

BABY ROCKET

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CONTENTS

PART I SANTA MONICA

Chapter 1		
Tang		3
Chapter 2		
Flash		17
Chapter 3		
Twinkle		28
Chapter 4		
Burn		43

PART II THE BIG APPLE

Chapter 1		
Breakfast at Tiffany's		57
Chapter 2		
Andrew in Flight		71
Chapter 3		
Ballet of the Flying Saucers		84
Chapter 4		
Starry, Starry Night		97

CONTENTS

PART III THE SPACE COAST

Chapter 1	
Platinum	111
Chapter 2	
Shuttle	121
Chapter 3	
Gemini	136
Chapter 4	
Splashdown	153

PART IV TERMINAL MORaine

Chapter 1	
Like a Diamond in the Sky	167
Chapter 2	
Two Minutes with a Star	183
Chapter 3	
WASPS Killed in the House	195
Chapter 4	
The Signature of Water	207

PART I

SANTA MONICA

(JULY 1998)

1. TANG

We were sitting over the remains of breakfast in the Montana Café. A sharp, clear morning light caught the silver in my father's hair, made the stiff table-clothes glow, and the waiter's apron and my father's starched, Sunday dress-shirt were all so bright, the café seemed a sound-stage—which was appropriate, for Santa Monica. I put my sunglasses on. Dad smiled.

“All you need,” he said, “is a scarf, and I'd swear you were Marilyn Monroe.”

“Flattery will get you everywhere,” I said. “I look nothing like Marilyn Monroe. Nothing.”

“You have her smile,” he insisted. “Did you know that angostura bitters are good for the digestion?” He'd asked me this question a thousand times, and always when he mixed a Manhattan. Proud of his constitution, my dad, James Walter Dance, Jr. pegged his days to three squares, plus the cocktail hour.

“You're a goat,” I teased. “You'd eat anything.”

He grinned, puffed out his belly and gave it a thump. Then, deflating, he frowned and mashed a drowsy fly that had landed near his coffee mug. I could feel him, stewing, angry. That morning, he'd gotten up before dawn to put on a slow roast, a mid-afternoon meal. That was Dad's idea of Sunday: Mass, then breakfast at the Montana Café, then a roast. But all the while I'd also felt him nursing anger.

He brushed away the dead fly, closed his eyes and rubbed them. Electric blue, dark-lashed, his eyes used to frighten me with their intensity.

“Dad?” I said. I touched his hand, and he took mine, giving it a squeeze. Looking back now, I'm glad for that squeeze.

BABY ROCKET

He shook his head, opened his eyes. “Listen, honey, you write about those astro-girls. Folks’ll be interested, now. Of course, back at the Cape we all laughed. A *girl* wanted to jockey with Carpenter or Glenn? Glenn even testified to Congress it was a fact of the social order that men seek adventure and women sew—something like that—but looking back now, I’d say those gals had moxie! Plenty of moxie! Folks today would be proud of ‘em. Hell, it’s been almost thirty years since we put a man on the moon! Thirty goddam years!” He shook his head again. “Anyway a book about those gals would sell. You might even get movie rights—I know some people here who are connected to the business. Not like that other stuff you’ve written.”

I listened, without hearing. I would never make it clear to him that I write history, not Hollywood bestsellers. So he went on about how the history of the thirteen women NASA had tested but never trained—we now call them the Mercury 13—would sell, which wasn’t at all the reason I wanted to get their side of things out there, their stories. So I was listening and not listening to Dad, afraid his best-seller enthusiasm might ruffle my own zeal for the project, yet also wanting to ask him questions, too, questions about his days at NASA I knew from long experience he couldn’t, or wouldn’t, answer until I said, lightly, to change the subject, “She was a true hour-glass. Monroe, I mean. She was—”

“She was perfect,” he said, abrupt, and the anger was back. He stood up as the waiter brought us our leftovers.

“Gotta use the can,” Dad said. “Back in a flash.”

Those last moments in the Montana Café keep replaying in my head now, like my own personal-disaster loop tape, my own Zapruder nightmare. Dad left the table; I went outside with our doggie bags to sit in the sun and let myself drift. I knew Dad would be awhile because arthritic joints made buttons a problem and still he wore a button-fly. He thought them manlier, somehow. By the time the Montana Café manager found me, they’d called 911. But Dad had died before he even hit the floor. I cradled his head in my arms, called to him, but he was weight, that’s all, heavy and still—he had left already.

“A heart attack,” the ER doctor said, “massive.”

When everything formal was over, I went back, by myself, to his apartment, dry-eyed, blown-out and hollow. I found his slow Sunday roast burnt to a crisp, the air dense with bittersweet smoke.

Days later, I found out that my father had bought himself a crypt in Westwood Cemetery. He'd chosen to skip a funeral mass, thank God, and everything else had been pre-arranged. And I, used to having Dad around to manage things or give orders, was grateful because there he was, even when he wasn't, managing things. I wouldn't have to speak with the priest or the funeral home. All I had to do was follow his instructions. Which was just about all I could do. I hadn't, to tell you the truth, ever thought much about losing Dad. He'd seemed just too permanent.

My half-brother, Joe, came out from New York to help with things. An IBM web-page designer, divorced, Joe has two kids. This meant I would stay in Santa Monica, after he'd gone home, to close out the last of Dad's affairs. I didn't want to be alone, but I knew I would do it. I was the older sister, the responsible one, always the dutiful daughter.

Both Joe and I were puzzled, and a little hurt, by our father's choice of a California crypt. Joe even asked, as we packed away some of Dad's things, “Why did Dad, a Long Island boy, want a grave in L.A.?”

“Because,” I said, “Westwood Cemetery's not far from here. It's simple, practical, and it makes no family-sense, and that's our dad.”

Besides, to be honest, Dad had a perfect genius for saying and doing things that hurt. Perhaps he'd felt the same way about Joe and me, but since the Dance family rarely discusses emotions, I don't know how he felt—and now, I never will. But such finality had yet to hit me, back then. I was too surprised by the sudden loss, too numb and frankly too conflicted. For a number of years I was so pissed off at Dad and his selfish, hurtful ways, we barely spoke. Only in the last couple years of his life had I made some kind of truce—not with him, but with myself.

On the morning of Joey's flight back home to New York, while I waited for him to finish shaving, I sat in Dad's living room.

BABY ROCKET

Going through Dad's things had been rough: what to chuck, what to save, and why? Did we want to keep *any* of his junk? After a day of this, even Joe and I ran out of small talk. Instead, we left the television on. Some afternoons, we went to the beach. Once, we visited the Getty Museum. It helped.

And now? I didn't want to stay. I didn't want to be alone in the empty apartment, with Dad's aftershave lingering in the closet and drawers. But I had, in my own mind, no choice. So, as Joe finished his own shave, I drank coffee and stared idly at a photograph Dad had kept, all his life, on the stereo cabinet—a spare black and white portrait of a woman. I had no idea who she was, although she seemed familiar. Anyway, she'd been on that teak cabinet since I could remember. Elegant in black, her skin pearl-white, she seemed a sad Rapunzel, trapped in her tower. As a kid, I'd vowed to set her free.

I'd been a romantic kid.

"Who is she?" I called to Joe, picking up the picture frame.

"What?" he said, peering around the bathroom door, his face in suds.

"Who?" I said and held up the frame.

Joe shrugged. "Don't know. I did ask. *Nada.*"

Yeah, I thought, I'd asked, more than once. I was told "none of your business."

Such a sweetheart he could be sometimes, our dad. He was a man who inspired as much terror in his kids as affection. I put the picture back down, and got myself ready to drive Joe to the airport. It wasn't busy that morning, and, as Joe's flight boarded, I told my brother not to worry, I'd be fine. Of course I could handle it. I was lying. I wanted to wail, or flee, or both, but could do neither.

"Are you sure you're okay?" he asked.

"I'm fine. Where's your seat?"

"21C. And yes, I have my ticket."

"Where?"

"Right here!" he replied, touching his breast pocket. "Would you just stop?" he frowned. "Worry-wart," he said. He has Dad's eyes, ice-floe blue, but the shape of his brow and cut of his chin, these belong to his mother, Mrs. Megan Dance. Once-upon-a-time a sweet young

thing from Wisconsin, Megan had inherited me when she'd married Dad. When I turned thirteen, I'd nicknamed her (behind her back and never in Joey's presence) Norwegian Wood.

Well? I was a teenager, and although she was Joe's mother, she was my *stepmother*. I couldn't help myself. Even now, we still rub each other the wrong way although we try to be adult, and polite.

My brother leaned over and brushed his lips past my ear, his standard farewell kiss, then started up the ramp. Without turning around again, he waved—a salute—so I was left staring at his hunched shoulders until he was gone.

The road back to Dad's apartment was clear, quiet, no traffic. The sun peached the smog of the city, and by the time I'd parked his '61 Impala, I was ravenous. I let myself in, and as I did, shot a glance, swift as a heat-seeking missile, over at the answering machine, hoping, foolishly hoping that my lover, Mitch, had called—but there was nothing: a big red digital zero. Hunting around the kitchen for coffee filters, I found them in the cabinet where Dad kept what he called his medicines and medicinals: Advil, bitters, mints and Metamucil, six canisters.

"I buy Metamucil in bulk," he used to say. "Get it? Bulk?" I'd roll my eyes at him. Always a toilet-joke on hand—that, too was Dad. He'd been sixty-six. I'd turned thirty-six that past June. His mother, Mrs. Eunice Dance, would've been ninety-six, if she'd made it past ninety. Others in the family fall into odder generational orbits, satellites in the purity of this thirty-year pattern. Oddly, I'd always felt extra connected to the family, just because of the pattern. Joey, caught in a different numerical orbit, thinks I'm crazy.

"Love's not made of historical serendipity," he says, and I know he's right, but heck, I *am* an historian. Serendipity is my business. Dad, now, being always at heart a NASA man, had lived futurity. He had two mottoes: "Let sleeping dogs lie," and "The past is the past." Both mottoes diametrically opposed to an historian's lot in life. Well, duh. I'd taken a road he couldn't value. What a surprise!

I lifted the Metamucil canister and unscrewed the top. A fine powdery orange, it smelled processed and weirdly familiar, although

BABY ROCKET

I'd never tasted Metamucil in my life. I dumped a teaspoon in a glass and went to the tap, gave it a few vigorous swirls. Even then, it was plain awful. I consigned the whole mess to the sink and went for coffee instead. While I waited for water to boil, I flipped on the television and stood by the window, trying to plan, trying to keep my mind off the plain fact of Dad's absence.

The TV muttered. Waiting on coffee, I sought a distraction, any distraction and just then one of Dad's neighbors, Bobby what's-his-name-next-door stepped out into the street below. He wore sweats and a Bruin's t-shirt. He bounced, touched his toes and I bet to myself that he'd never noticed how the sidewalk in front of his fifties apartment complex spoke. The concrete said "bombshell," in bold cap letters. Bombshell. I've always wondered who fingered that word into the cement while it was still wet, and why—and given that my father had once been a rocket mechanic, I wondered whether he'd done it himself.

My dad's complex, dubbed the Galaxie—with a star dotting the "i"—had seen better days. A perfect, four-sided square with a once-salmon trim faded to powder pink, everything about the Galaxie is square: the windows, the courtyard in the center, the little do-dahs that adorn the stucco. Built in the early '60s, when everything from architecture to food, from Paco Rabonne's paper dresses to space-age neon plastic chairs had to be "futuristic," the Galaxie now needed a face-lift.

My father, too, had been a square, as they used to say: a tight-lipped Army man, a sometime photographer who'd wanted to shoot war footage but when push came to shove, signed up in '52 rather than face the draft. Never even saw Korea. Went from Huntsville to White Sands: Private E-2 James Walter Dance, Jr. took a course of seventeen weeks in guided missile repair. He'd excelled at airframes, hydro-pneumatics, and had been certified by one Keith A. Glasgow, 1st Lt. Ord. Corps. With his newly-minted certificate in hand, he went over to Langley then on to Canaveral, his hair and his manner strictly regulation, with his eyes, like everyone else's at that time, on the moon. He'd been a bombshell rocket repairman, my dad, a mechanic who took amateur photos on the side.

“The Cape was the only place to be—on site with the Saturn, not off in Houston,” he used to boast. “Back in those days, we were all heroes together, working on the ground to beat the commies to the moon, and we did it. We did it! Did I ever tell you about the time—” and then he’d tell me a story I’d heard a thousand times already. Oh, yes, he’d been more than proud of his minor part in the space-race but all his stories about inside the astronaut corps (most of them raunchy) seemed canned because he told them again and again, exactly the same way, as if keeping the past (which was just the *past*, remember) at bay, with some kind of repetitive barricade of story.

Still, those stories are what got me interested in the women who’d wanted to go to the moon. Once I’d interviewed most of them, and found out what had happened to those optimistic young women, I couldn’t let the story go. They’d been pilots first, women second, certainly more at home in flight gear and overalls than high heels, and they got caught in the “girls must be girls” double-bind of the fifties. NASA had made them don skirts and pearls when they interviewed with the press, women who were not, at heart, anything like the standard-issue fifties blond bombshell, even if they’d been blond. Dropped like rocks after a Congressional hearing in 1962, they’d had to watch a Soviet, Valentina Tereshkova, go where no American woman would, until Sally Ride, twenty years later.

Bobby-what’s-his-name jogged off, leaving the concrete bombshell where it lay and leaving me with no distraction. It was only a week ago that I’d pointed out the word “bombshell” to Dad, as he’d stepped over it. I’d asked him what he thought it meant, but he hadn’t answered. I’m not even sure he’d heard. Maybe hadn’t even noticed.

I turned from the window, sighing because despite my father’s pre-planning, decisions still had to be taken about his stuff: in every corner, his stuff, and no instructions. Like that Metamucil—what do you do with six cans? Where could you donate that? Or a terry-cloth bathrobe with torn pockets which he’d bought for a song because, he’d said, “Who else would wear such a color, ‘baby-shit’ brown?” His clothes, like this robe, were the worst to handle; they smelled of

BABY ROCKET

him and hung in the closet in expectation, as if he would be back any minute.

And what about all that old vinyl in the stereo cabinet? The records might've been valuable, but there was so much junk, even under the bed where Joe and I had found a tatty shirt box packed with undated Polaroids: family photos. So there they were, my parents and Aunt Patsy, my father's only sister, with her platinum 'do. She'd been the bridesmaid at my parents' wedding.

But there's no single picture of the bride, my mother, my real mother. She's just a white blur of chiffon. She died when I was four, an accident. All his life, my father had never once spoken of her, had never even said her name and I'd always known, without exactly ever knowing why, that I was not to ask. When I was eleven, I thought that portrait of a lovely lady framed on the stereo cabinet must be her. But as I said, I knew better than to ask.

Still waiting on my coffee, I lifted that self-same picture off the stereo again. There had come a day, of course, when I was sixteen and finally able to screw up my courage: "Is she my mother?" His face went red, red to the ears.

"No," he'd said. "And it's none of your business."

He'd always been a stern man: when he said "no," us kids jumped. His flat refusal left me with the impression that she must have been part of a past that took from him even the smallest of words, so I'd decided, too, that he'd been lying. She was my mother. Had to be. He just couldn't ever bring himself to say so.

I put the picture down and thought it was high time to ask Aunt Pat about it. She hadn't the strength to come out West to the funeral. Said she'd never expected to outlive her baby brother. If she didn't know who the woman was, then Dad had taken most of his past with him. But I was sure she'd tell me what I'd always known: the woman in the frame was my mother. Why else would she seem familiar?

I poured my coffee and sat down in front of the TV. Funny thing was, despite how odd and bereft I felt, I had yet to cry. Not a tear. The whole of last week felt surreal—although I knew Joey had been with me, sitting there alone with *The Honeymooners* on the golden

oldies station seemed the only reality I had left. I kept the sound low—in case the phone rang—but I could still catch bits. Ralph Kramden shook a fist at Alice. She gave him a look that made his eyes bug. I left Ralph trying for the millionth time to bust Alice's chops, and headed to the kitchen.

The morning fog had burned off, leaving a hard and pressing California sky. Sun on the kitchen windowsill made the new bananas sitting there gleam. On some kind of automatic pilot, I diced blue potatoes for a frittata, flash-steamed beans, fried onions, and looked around for curry. But there was no curry, of course not. Curry was not a Dad-thing. He'd been a meat and potatoes man, even if he would, on occasion, eat fresh fish. He was a Long Island boy by way of a Connecticut family, who'd spent all those heady years at NASA on the Cape, all before my time, but I'd heard so much about the space-race, and had been born in Cocoa Beach, right at the heart of it all, I felt a part of that history. When I was a kid, I thought they'd named the Lunar Excursion Module—the LEM—after me. I still have my Apollo 11 commemorative issue set, a now-tarnished gold medallion in a battered navy blue folder with a cancelled stamped envelope mailed the day of the first moon landing, a gift from, who else? Dad.

The Peruvian potatoes lost their blues in the pan as they fried, and I wished, for the first time since the funeral, that I could've lost mine. The apartment echoed even with the TV on, and it seemed too early for a drink. But without Dad and his rigid schedule, and without Joe, I became unmoored. Whipping the eggs for my frittata, I could almost see Dad standing there, near the stove, with two eggs in his hand, as he had been that last Saturday, the last full day of his life, making one-eyed Egyptians: fried bread with a hole cut in the middle so the egg-yolk peeks up. The little toast round sits on top, like an eye-patch. Some people call them one-eyed Jacks, but I prefer the idea of Egypt.

"Haven't had those in years," I said to him.

"Me neither," he said. "Just felt like 'em." He shrugged and glanced over his shoulder at me. In his ratty bathrobe, he'd not yet shaved and

BABY ROCKET

I remember noticing that his beard, if he'd let it grow now as he'd often done in the past, would've been white.

"Want one?" he asked.

Butter browned in the pan. "Yeah, sure," I said. A one-eyed Egyptian had been my stepmother's special treat, something so buttery it was guaranteed to win a kid's heart, as she'd once won a little bit of mine. That was before I became a teenager and the fighting began.

"Coffee?" he asked. "Pour me a cup?"

"Black," I said, a reflex. He always drank it black.

When I handed him the mug, he said, "Learned the one-eyed Egyptian from Mom."

I tried hard, at that moment, to keep my surprise toned down to minimum outrage. "No, sir," I said. "This is Meg's recipe."

"Nah," he said. "Mom's. Get us a plate, will you?"

This sleeping dog I hadn't touched. If he wanted to remember the Egyptian as his mother's recipe, I'd thought, let him. He was wrong, but he'd been wrong about the past before, and about worse things.

As I pulled my blue-potato frittata out of the stove, my glasses steamed over. The eggs sighed when the air hit them, brown top bubbling, onion-fragrant, pepper-sharp but those blue potatoes had been a mistake, they'd stained the gold eggs purple. I couldn't eat purple eggs—could I? I put the frittata aside to cool, thinking, maybe later.

But later, after the eggs had fallen and the phone finally rang, I'd already skipped the formality of a meal and was well into Dad's liquor cabinet. Drinking slow and hard on an empty stomach, getting plastered to keep the grief—or whatever I was feeling, not exactly grief, more like shock—in check, I looked through pictures while listening to Frank Sinatra sing "Fly Me to the Moon," Dad's favorite because it had been Buzz Aldrin's. The phone shrill and unexpected, jolted me to my feet. When I heard my Aunt Pat say, "Hi, there, sweet-pea, how're you doing?" I mumbled something that made her say, "What's that? What's wrong? You sound sick."

I cleared my throat and said, "Got to turn down the music—" and lifted the needle off the wax.

“Oh,” said Pat. “You thought I was Mitch.”

“Yes, roger, mm-hmm, that would be a ‘yes, ma’am,’” I said. I was good and drunk. I shook my tumbler of gin. I tried to focus on a scar on the back of my hand, a knotty, circular welt, as I set my glass down, but that made two wobbly scars instead of one.

“Should I phone back?” Pat asked.

“No,” I said, “it’s all right.” I rubbed the scar with my thumb, as if the gesture would settle the wobbling. “I’ve been waiting, but he’s not going to call. I should go to bed.”

“Why don’t you call him?”

“Good question—” Ice in my tumbler tinkled.

“I see,” she said. “What’re you drinking?”

“Gordon’s.”

“Uh-huh. You should just call him, Clementine, and lay off the gin. As I always say, it takes two to tango.”

“Oh, sure, Pat, I know. Mitch and I, we’ve been doing the Aztec two-step—hey, wait! Tang! That’s it, that’s what it smells like—” and I started giggling, giggling on into a sobbing belly-laugh, until my aunt had to ask, “Sweet-pea, what *are* you going on about?”

“The Metamucil,” I said.

“What? For heaven’s sake, what else have you been drinking?”

“Not Metamucil, that’s for damn sure,” I said, still laughing. “It reminds me of Tang. You know, official drink of the astronauts?”

“Oh, sure,” said Pat. “Your father used to bring Tang home in bulk. But I say if you want orange juice, get an orange, though your father said NASA doctors made a bunch of astronauts sick, forcing them to drink OJ for the potassium. Listen, sweet-pea, your painter-friend Quiola called today. Wanted to know when you’d be back. But you can’t call her I take it? The house she’s renting has no phone?”

“That’s right.”

“Is this the same place you’ve rented next summer?”

“Yep,” I said. “Belongs to another painter-friend of her’s.”

“Another painter?” Aunt Pat has never been sure what to make of art or artists—especially Quiola, with her odd name and her wary personality. Dad had been a photographer but that wasn’t art, not in

BABY ROCKET

Pat's eyes. Painting, however, was. And if I ever got the nerve to tell Aunt Pat about Quiola's *life*, whew, I would have to be brave. She'd never understand.

I said, "It's all right. I've talked to him. He seems nice enough. Did you give Quiola this number?"

"Yes," said Pat, her voice uncertain. "I don't like this idea of no phone."

"Don't worry. Unlike Qui, I have a cell."

"Lem, are you sure you're all right?"

"Oh, yeah," I lied, planting my feet on the carpet to stand. "Don't worry. I'll be fine. But listen, Patsy, something you might clear up for me." I wandered across the room. "Dad's had this picture of a woman on the stereo cabinet—the one in the silver frame? Been there forever. Who is she?"

"The one in the silver frame...on the stereo...you know who it is, Lem."

"No, I don't. Honestly. Should I? Why?" all the while thinking: *My mother, right?*

"Should you? I suppose the answer is yes," said Pat, "I mean, I always thought you knew. That's Marilyn Monroe."

Stunned, I lifted the picture and said, "Can't be."

Pat laughed. "I know it doesn't look like her much, but that's Marilyn. Your father bought the print from a photographer who worked for *Vogue*, it was, I think. Right after she died. Even spent extra on the frame. I thought he should have been practical, not mooning over a dead movie star. But Jimmy had his reasons." She sighed. "I guess Megan didn't mind having a picture of Marilyn in her living room, but I never asked—none of my business. What's so funny? Lem?"

"Nothing, nothing," I said. "Joke's on me," and I went to dump what was left of my gin down the kitchen sink. That morning's experimental Metamucil, viscous and stubborn, still clung to the drain. My stomach took a lurch.

"He was young—" said my aunt, tentatively. "And he had his reasons—"

“Oh, sure,” I snapped. “Bet he and the fly-boys had plenty of T&A out on the Cape.” I have Dad’s quick-flash anger, though I hate to admit it. And I’d heard all those canned, raunchy NASA stories, like the one about the fantail dancer who lost her fan. So many stories, the point of which had been repetitive and simple: tits and ass.

My aunt waited a moment before she spoke. “Back then, things were different—it was just different. You have to understand.”

“I do? Why’s that?” I folded down the frame so I didn’t have to look at the woman who was not my mother, nor even so much as an old fling. Why hadn’t he opted for a simple pin-up? Why play a minor-league Joe DiMaggio to this odd black and white that didn’t even really resemble “the” Marilyn Monroe?

Seemed pathetic, somehow.

“You should go to bed,” said Patsy. “Take some aspirin. I’ll call tomorrow, when you’re feeling better. Don’t forget: water and aspirin.”

“I won’t forget,” I said, and hung up.

Things were different back then? Were they? I stared at the phone. I knew it wouldn’t ring again. I was thirty-six, unmarried, drunk and I’d just been rude to my poor aunt. Mitchell Clark, my long-time lover, twice divorced, forty-two and probably sober, was not going to call, even if I’d left him a message about my father’s death. No, Mitch, a lawyer, was a busy man. In fact, Mitch and I are both professionals, the busy children of back then, the kids that those perpetual Honeymooners, Ralph and Alice Kramden, never had. Meet George Jetson! His boy, Elroy! Daughter Judy! All grown up.

But whatever did happen to Jane, his wife? My father had lost three of his, and I didn’t seem able to become one, not even once. More to the point, I didn’t get why I wanted to be one in the first place. Marriage hadn’t worked out well for anyone I knew—from outright abuse to just plain garden-variety boredom, marriage didn’t seem to suit the me-generation. Or at least it hadn’t suited me.

Had things been so different, back in the fifties? Back in the day when Alice and Ralph and my father and Aunt Pat, and my stepmother and my dead mother and even Marilyn Monroe, had all been young?

BABY ROCKET

I left the phone to silence and sat down at the table in my father's kitchen. The formica was cold on my bare feet. The overhead light was unflinchingly white.

“To the moon, Alice,” I whispered, shaking my fist like I was going to deck someone, lifting my chin like I'd take the blow. “One of these days, Alice, pow! Right to the moon!”

2. FLASH

The next morning, after a painful voyage to Dad's kitchen for Advil, I switched on the radio. It kept me company while, with the slow deliberation of the gin-impaired, I spooned coffee into a filter.

Bob Edwards on *Morning Edition* ignored my hangover to crow about Senator John Glenn's shuttle-ride: "official photographs taken this month at Building 9 show a bemused space-age icon, suited up for a historic flight. Is this science, or a publicity stunt?"

"Stunt," I whispered, mimicking my father. That's what he had said about Glenn's spin: "He always thought he was a goddam hero, that's his problem." For some reason, he didn't like Glenn, maybe because the man went into politics instead of remaining an astro-hero. The smell of last night's uneaten frittata sat on the close air. I don't like AC, but I turned it on. "L.A.," said the local weather, "was set for another roaster, but Florida was burning up, acres and acres of what should have been wetland, raging out of control." I made a mental note to call my friend Leah, who lived in Florida, to make sure she was out of harm's way.

But at that moment, all I wanted to do was crawl back into bed and Prozac myself with sleep. Maybe sleep would clear off my eye-buster of a hangover and the foul, sad humor that went along with it. But I'd only been awake a bare hour—even if in a haze—and I had things to do, all the quotidian details, tedious and painful, of closing out a life, even as I kept expecting to see Dad reappear in his bathrobe, his jolt-blue photographer's eyes snapping to fix on some likely shot.

After a shower, the Advil, coffee and dry toast, I felt marginally human. I'd decided to check on Dad's e-mail, start weeding his files. As I waited for the connection, I pulled open the desk-drawer where

BABY ROCKET

he kept his CDs and zip-disks. The label that caught my attention first said “Baby Rocket.”

What on earth were you doing, I thought at his absence, working for NASA again? He'd left NASA in the sixties, worked for Lockheed on Long Island and retired, but those rocket-boys never really let go of the “space community.” I was about to put Baby Rocket in the zip-drive, when the email prompt pinged: a post from a man named Allen Chernowski.

Dear Mr. Dance:

In answer to your query, yes, Anna-Mae Miracle was my mother's maiden name. And she did have a twin, Jean-Marie—your wife. This is so exciting! May I phone you? Please send me your number. My mother, after all these years, would be most grateful to talk to you again, and we would both like to see Clementine—with your approval, of course.

What? I re-read the words and the message bit through my hangover. I looked at the email address: lenski@hotmail. Not unusual. I read the message a third time, as if the words might have yielded, under the pressure of repetition, some further insight. How had my father located this person? And why? When? It wasn't like him, not my father, who'd shown so little interest in family matters that I often wondered why he bothered to keep in touch at all.

My mother had a living *twin*?

Not just a relative, or a mere sister, but a *twin*? I pondered “twin” until it turned unfamiliar, as if that particular word, more than all the others, needed translation, as if it were a promise or a curse cut from another tongue and pasted awkwardly into English.

I'd been told my mother had no surviving family. I knew her maiden name, Jean-Marie Miracle, spoken My-ricle—as common a name as Smith in Kentucky, where she'd been born. She'd moved with her parents to Florida, and had married my father after he'd gotten her pregnant with me—a shotgun wedding.

And what did I remember of her?

Nothing.

FLASH

I'd tried. People say all the time they can remember being four years old, but I never believe them. My memory starts at ten. I've been told, "this lack has to do with trauma" by a therapist once, the trauma of losing my mother. But that's cold comfort. I'm missing the first decade of my life, as if flung into the world at ten.

A twin? My mother?

A jolt of queasy shock set me loose from my father's desk. I began to pace. Seeking distraction again, I peered out the living-room window and was caught this time by my father's neighbor, who was just returning from his morning run. He looked up as I looked down. I managed a weak smile. He gestured he'd be right up. I was not ready for Bobby-chat, although the Advil and coffee had begun to repair the damage General Gordon had inflicted in my skirmish with anger—*Dad! How could you just up and pop off?*—and depression—*Mitch, you lousy—*

"Men are dogs," I muttered aloud.

And there was that email from a man who was, I suppose, my cousin, needing an answer. I typed a greeting, pasted in the formal explanation I'd written up about Dad's sudden death, gave him my own New York address, number, email. My hands were not steady, but whether from the hangover or a kind of emotional panic, I couldn't have said.

The doorbell rang. Too upset that I had family I'd never known about, I couldn't commit to e-contact with my newfound relation. I left the post unsent and went to the door, opening it a crack. I smiled at Bobby-whatever-his-name-was, O'Brien, O'Connor, O'Something or other.

"Hi," he said, breathing deep, but not too hard. He was musky wet, and I could feel the heat he'd brought in with him from his run.

"Hi," I replied, without gusto.

"So? Have you decided?"

"Decided? About what?"

He laughed and dried his face with a tail of his t-shirt, while I blushed and asked, "Was this last night?"

He leaned against the door. "Stopped by about nine, asked you to go roller-blading—couple hours up and down the beach would

BABY ROCKET

do you good. Anyhow, you said you'd let me know." He grinned. "At least that's what I thought you said. So, I don't suppose..." he trailed off, cocked his head and lifted his eyebrows, looking as much like a puppy as humanly possible, a practiced gesture and probably effective.

All right, effective.

"Oh, God. I was pie-eyed last night. Sorry. I don't remember. Anyway, it's a nice idea, but I've never been roller-blading. I don't know how."

"That's okay. I can teach you the basics. Meet me around 3:30, at the rental near the Pier."

"I don't think so. I've got a lot to do. And I'm not young—"

"Age is no excuse. Look at me, I'm thirty-two and I blade. So trust me. I know all about the fear of falling. I won't let you fall."

"I'm older than you think."

"Oh, please," said Bobby with a scowl. "Just say 'no, thank you' because if you keep harping about your age, you're going to make me feel bad, and I just had a good run. I don't want to feel bad. Okay?"

Well, I could've stayed in my father's apartment that afternoon, surfed the web, listened to the clock tick while I waited for Mitch to phone. Or, I could go to meet Mr. Blademan Robert O'Whatever on the Santa Monica Pier.

"All right," I said. "3:30pm."

"Good," he said, heading off for his place. "I'll see you this afternoon."

I phoned Aunt Patsy to let her know I'd taken the aspirin and water, but nobody was home. I left a message, then ran downstairs to check Bobby's mailbox, so I'd know his full name, Robert Patrick O'Brien. And then, just before I left the apartment with a bagged lunch and beach gear, I shut my eyes, hoped for the best and punched "send" to my...cousin (?), Allen Chernowski.

Santa Monica has one of the widest beaches I've ever seen. At 3:25pm, I stood up, stretched, and trudged off across the hot expanse to meet Bobby. I came away from the water's edge with my towel

FLASH

and fanny-pack dry as a bone. I'd gone to the ocean to swim but changed my mind. We were too near a sewage plant, and this water was too full of people, and besides, I'd just read Mike Davis's grim but funny account of how Thomas Mann and Thomas Huxley, while walking on the south shore of Santa Monica Bay in the 1940s, found a flotilla of condoms, like dead caterpillars or miniature Man O' Wars, drifting in on a morning's tide.

The ribbon of concrete that borders the beach was busy. Muscled bladers zipped by, men and women, spandex bright. As a kid, I would have begged to wear such stuff—it would've fit my fantasy of a world where Flash Gordon and Mrs. Peel reigned supreme and everybody lived aboard the *Starship Enterprise*, or at least on Mars, NASA having made the moon a pit-stop on the way to the stars, even if Dad used to poke holes in my dreams with his real NASA talk of cutbacks and shortages. Still, I remember how once, at some gift-shop, he'd swiped me a length of silver tissue paper, and fixed it around my shoulders, a make-shift Supergirl's cape. I was twelve. Despite the realities of defunding, Dad had remained in love with space, the final frontier, and he'd passed that love on to me—I was riveted to that space-race past. Joey got the tech end of Dad's love, which is why he was at IBM.

I dashed between bladers and across the pavement to the rental hut. No Bobby. I bought a diet Coke, parked myself on a bench and then spotted him blading down the walk toward me. He seemed like a kid: fluid, he was moving as brisk as a breeze. He looked a decade younger than I felt. Instantly, my thighs gained twenty pounds. All fat.

"Hey, there," he called as he braked. He took off his sunglasses and let them hang around his neck on their strap.

"Hi," I said and stood, seeing myself as an inelegant woolly mammoth, struggling to rise from the La Brea tarpits. "Did I just see you flying along on those things like a pro? Mild-mannered Robert O'Brien in the morning, avenging Blademan by night?"

"Blademan." He grinned. "I like that." He glanced down at his shorts and UCLA t-shirt. "I need a better costume."

"Spandex," I suggested.

BABY ROCKET

His eyes widened. “Don’t you think spandex reveals, ahem, a bit too much?”

“In L.A.? Nothing’s a bit too much.”

“Gotcha. Or you got me. Come on, let’s find you some skates.”

With the half-hearted help of the boy behind the counter, we assembled equipment. I felt pinned beneath that boy’s lackadaisical gaze, into which I read buckets of skepticism: who is that old lady trying to fool? Clumsiness set in. I dropped the skates. Twice. Couldn’t tell a knee-pad from an elbow. It reminded me of bowling with Joe, when we were kids. Bowling was something we did to break up the humid monotony of New Jersey summers, and we were terrible at it. The heavy ball would smack the slick alley as if it were a basketball court, and then would wobble, dispirited as a lost dog, into the gutter.

“Are you sure I need all this stuff?” I asked as Bobby handed me a helmet.

“If you tumble, you’ll be glad of it,” he said, adjusting my chinstrap.

“You said I wouldn’t fall.”

“Okay, so I lied. Everybody falls. Aim for the sand—think of it as airbag.”

“I feel ridiculous. Like the Michelin Man.”

He surveyed his handiwork. “More like Tank Girl. Try standing.”

“Don’t blame me if I turn into the Keystone Kops,” I said. But his grip was guiding and sure. He steadied me as he explained the basics of forward-glide, push, stop.

Two spills later, Tank Girl was bathed in sweat yet confident enough to inch away from her teacher. Now shy those twenty or so years and pounds that she’d added at the rental booth, she shouted and shoved and rolled down the concrete, trying to find the right rhythm of swing and balance, while her teacher made encouraging noises and bladed circles around her.

At last he suggested that we stop at a café, so we hobbled up a wooden boardwalk and threw ourselves into plastic chairs.

“My hair’s a mess,” I said, taking off my helmet.

FLASH

He looked up from the menu. “At least you have hair! Be grateful. Every time I put on a hat, I worry about how many follicles I’m losing.” He settled back and crossed his skate-burdened ankles. “You look burnt.”

I shrugged. “Can’t feel it.”

“You will,” he said and glanced at his arms, patting his balding forehead. “I can’t afford too much sun or these freckles may turn mean on me. Melanoma, no thanks.”

We ordered slushies and as I drank mine I realized, with a sudden gratitude so profound it was almost silly, that I hadn’t thought about losing Dad, or my dead mother, or anything more serious than balance, coordination and sweat for an hour. And my hangover was gone.

“Hey, you,” I said. “Thanks. This is great.”

“Isn’t it? Sunshine, sea-side, slushies.” He clasped his hands behind his head. “So, tell me, what do you do in The Big Apple? I’ve been curious.”

“I’m an historian, freelance. Right now, I’m at the Oral History Project at NYU writing a history about women in the space program. NASA in the blood, I guess.”

“Cool,” he said, nodding. “I’d love to meet an astronaut. You know, when I was a kid I couldn’t wait for 2001. I wanted a computer like Hal to run my life—without the mental breakdown, of course. I figured I’d grow up to be Johnny Storm.”

“Johnny who?” I said.

“Johnny Storm, The Human Torch.” He leaned forward to drum the table-top with both hands like it was a bongo. “*The Fantastic Four?*” he said.

“I remember the Invisible Woman.”

He sniffed. “Her *name* was Sue Richards. Her husband was Reed Richards, or Mr. Fantastic to you. Ben Grimm was The Thing, and Johnny Storm—”

“—The Human Torch, okay, all right! I thought The Thing was a Volkswagen that flopped.”

He sighed. “It was. I bought one. So...how’s about we blade back, ditch your rig, and head for home? I could use a shower. And dinner—at Babalu’s. Have you been there? Food’s great.”

BABY ROCKET

“Once. With Dad but it wasn’t his kind of place. Our waiter was, um, very ornamental.”

Bobby laughed. “Blond, swish, with attitude? Yeah, I can see where Babalu wouldn’t be Jimmy’s ideal restaurant.”

Jimmy? I was startled. Jimmy? Dad wasn’t someone called Jimmy, unless you were Aunt Pat or, in certain fraught moments, Uncle Charles.

“Your father,” Bobby mused, having not noticed my astonishment, “used to do stuff with me now and then. Just guy stuff. I don’t get on with my own flesh and blood, you know? He was the same age as my dad, but not the same man. He’d talk to me. Nothing serious, but he kinda looked out for me, you know?”

I nodded, but I was speechless. Jimmy? No way. My father was Dad, or Mr. Dance, sir. He issued orders. I doubted that he and Joey had ever done “guy stuff” together, so why with this neighbor, more or less a stranger?

Bobby coughed, glanced at his watch and said, “So, if we get back by six, can you be ready by seven? Or am I pushing it?”

By eight, we had a half-finished bottle of chardonnay on the table. Babalu’s was neither empty nor crowded, so the evening bustle was pleasant. When the appetizer plate arrived I asked, “What do you do besides blade?”

He squinted at his wineglass as if the question should be dropped for a discussion of vintage or nose. “I hate to admit it,” he said, “but I’m a student. It’s a sore point with my parents because I’m also a lawyer. I practiced in Boston for about ten years. Bored to fucking death. So I packed my bags and landed in forensic anthropology at UCLA. I’m aiming to become a bone jockey.”

“A bone jockey?” I raised an eyebrow. “Sounds lewd.”

He laughed. “I know. And I write porno for quick cash on the side.”

“You’re kidding.”

But he wasn’t.

“So you’re not Johnny Storm,” I said, “or even Blademan, you’re Flesh Gordon?”

FLASH

He laughed again. “Did you know it was a pornographer who first published Isaac Newton? His theories were considered heathen, so the only publisher willing to take the risk was a pornographer. Guess the guy figured gravity’s no weirder than doing it doggie style.” He smiled. “You don’t approve, like a good Catholic girl?”

“Aren’t you Catholic?” I reached for an appetizer.

He laughed. “With a name like Bobby O’Brien, I’d better be. Or let’s say ex.”

“Ex-Catholic, always Catholic. Tell me, just how is pornography less boring than the law?”

“Ah,” he said, and leaned forward. I could taste the chardonnay on his breath. He lowered his voice. “Let’s just say that the law’s repetitions don’t hold a candle to how her ‘lush melon breasts rested firmly in his hands as he brushed a practiced thumb over her dark, cinnamon nipple.’ No matter how many times these nipples must rise—as does, well, that I leave to your febrile imagination—they are always more interesting than the law.”

“Febrile? There’s a word I bet pornographers don’t use very often.”

He shrugged, leaned back and poured us both more wine. “No, but my Catholic-boy’s Latin isn’t going to waste.”

His apartment was the mirror image of Dad’s. This was disorienting after two bottles of wine. It was dark but he bypassed the lightswitch for candles. His sideboard was full of them, fat, white, all different heights. It looked like a scene Bobby the altar-boy pornographer would’ve invented. The couch was a futon, there was one large, dim painting on the wall, and a bookcase. I heard him padding about in the kitchen. I heard ice. I traveled uncertainly toward the painting over the bookcase. It was, of course, a nude, a blond with her broad back to the room, her one eye gazing sleepily down upon the candlelight.

“Does she have lush, melon breasts with cinnamon nipples?” I asked.

“What?”

“Nothing,” I said, thinking *just another bombshell in the Galaxie, like Dad’s Marilyn Monroe. Va-va-va-voom!*

BABY ROCKET

I was tired. I wanted to go home. Not down the hall, but home—home, to New York.

“A night-cap,” said Bobby, suddenly whispering in my ear, a whisper followed by a flick of tongue. He handed me scotch over crushed ice in a beveled glass. “It’s called a Scotch Mist,” he said.

I turned around and put the glass down among the candles. “I’m neither cinnamon nor melon,” I said.

“That’s breakfast. We haven’t finished dinner yet. And I prefer savory to sweet.”

“I’m not a tart,” I said, in my best faux-British accent.

He frowned, then laughed. “You think I’m cheesy?”

“I do?”

“Don’t you?” He cradled his scotch, then crouched down in front of the bookcase. For a startled moment, I thought he was going to read from one of his porno masterpieces but instead I heard a deep bass voice, singing.

Ah. There was a stereo in the bookcase.

“Like the song?” he said as he stood and glanced over his shoulder. “A perfect choice, don’t you think?”

“You seem to know a lot about what I think.”

He didn’t answer me, nor should he have, I suppose. I was being cranky when I should’ve been melting, or at least nice. He carried his drink over to the couch. Somewhere along the way he’d lost his sneakers and socks. He sat down, and held his glass loosely at its rim, letting its weight hang and swing so that the ice clinked. I snagged my drink, and told myself to take it slow.

“I’m sober,” he said, staring into his glass. “That’s not a good thing.” He took a long swig and set the glass down between his bare feet. “Why don’t you come over here. You look tense.” He patted his hand on the couch. “I promise, I don’t bite.” He smiled his puppy-dog smile. “Unless a nip is in order.”

My feet took me across the room, even if I should have just gone back to Dad’s. What was I doing there, with Bobby, getting drunk for the second night in a row?

FLASH

Looking back, I'd say maybe because he'd known Dad, or because he was Irish-Catholic and a redhead, like Dad, and I was lonely, angry and feeling old. His chest was solid against my cheek. His breath was sweet with scotch, his lips salty. "Superman," crooned the CD on the stereo, "never made any money/Saving the world from Solomon Grundy/And sometimes I despair the world will never see another man/like him."

Doesn't every little girl think her Dad is Superman?

All I can say is that I was vulnerable.

The phone rang. He didn't move. Neither did I, but at the third ring, like Superman, he was up and away: an emergency, a parent, a sibling or a lover. I bet lover. In a flash I was out the door.

Dad's kitchen lights had turned the living room sepia. The answering machine blinked, but I let it be. Instead, I got myself water and a pre-emptive duo of Advil. They looked like pink M & M's, which made me think again of Marilyn Monroe face down on the stereo cabinet. I swallowed my painkiller and went to her, and although I'd seen that photograph all my life, just then I thought it the saddest picture I'd ever laid eyes on. She's so overexposed, she's lit so harsh, so bright, the contrast cuts too sharp, as if the photographer had sought not to capture but incinerate, using plutonium for his flash.