A certificate. He can fix it so's everything's legit. I'll need some need cash though—I don't keep funds earmarked for this kinda thing."

"How much?"

"How much you got?"

Two days earlier he wouldn't have bothered to ask.

Vatch's departure from her life was accompanied by the same confusion that had attended his first murky appearance. He was the one who raised the question of her future: a placement, job security, protection. She had no doubt that there was a commission involved, a finder's fee for the face—and it irked her. But she told herself that she was building a career. There were stages involved, compromises and gray areas. She was in no position to turn down a decent offer, even if it came to her via Vatch.

The problem was that no legitimate house would have her with the face in its present form. The beauty of the Calopar daughters had proven to be irresistible but cataclysmic. Incontinence. Impotence. Symptoms of linguistic interference that were made much of by Glossalists seeking evidence to support their erotic theories. Ocular granuloma induced in viewers by Calopar's signature ECAF—Excecating Congenital (hyper-)Aesthetic Facialism, otherwise known in the layman's literature as "inverted gorgonism"—which essentially turned the gazer's eyes to stone. That was the least of it. There were the suicides, the homicides, the unspeakable mutilations. The previous August, on Eel Street, three members of a newly-formed black-market co-op of unabridged Calopar whores were found with their faces removed from their skulls as if their beauty had induced in the fugitive viewer some sort of obsessive surgical impulse. In October, DEA officials added the Calopar face to their list of illegal substances. Medical records were subpoenaed and women were taken into custody for mandatory facial renovations. Vito Vesuvius issued a statement saying that he would seek immediate expulsion of any GASM member found to have violated the ban on Calopar whores. Even the pop-up brothels and the street pimps didn't want the heat. It was official: the face was contraband.

Vatch referred her to a pimp with a floating stable and a posse of rented muscle.

"It's not safe on your own," he told her. "Especially with the face. It makes people do things. You know what I'm saying."

The pimp was a pseudo-Russian, short and built like a bullet, with a studied accent and an artificial beard. Amid the marginal realm of unregulated flesh, the Slavic incognito lent him a certain underworld credibility: Moscow, Vladivostock, Brighton Beach. The beard was pointy and Leninesque. A spell was cast. Certain threats were implied: razor wounds skillfully applied to the genitals and then bathed in Stolichnaya; a hollow-cheeked young man in a cheap black leather coat who would approach you on a crowded street at noon and put a bullet in your head. It was all theatre, of course. The pimp's backers weren't a cartel of ruthless Yuris in badly tailored suits, but a group of uptown film producers looking to branch out from celluloid sex into a more reality-based sector of the business. They'd found their vehicle in one Thomas Gerfitz a.k.a. Peter Dangle, who had been forced out of a budding career in the skin cinema after a botched penile enhancement at an unlicensed skin boutique had left him *sans outil*. The doctors plugged him into a catheter, packed his crotch with gauze, and placed him on a suicide watch. A few weeks later, he was released from the hospital with his mood artificially elevated by psychotropics and his occupational options severely limited by anatomical constraints. A producer from his former studio suggested a career in the service sector, offered seed money, contacts. The cock jockey, his anatomy now permanently abridged, embarked on a career as an entrepreneur.

He specialized in a line of whores whose faces had been reconstructed to resemble famous women: starlets, princesses, gymnasts, divas, ax murderers, spies, supermodels. The living and the dead. He had influential backers and a class-2 peep license that allowed for mobile divestment services with restricted contact. In other words, the business was registered as a tits-and-ass show on wheels. His skin-to-skin operation was unlicensed and technically illegal, but the peep license was a loophole through which pimps like Lin Po and Tufa had made their entry into the industry, and Gerfitz intended to follow in their footsteps. GASM-approval for his skin business was rumored to be imminent, despite the fact that initial marketing tests of his merchandise were mixed. One critic complained that his whores were essentially nostalgic, while another (an investigative journalist who'd managed to uncover his identity as Dangle) traced the origin of his revisionist merchandise to "a neurotic compulsion stemming from the entrepreneur's rumoured surgical trauma" and speculated that the pimp hoped to somehow correct the past by correcting the faces of his whores.

When Emma came to him by way of Vatch, he offered to do for her what his studio had refused to do for him: finance her face, make sure it was done

by a legitimate clinic. They were in his chauffeured car driving north on Oceanside, the radio tuned to an industrial waltz. Blue liqueur on ice in the glass in her hand. The seats upholstered in something illegal. He let the accent drop. Told her what had befallen him at a black-market skin boutique on the Sprawl all for the lack of a little capital and an investor who believed in him. How he used to be Thomas Gerfitzl and then became Peter Dangle, and now was simply Ivan (not EYE-van, he told her, EEE-von, and when she asked if that wasn't a woman's name, he politely offered to knock her teeth out for her, which was another sort of facial adjustment altogether). He used to ride meat for ten hours at a stretch while they held light meters up to his ass or angled a camera under his scrotum. Now he drove around in the back of a six-door bulletproof Caddy that had once belong to a feared and famous dead man.

"You're stuck between the devil and the DFC," he told her. "You can cash in your life savings and try to buy yourself a new face at a discount—that's what I did, and look what happened to me—or you can turn yourself in to the bureaucrats over at the Facial Calibration Department. They'll just ruin you in a less dramatic fashion than the black-market hacks. They'll make you bland. Drain all that beauty out of your face and leave you with nothing. No product to sell. No livelihood. Or."

"Or what?"

"Or you can let me help you. There are methods that can preserve your face. Take just enough edge off your beauty to render it bearable—not to mention legal. You could work wherever you wanted to then. You'd have houses fighting over you."

"And who would I be?" Emma asked. She sipped her drink through the mask, the damp paper clinging to her lips.

"You'd be yourself."

"Don't you have a gap you need to fill in your inventory? Some dead movie star or one of those faces that men fight wars over?"

No, he told her. She was too perfect. It would be a waste to abridge all that beauty, shoehorn it into a prefabricated face: Marilyn, Mata Hari, Dietrich, the Virgin Mary. Her face could stand on its own. It wasn't his sort of merchandise, of course. His clients were followers and fetishists. They wanted a familiar face—a face with a mythology behind it, a certain amount of fame attached. A face already validated by history. No, he would add her to his stable, but she would be herself. Once she paid off the mortgage on the face, he'd sell her contract to a suitable house. The Volcano Club, say, or The Iron Tongue. "If you go with The Tongue," he told her, "we just have

to remember to put a No Bruise clause in the contract. Protect your investment.” He would pocket a quick profit, and she would be set for life: disability insurance, medical coverage, a retirement package, bonus clause, maybe even stock options. She had his word.

“You could be a star,” he said.

“We don’t believe in knives,” the face consultant explained.

There were ceramic faces displayed on the bookshelves and framed reproductions of antique anatomical charts on the walls.

“The knife is rehabilitation by means of mutilation. Your face suffers from an excess of symmetry. Calopar is an anatomical organizer, an anti-entropic. It works by compulsively sorting cells in the fetal face for optimum bilateral congruence. By the time the face reaches puberty it’s become too perfect to even look at. What we want to do here is reintroduce time into the face, and thereby reintroduce imperfection into your features. Create just enough asymmetry to render the face viewable.”

They scrubbed her face, dressed her in a paper gown, and took her to a time-controlled room where all the clocks stood still and the air was thickened by a perpetual nostalgia for some obscure moment in the recent past. Emma felt as if she were walking through water. It was all she could do to keep moving forward. One wall of the room was glass and behind it she could see computer equipment and technicians in lab coats. In the center of the room there was a chair with a lead box suspended above it on adjustable brackets. The box was open on one side and hinged, with a circle cut in the bottom to accommodate the neck. Inside, it was lined with rubber the color of jaundiced skin. The nurse led her to the chair and enclosed her head in the box with her face toward the opening. She felt like that girl in the fairy tale who makes the wrong wish and gets turned into a television. They took measurements and drew lines on her face with a grease pencil. The computer divided her features into a grid. The nurse wheeled over what looked like an enormous gun with a clock attached to it and bolted the barrel to the front of the box.

Emma couldn’t see anything. It was difficult to breathe...the stale odour of her own breath inside the box...the box ticking as if it were going to explode. She remembered something her mother had said a long time ago and she felt an uncontrollable urge to scream. Her head felt as if it had been disconnected from the rest of her body. It felt hollow, poised...a single station in a vast railway system, hushed with the imminence of some awful arrival.

She took a deep breath.

Felt the world rush through her.

She awoke in a room with a mirrored ceiling and gazed up to see her own image hovering above the bed like an angel of death. There was something vaguely familiar about the face—the way certain violent events seem familiar at the moment of their unfolding, as if the circumstances of our deaths have been whispered to us in the womb, and the body’s catastrophe, when it finally arrives, is nothing more than a memory resurfacing.

Ivan didn’t put her to work right away. He said he wanted her to take some time to grow into her new face, to bond with it.

“If you’re fighting your face, your clients will sense it,” he told her. “Some of these shoddy Calopar renovations, you can tell that the face is out of synch with the rest of the body. It’s like the merch doesn’t know her own map. The face isn’t participating in the action: it’s just there, watching the body, like a third party. It freaks the clients out. Some of them like that, but it’s a niche market and I’m already maxed out on inventory in that area.”

Ivan didn’t want her being distracted by the other whores while she adjusted to her new face, so he moved her into a mirrored room in his penthouse. Everywhere Emma turned, she saw the face repeated like bottles of beer or cans of soup on a grocery shelf. She began to feel the burden of her own eyes multiplied in the mirrors. She had no privacy. The face was continually gazing at her, its eyes at once vacant and hungry. There was no way to escape it except for the television set, which Ivan allowed her to have only after she begged him. The television was like a hole in the room. She could turn it on and gaze at something other than the monotony of her own image staring back at her.

But her confinement in the pimp’s mirrored guest room failed to render the new face familiar or alleviate her anxiety over its appearance. Emma had no way to gauge her own beauty. In the weeks that followed she paged through magazines, art books, and Ivan’s catalogue of whores with famous faces, measuring her own face against those she encountered. The photographs taught her nothing. The faces portrayed in them failed to move her. Like her own, they were marred by an intense vacancy, a lack so profound that it was visible. She began to wonder whether a secondary effect of Calopar on the daughters of its users had been to render them aesthetically immune, to blind them to the charms of the flesh as a natural defense against their own unbearable beauty. She found herself plunged into an ontological crisis that resisted all her efforts to alleviate it by means of the television remote. She surrendered herself to the mirror. Ivan told her that she was

stunning, and she spent hours peering into the mirrored walls of the room trying to see what he saw—but the new face made no more sense to her than her old one. It merely had the advantage of being visible, whereas its predecessor had kept itself hidden.

She recalled a pamphlet Vatch had once brought her. It was distributed by a Facialist sect that claimed that the Calopar face couldn't be seen because it was the face of God made manifest in flesh. If her first face had been a manifestation of God, this second face was a text written in an unintelligible language. The longer she gazed at it the less she understood.

Sensing her alienation from the face, Ivan began to lobby for additional surgery. In order to fine-tune her beauty, he said. Tweak the face. Make it a little less daunting.

"Too perfect and you scare the customers off," he told her. "You want just a whiff of mortality. It reminds them of what they're paying for."

"No," Emma said. "No surgery."

"I've got a substantial chunk of my capital invested in you. This isn't your decision. Read your contract."

She picked a lamp up off the night table and flung it across the room at him. It struck the mirrored wall. For a moment, her image hung there in front of her, fractured, like something a spiteful Spaniard would paint after too much wine. Then it vanished with a crash. The pimp stared at her as if he were trying to set her hair on fire with his eyes. Emma snatched up a sliver of silvered glass and pressed it to her cheek.

"How much is your investment going to be worth if I decide to do the surgery myself, Ivan? Let's bottom-line it. I mean, why increase your overhead? How hard can it be? A slice here, a slice there."

The pimp rose from his chair.

"We'll talk later," he said softly. "When you're rational."

That night she was awakened out of a sound sleep. Hands holding her down. The lights on. Dangle's face above her. Someone was squeezing her nose shut. She screamed. The pimp appeared, then disappeared. A moment later, he climbed on the bed and straddled her face. She could see the dark socket of his anus poised above her, the ruined rope of his cock hanging between his parted thighs. She screamed again, begged him to stop. The anus opened as if it were going to speak and a warm burst of air broke over her face. Then again. When it opened for the third time she saw the dark tip of a turd appear, like an animal peering out of a hole. Above her Dangle grunted softly, said something to the hands that were restraining her, and lowered his ass toward her mouth. She tried to purse her lips and take short, quick

breaths, but yet another hand appeared, wrapped itself around her chin, and squeezed her cheeks, forcing her jaw open. The pimp bore down on her, pressing himself against her lips in an obscene kiss. His shit filled her mouth, a hot putrid mash clotting her throat. Emma gagged. He sat on her face, applied his full weight to her, forcing her to swallow what had come out of him. She struggled, tried to breath.

The room went black.

She woke in Ivan's shit and her own vomit. The stench made her sick again. She stumbled to the bathroom and found him there, one foot perched on the edge of the toilet, meticulously wiping himself with a wad of tissue.

"You look like shit," he said with a smirk as she retched into the sink. "Clean yourself up. You have an appointment in two hours. And remember, I paid for that face. It belongs to me. If I can't turn a profit on it, I'll use it as a toilet. The choice is yours."

The face took six weeks to heal. From a fiscal standpoint, the surgery was a success. If Emma was no closer than she had been to accepting her new face, at least the face now appeared as if it had accepted itself—a development that rendered both the face and the body to which it was attached more valuable on the open market. And the open market was precisely where Ivan put her.

Right after her surgery, she was moved out of the mirrored room in the penthouse and installed in a secure loft in the garment district with Ivan's other whores. The loft was an old knitting factory that had been converted into a dormitory. Two thirds of the space were devoted to kitchen facilities, a dining area, toilets, showers, and separate bathrooms and sleeping quarters for the pimp's rented muscle. The remainder of the loft was divided into cubicles to house the whores. Each cubbyhole was furnished with a mattress, a mirror, a dresser, a lamp, and a wooden chair. The loft's skylights and window panes had been painted white to allow the sunlight to filter through while keeping out the prying lenses of paparazzi who were looking to make a reputation for themselves by producing photographic evidence of Ivan's unlicensed enterprise. The pimp had formally applied for GASM membership, but in the interim he continued to cultivate the illusion that his operation didn't exist. More than a few of his whores were forgeries of famous figures in the skin industry and therefore infringed on GASM copyrights. The girl in the cubicle next door to Emma, for example, was recuperating from massive hair transplants intended to enhance her resemblance to Apfel Sin, the insanely popular yap vulvocalist who'd been discovered by Gneissman and

had recently opened to rave reviews at The Sideshow. Two other whores had, as a condition of their employment, undergone double mastectomies, had their breasts replaced with shoddy pneumatic prosthetics that wouldn't fool a layman let alone a devoted Merkle, and had false rubber valves surgically implanted in their armpits and navels—all this to accommodate the perverse desires of a single wealthy client who could well-afford an original Merkle whore but happened to harbour a fetish for fraudulent anatomies.

Emma was assigned a cubicle between the bed-ridden Sin impersonator and a post-beatific Joan of Arc with a surgically-implanted halo and a suit of armour that occupied a corner of her cubicle during her off-hours like a hollow chrome doppelganger. Emma filled the drawers of the tiny dresser with her few belongings: the lingerie that Ivan had bought her, a hairbrush, lipstick, a black satin blindfold, the photograph of her mother before her face had evaporated. During the day, she donned the blindfold and tried to sleep beneath the pale light filtering in through the painted panes. All around her she could hear the other whores asleep in their cubicles, their disparate breaths secretly synchronized by proximity, like their moods and the monthly flow of their blood, until their breaths became the breath of a single animal, rising and falling, breaking in waves against the ragged edge of Emma's insomnia like the feminine fulfillment of some Carnite prophecy: an ocean of women. On the days when Emma did manage to sleep, she woke between three and four in the afternoon, ate, showered in the communal stall, blew her hair dry and applied her makeup while standing beside the other whores in front of the enormous mirror that occupied an entire wall of the loft and was fitted with thirty-three sinks and an arsenal of holstered hair blowers. At six she boarded one of Ivan's armoured vans in the company of a Garbo, a Jackie O, one of the mock Merkle whores, Josephine Baker, Bathsheba, Helen of Troy, and a Mother Theresa with whose improbably voluptuous anatomy Dangle's meat technicians had taken vast creative liberties (verisimilitude only got you so far in the skin business).

At 6:25, the whores, half a dozen armed chaperones, and a sales associate were dropped off at an anonymous alley that ran between Carp and Albacore. The alley, to which Ivan and his investors had secured streetwalking rights by means of covert alliances and contracts not sanctioned by GASM, was too small to appear on City Hall's official maps, but johns and industry insiders referred to it as The Portrait Gallery. Emma and the other whores would line the walls of the alley while sailors, Shriners, and groups of foreign businessmen accompanied by interpreters trooped through. Ivan had arranged for an electrician to tap into one of the streetlights and string sockets

along both walls. The whores displayed themselves beneath the bare bulbs while the sales associate made his pitch to prospective buyers: anatomical specs, quality of craftsmanship, biographical bits and pieces designed to arouse the buyer's billfold (Catherine the Great's equine appetites, or how Danae had invented the golden shower). All business went through the sales associate, who collected the cash in a lockbox and routed credit card transactions through a portable modem. The johns were then issued room vouchers and sent down the street with their whores to consummate the deal. Ivan had an account with a Carp Street flop that rented rooms by the half-hour, and the manager of the establishment allowed the pimp's goons to lounge in the dusty lobby where they were in a better position to protect Ivan's investments if any shit should happen to hit the fan.

After a few days of working The Portrait Gallery, Emma became friendly with some of the other whores. It was hard for her at first. All those years alone while her mother grew invisible in the next room...only her paper masks for company...the endless string of men who sometimes spoke but never listened...then her incarceration in the pimp's mirrored room and the claustrophobic persistence of her own image—Emma had never learned how to talk to other women. She was self-conscious and felt the burden of her face. But she quickly learned that all of Ivan's whores bore one burden or another: broken promises, sales quotas, scars, secrets, deferred dreams that festered into peptic ulcers or acne so severe that the pimp threatened them with more surgery if they didn't do something about it immediately.

The Portrait Gallery was only one of several sales outlets out of which Ivan operated. The pimp maintained a discreet presence on the piers, warehousing half a dozen whores in two cargo containers that had been subdivided and decorated as stage sets from famous films. Mingled in among the art houses and tattoo galleries on Park Place he kept a third-floor showroom in which his celebrity whores could be viewed by appointment, and he had a catalogue service that would deliver a whore to a customer's doorstep or to the forecabin of a freighter. In addition to group quotas, the whores were also expected to meet individual sales quotas that were a constant source of anxiety to most of them. To her surprise, Emma learned that the Mother Theresa whore led the Gallery group in year-to-date sales. Apparently, the blasphemous discrepancy between the late nun's ravaged face and the young dupe's flawlessly-engineered body provided an erotic jolt that proved irresistible for a significant percentage of Ivan's target audience. Vegan clients in particular were fascinated by the anatomical antithesis that they imagined had been accomplished by the same horticultural techniques with

which their shamans sometimes grafted two souls into a single body. They addressed the Mother Theresa whore in the plural, and before fucking her they prayed for her health and asked permission to sprinkle her with water from the tiny vials that they wore on lanyards around their necks.

“I don’t mind it,” she said as they sat in Emma’s cubicle one morning after a ten-hour shift in The Portrait Gallery. “It’s kind of sweet in a way. Sometimes they give me like little packets of fertilizer. For gifts, you know? I mean, it’s just nice to have someone be nice to you for a change.”

She choked up, put her hand to her mouth, and started to cry.

Emma put her arm around her. “Are you okay?”

The Theresa whore nodded, wiped her eyes with the heel of her hand.

“When I look in the mirror, I can’t breath. I’m only twenty and I’m wearing this old woman’s face. That bastard told me I was gonna be a Bardo. I saw the body first. There were the stitches and everything was still swollen, but you could tell it was going to be beautiful when it all healed. A few days after that, they took off the bandages and let me see the face. I kept thinking it was going to get better. I was staying in his penthouse then, in this room with mirrors everywhere and I couldn’t stand to look at myself. The whole time that son-of-a-bitch kept telling me it would all come together when it healed, but when it did finally heal it looked worse than ever. Then one night he put a video on and asked me if I knew who Mother Theresa was. There was a shot of all these half-naked children in the street, in like India or someplace, and then I saw myself. I started screaming. Ivan slapped me. I told him I wanted my face fixed or I was going to the cops. I’d hire a lawyer and sue him. He told me I was a dumb cunt and that he’d smack the shit out of me right then and there except he’d just spent good money for my face. I tried to get out of there. I tried to leave. I don’t know what I was thinking. He called security. They took me back to the room, the one with the mirrors. They held me down and he had his...he had his mouth....”

“What?” Emma whispered. “You can tell me. I was in that room. He did something to me too. You’re not alone.”

“I can’t. It was awful.”

“What did he do? It’s okay,” Emma said. “You can tell me.”

“He...oh, god...he had his mouth between my legs, and he...he...”

“What?”

“...he bit off a part of me.”

The girl had her hand over her mouth and she was sobbing and nodding the dead woman’s ravaged head in mute hysteria. Emma put her arms around her and held her the way she’d sometimes held her faceless mother

when she was sick with junk. Looking at the girl's face, she had to keep reminding herself that the Mother Theresa whore was only a few years older than she was. Her hands were beautiful. The line at which her chin's wattled skin met the perfection of her throat was like some loophole in time through which her head had become alienated from her body.

The whore pulled herself together.

"Is that what he did to you?" she asked.

"No," Emma said. "He did something else to me, but it wasn't nearly as awful as what he did to you."

The Theresa whore pressed her fingertips to her lips and looked at Emma as if she were going to cry again. "There's something else I have to tell you," she said. "I'm not the only one. Eventually he does it to all of them. Sometimes I think that's why we all stay. It's as if he's taken away the most secret part of us and there's nothing left to leave for."

A few mornings later Emma heard the same story from the Joan of Arc whore, who appeared unarmoured in her cubicle bearing two cups of chamomile tea and then led her to one of the toilet stalls where she lifted her nightgown and spread her labia to display the place where the pimp had mutilated her with his mouth. She told Emma that she belonged to a feminist action cell that was going to rid the waterfront of sadistic hierarchical phallic scumbags like Ivan.

"He thinks he's crippling us. He's under the illusion that female pleasure is confined to this one little piece of meat, that it's governed by the same phallic paradigm that's left him frustrated and impotent and filled with rage. Let me tell you something, he did me a favour. I didn't understand my own body until that fucking animal tried to mutilate it. I actually believed that my own pleasure was centralized. That it was like some colonial empire that required a seat of power in order to survive."

"You shouldn't be telling me this," Emma said. "You don't even know me. What makes you think you can trust me?"

"I know more than you think. In some ways I know more about you than you know about yourself."

"What are you talking about?"

She reached over and touched Emma's chin, gently nudging her toward the mirror. They both stared at Emma's face in the glass.

"I'm talking about your face," the Joan of Arc whispered, "and what it's capable of. I'm talking about your political conscience...about abandoning your role as a perpetual victim...about using your anatomy as a weapon

against those who've been using that same anatomy as an instrument of your oppression. I'm talking about killing Thomas Gerfitzl or Peter Dangle or whatever other incarnation in which the enemy chooses to present himself. Do you think I stick around here for my health? I'm here to recruit an assassin—and now I've found her."

"You're out of your mind," Emma said.

"Am I? You've internalized your oppressor. He haunts your gaze: you can only see yourself now through his eyes. You're alienated from yourself, and what's worse, you've accepted your alienation. You believe there's no solution to it, but I'm telling you there is. Don't confuse passivity with ethics. If your right eye offends you, pluck it out. Destroy the gaze and you free the object. Don't misunderstand me, I'm not telling you this just so that you can preserve some piece of yourself that you mistakenly associate with your sexuality. What Dangle does to you with his teeth is beside the point. If you act only to preserve the hierarchy of your own anatomy, then you've gained nothing. It's a serious mistake to see yourself purely as a victim here. Pimps like Dangle are part of a destructive paradigm in which you and your own sexuality are complicit. Do you understand that? In killing him, you kill the worst part of yourself so that the better part can live. By killing him, you make yourself whole."

"I have to go to sleep."

"No, you have to wake up, sweetheart. I want to tell you a story. About nine months ago I was working The Portrait Gallery, sleepwalking through my shift. I was drinking and eating pills and watching my life as if it were a movie starring someone else. A few months before that, Ivan had funded my surgery and had me delivered to his apartment to recuperate. I stayed in a mirrored room. He brought me champagne and lingerie and little black fish eggs on tiny crackers. I thought he was God. One night he came in and told me that he wanted to see what he'd paid for. I was on the bed and he had his mouth between my legs. I hadn't heard the stories. I didn't know enough to be afraid of him. I thought he'd saved me from the streets. He'd given me a new face and a new career. I was grateful. It wouldn't be an exaggeration to say that I was fond of him. I won't lie to you: I was enjoying it, his mouth on me. His tongue felt good. I was on the verge of coming when he did it. He had my clitoris between his teeth and he bit down hard and in an instant I went from pleasure to indescribable pain. I think I screamed. I know I passed out. When I came to I was tied spread-eagled to the bedposts and this old man in surgical gloves was working between my legs with a needle and thread like some kind of demented tailor. I couldn't feel anything there.

Later I found out they'd given me an Epidural. The old man was some kind of retired military doctor. Ivan came in every few days to check on me. I would lie there crying on the bed with my legs spread while the old man inspected the stitches, and Ivan would walk in and peer over the old bastard's shoulder and ask how soon it would be before I'd be ready to work. He never told me why he did what he did to me. In fact, he acted as if nothing had happened, as if that mutilation were just another part of the overall renovation of my anatomy: the facial reconstruction, the breast augmentation, this stupid halo. I was allowed another five weeks for everything to heal and then I was sent here and put to work.

"So on this particular night, the night I'm telling you about, I was working The Portrait Gallery when this John appeared. I noticed him immediately, which was odd because I didn't notice much of anything during that period: I was still in shock from what had happened to me and like I said I was medicating myself with squink and anything else I could get my hands on. He had a slight build and the sort of deliberate movements that dancers have. From the eyes I thought he might be Japanese or Korean. Not your typical suit though. More like the artsy type you see hanging around the cafes on Eel. I figured him for a needle artist or maybe one of those origami architects who works for Po. He wore a black cape and a black fedora and he had this very triangular goatee that consisted of like exactly six black hairs which didn't look like hairs at all but tattoos or ink lines because the point of the beard didn't hang over his chin but adhered to the skin and ended underneath like an arrow pointing back to his body. He bought me for a two hour oral session, which didn't make any sense. Nobody buys two hours for an oral. It's a fucking eternity and it costs a fortune and these guys all go off in like ten minutes at the most. Anyway, he paid in cash and the rep gave him the room voucher and we walked over to Carp.

"When we got to the room I asked him whether he wanted me to do it with the armour on or off. He said 'Off' in this soft voice, and he began undoing my buckles and straps. He kept asking me the name for each piece of armour as he removed it, and I just stood there saying 'greave, solleret, hauberk' and watching him disassemble me in the broken mirror. I had this fear that when he finished removing all the armour there would be nothing underneath. That's how I felt. As if I existed only in the armour...that you couldn't take apart all that metal and find me inside anymore than you could dissect a body and discover the soul. But then his hat was off and his hands were on me and I saw myself in the mirror standing naked beside a woman.

“At first I figured her for just another dyke shopping incognito. I’d had one or two like that before, but I couldn’t have been very good at it because I’d never had a repeat sale. I remember one time this jane just wouldn’t come and my neck locked up and for a week after that I had TMJ so badly that I couldn’t give a blowjob and Ivan drove down here one morning and threatened to erase my face and cut me loose if my mouth didn’t start working again. So I was sort of figuring this would be another fiasco. But this Japanese jane, or whatever she was, was talking to me like she already knew me, and I was starting to suspect this wasn’t your typical transaction. She asked me if I’d been having difficulty urinating. She hadn’t paid for that, I told her, and besides, as the Maid of Orléans it wasn’t my forte: it created a rust and odour problem with the armour. If she wanted wet service, she should have rented a different personality. She said I’d misunderstood her, that she was a doctor. I told her that as long as we were on her time she could be whatever she wanted, but that she’d bought herself two hours of oral with Joan of Arc and that personally I thought she was mixing her metaphors. She said, ‘You don’t understand, I’m here to help you. We’ve heard some disturbing reports about your pimp. Now lie back on the bed and show me where he bit you.’ I asked her if she was some kind of cop and she laughed and said, ‘Hardly.’ She said she was a revolutionary as well as a board-certified gynecologist and that I could call her by her nom de guerre, which was Michiko. ‘Just relax,’ she said. She was down on her knees examining me. I felt her fingers and then after a few seconds something softer. I looked down and saw her with her face between my legs and it reminded me of Ivan and I flinched. She had a hand around each of my ankles and she looked up at me and her chin was wet and she said, ‘Relax. I’m going to teach you something. If you fight it, it won’t work.’ She used her teeth a bit, but mostly her lips and her tongue. She avoided the scar where my clitoris had been and she spent a lot of time on my asshole and something she called my fourchette, but the best part was like a long kiss with her arms around my waist and the lips of her mouth over the lips of my cunt and her tongue tickling the opening. She worked for maybe half an hour and I could feel her nose breathing softly into my pubic hair as if she were some kind of cunnilingual yogi master and weren’t exerting any effort at all, which I thought was pretty remarkable considering how Ivan and every other man I’d known had snorted and gasped for air like some long-distance swimmer...and when I came, which after Ivan I thought I’d never be able to do again, it wasn’t like any orgasm I’d ever had before—those localized clit jobs where the world seems to contract until nothing exists but this bullseye between your legs.

Instead, I felt like I was unfolding in waves, engulfing everything—the room, Michiko, the city outside the window. ‘You’re not damaged,’ she told me afterwards. ‘You’re more whole than you’ve ever been. The piece of you that he took is the piece of himself that he recognized in you, that’s all. It wasn’t your true body or your true self.’

“Michiko explained that I’d allowed myself to become a commodity because I couldn’t imagine any alternative. But there were courageous women out there in the city, she said, who had dared to conceive of a future in which the body was an end and not a means, and who were secretly working towards that goal. That’s how I was recruited into the movement. My mission here is to recruit promising prospects like yourself and eventually gain access to Ivan and eliminate him before he does any more damage. Now, come with me. I need to show you something important.”

She led Emma back to her cubicle and closed the door. “Sit back on the bed,” she said as she propped a mirror up on the chair. “Can you see yourself? Good. Take off your underwear.”

“What?”

“Please, there’s nothing more ridiculous than a bashful whore. Don’t take your eyes off the mirror.” She knelt down and began lightly lapping at Emma’s labia. It was as if words had been distilled into flesh and the Joan of Arc whore’s story were being reenacted with her in the role of Michiko and Emma’s body in place of her own. Emma placed her hands on the whore’s halo and opened her thighs wider to accommodate her tongue.

When she came, the mirror quivered once and then turned into a silver puddle simmering on the seat.

She worried about all the things that might go wrong.

What if she froze? What if she went dry, lost her concentration, couldn’t come at the crucial moment? He would bite off that piece of her and defuse the face.

Your body is a bomb, she told herself. Every element has to be checked and rechecked.

She masturbated twice a day. Forced herself to come when her clients fucked her. She practiced her orgasms as if she were preparing for some pornographic exam.

She cornered Tanya in the toilet.

“Tell Michiko the price has gone up. I want another ten thousand in cash when it’s done.”

One night between clients, she ducked into a gadget shop on Carp and

purchased a roll of body tape and a small electric dildo with a wireless remote.

It was nearly another month before Ivan finally sent for her. One of his goons caught her by the arm as she was boarding the van for her nightly commute to The Portrait Gallery.

“You’re not working tonight. Boss wants to see you.”

She was hustled into a waiting car and delivered to the pimp’s penthouse, where she was led to a room with glass on three sides. The city lay spread out beneath her like the vast illuminated body of an angel fallen to earth. Traffic bleeding down the avenues. The architecture aflame.

Ivan appeared with a cigar and a glass of something yellow on ice.

“Take off your clothes,” he said.

He watched her over the rim of his glass as she stepped out of her dress.

“Are you afraid?”

“Should I be?” she asked.

“Maybe. I was almost certain you were hiding a pair of balls under that dress. Brass, like the ones Carney’s welders are wearing on the wharves these days. I thought I heard them clacking when you walked in.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Of course you do. You’ve been living in the loft for what, five months? You must have heard the stories by now. All those weepy little cunts moaning about what I took from them. And not a one will tell you what I gave them: new faces, new bodies, new lives. They don’t understand that they now share a deeper bond with each other than they ever did with their own flesh. Not one of them knows what it means to be a true team player. You have to give of yourself in order to become a part of the corporation. This is how you build a company. Can you appreciate the symbolism of sacrifice? We’re no longer individuals here. We’re part of a single entity. Of course there’s a hierarchy, an order. But to cling to a particular piece of yourself is unacceptable. It’s an obstacle to incorporation. Do you know the etymology of that word? Incorporation. To be joined in a single body. Now how can you do that if you’re clinging to a paltry piece of your own individual anatomy? I’ve already given up that piece of myself. I’ve made the sacrifice. I’m not asking anything of them that I wouldn’t ask of myself.”

“You didn’t ask it of yourself. It was imposed on you. Don’t pretend it was a choice.”

“Precisely,” he grinned at her. “Precisely. I’m a little disappointed in

you, Emma. You're too smart for your own good, and not quite smart enough for the greater good of the corporation. It was imposed on me. Precisely. And I've imposed it on them. The situation is identical. It's imperative that the choice be removed. Think of it as the anatomical approach to corporate management. Limbs and organs are incapable of choosing. If they could, the body would be in chaos. The anatomy is centralized. As a manager, I'm therefore obliged to deny choice to the constituent parts in order to create a functioning whole. I thought you would have understood that by now. You're ambitious. You've had the opportunity to see how a large business works and where it fails, the potential points of collapse. I was angry myself, at first. I felt cheated after the surgery. Until I discovered a body larger than my own: the corporate body. Suddenly my own anatomical crisis seemed trivial. Eventually I even came to see it as necessary, a vital part of the corporate process, of my growth as a manager, a leader. Eventually you'll come to see it that way too.

"I've been watching you for months. Waiting for you to panic. To run. But you're a cool cunt, Emma. Very cool. With that face you could be a star. It would be a shame to see all that beauty wasted on wharf rats willing to squander a week's salary on a moment's pleasure. I'm about to be admitted to GASM—the announcement will be made at next week's session. Do you know what that means? We're about to become a legitimate house. There are plans for an IPO. If I sold your contract now to Vesuvius or Brash, Sarsen & Scree, I'd be putting long-term revenue into a competitor's pocket and getting nothing but a one-time gain in return. None of them will appreciate your potential. None of them will recognize the secret behind your face. You'll be chained to a mattress the rest of your career."

"You said..."

"Forget what I said. I lied. It was for your own good. You'd still be in a room somewhere wearing a paper face and fucking fish-cutters for lottery tickets if I hadn't convinced you to fix your face. One day one of them would have sold you to the DFC and they would have ruined you in one of those government clinics. You'd have come out looking like a housewife and the city would have given you a stipend and enrolled you in typing school. You have a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity here. You'll get lost in another house. You have no idea. The politics will bury you beneath the cheap sheets on some third-tier mattress. Have you ever been inside The Volcano Club? It's a hundred and ten degrees at 4 a.m. in February. The heat'll wreck your complexion, destroy your hair. That kind of daily dehydration takes ten years off your career. Is that what you want—early retirement on a pension

so thin it barely covers your rent, a few hundred dollars in dividends each quarter on the thousand shares of company stock you managed to squirrel away with your options, a second career working the register in one of those sex bakeries on Harbour Street? You have management potential, but you're still too attached to your ego. I can't trust someone with that much self-interest. I suspect you're not a true team player."

"You're wrong."

"Prove it."

He was on his knees as if he were talking not to her but to her cunt.

"You see, I believe you are special, Emma. That's why I'm giving you this choice. I want you to choose it. If I have to take it from you, then you're just another piece of merch. But if you have the discipline to choose, you might still make something of yourself."

"I thought you said it was necessary to remove the choice."

"I suspect you're an exception to the rule. There'll be a press conference right after the GASM announcement. I plan on introducing you as my VP of Floor Operations. Of course, you'll still do bed time during the first year or so, while we build the business."

She took his head in her hands, sat on the bed and pulled him between her legs. "Not until I come," she whispered. "I want to know how it feels to go from one extreme to another. I want to remember that. I want to remember the price I paid."

"You're not like these other cunts, Emma. You scare me a little sometimes. If you're fucking with me, you'll live just long enough to regret it."

"Not until I come."

"I heard you."

"Promise."

"Scout's honour."

When his tongue touched her, she nearly panicked. Then it passed. He found her clitoris and settled into a rhythm. The lingual war of attrition that he had waged a hundred times before for the cameras. Tedious, efficient, uninspired. It was all Emma could do to bring herself to the brink...and then she felt herself going over, felt the air in the room change as the first contraction came.

She had a handful of Ivan's hair in each hand, and when she started to come she yanked his head up from her crotch and let him see the face rendered visible now by desire.

The screaming had already begun, but whether it came from herself or Ivan or some other source, she couldn't tell. A door opened somewhere and

the room was filled with motion. Then the windows turned to water. The mirror above the bed rained down in scalding silver droplets that made her cry out in pain. There were shouts, two gunshots, smoke, the plaintive moan of the wind moving amid high places. Emma held tightly to the two handfuls of Ivan's hair and let her face burn through the back of his skull. Wind was moving through the room, toppling lamps and whipping the sheets from the bed. She heard another scream that she was almost certain came from Ivan, felt him pull away from her...then heard the scream fading away far below.

She got up from the bed.

Ivan's two bodyguards were slumped in opposite corners of the room, each one with a gun in his hand and a hole in his forehead. Ivan was gone. Emma unclenched her fists and let the wind take the two handfuls of his hair.

She dressed quickly to the keening of sirens, walked out through the empty penthouse, and rode the elevator down into the blazing body of the city.