

WEBB, 1973

Webb was not new to accidental discovery. Accidental discovery was unavoidable when a man did secret things. It was inevitable that a man's wife should find the silken primrose panties he'd hidden beneath the mattress—she was a snoop, had always been a snoop—inevitable she should throw these panties into his lap, accuse him of having an affair with a fat woman. Inevitable she should, early one morning, barge into the bathroom to discover him applying her lipstick, tilting his head before the mirror like a quizzical bird. Afterward, there would be frostiness at dinner, Beverly saying, “Webster, don't forget to bring the garbage out. That seems like a task for the *man* of the house, don't you think?” Or, “*Oh!* I saw a beautiful sapphire brooch in that jewelry shop on College Avenue. I'm not sure the price, but a blank check will do.” She would stare at him with cool aloofness from across the dining table. She was not his wife, but a crisp piece of lettuce. Iceberg, devoid of nutrients, like the “salad” she served once she'd made her biggest demand and his mother moved out. For this salad, Beverly quartered a head of iceberg lettuce. She chucked a quarter onto each plate, shaking bottled thousand island dressing onto the hunks. Webb sawed through the iceberg with a steak knife and yearned for his mother. Yearned for the salad she made in the height of summer, picking butter lettuces from the garden, tossing them with crème fraîche and herbs, lemon. She served these salads with an open hand, offering fresh pepper like they did in restaurants. He loved that salad! But he'd been caught wearing a women's brassiere, stuffing it with tissue as if he were a teenage girl, and one paid for such indiscretions. His mother had warned him of this, and his mother—not he—had paid.

Nights following these discoveries, Beverly came to him with unquenchable desire. She climbed on top of him. Rode him. Slapped his face until he

cried out. Bit his shoulders, yanked his hair. With moonlight glimmering menacingly through the blinds and across her face, she looked at once indefatigable and demonic, like a deranged gerbil. He clamped his eyes shut, but she took his face between her hands and cried, “Webster!” as if to remind him who he was. In the morning, he would leave the blank check on the counter with his too pretty signature betraying his desires.

The afternoon Hila uncovered the truth, Webb was in the bedroom wearing a pair of minuscule lace panties that left residual markings like Braille against his skin. He preened before the mirror like either Mick Jagger or a peacock. *Like a peacock*. A problematic metaphor. Only the males preened, showing their glorious and unabashed selves to the world. If he were a peacock, he could be both beautiful *and* male. He could be both decorated in finery *and* loud about it.

On this particular occasion, Webb had watched from the window as Hila eased the car out of the driveway and onto the street. Knowing she would not return for several hours, he went to his drawer of special things. Mesmerized by the polite, pleasing scratch of lace against his genitalia, he’d not heard her return. She’d forgotten something innocuous but needed; sunglasses or lipstick.

“Oh!” she said, as if she’d barged into an occupied bathroom stall. “Excuse me!”

He found her waiting at the kitchen table. Her legs, contained by black hose, were crossed not once but twice. She’d made coffee. She motioned him to the table, handed him a mug.

“Webster,” she said. “First, I’d like to apologize for startling you.”

Her words were measured and meticulous. He waited to hear what she wanted, prepared to meet her demands.

“Webster, do you like wearing women’s clothing?”

This, he had not expected. He dropped mumbled words into his coffee like sugar cubes.

Hila lit a cigarette. Her smoking in the house made clear the seriousness of this discussion. “Webster,” she said. “I’m not trying to make you uncomfortable. I’m only trying to understand this situation in which we find ourselves.”

“No.”

“No, what?”

“No, I don’t.”

“Don’t what?”

“What you said.”

“Webster, certainly you should be able to say it.”

“No, I do not like wearing women’s clothing.”

“So let me understand. A genie whisked her wand and said *presto change-o*, and suddenly—*oops!*—your corduroys went missing and you found yourself before the mirror clad only in a pair of lace panties.”

“Genies don’t have wands.”

“Excuse me?”

“Fairy godmothers have wands. Genies reside in bottles.”

“I cannot fathom that you are arguing with me over the magical implements of imaginary characters at this moment in time. Fine. Allow me to rearticulate. You’re saying that a fairy grandmother waved her wand and said, *Give this dear man some lovely lace panties. Make them nine sizes too small, for that is his destiny!* And voilà!”

“No,” he said. “Yes.”

She exhaled cigarette smoke.

He said, “I’m not homosexual!”

“I don’t believe I said you were. Also. That’s an offensive thing to say. You’re implying there’s something wrong with men who prefer men, or that your own predilection and need is superior to theirs.”

He said nothing.

“I find that sentiment offensive. I’m especially pained you feel the need to say such a thing to *me*. I believe I’m the closest person in this world to you, and as such, I would never judge you. Yet you act as if I do. As a result, we’re entangled inside this . . . this quagmire of deceit, because you’ve refused to be honest both with yourself and with me.”

Here, his face must have betrayed him.

“If you don’t like the words, Webster, maybe a fairy godmother will wave her magical wand once again and change them. Until then, we find ourselves inside a landscape of treachery because you are hiding the truth. You’re treating the truth like something unsavory, and as a result, Webster, you have made the situation needlessly dirty.”

Tick tock tick went the grandfather clock.

“Webster, do you want to be a woman?”

He clasped his hands to keep them from shaking, felt the residual tremors deep inside himself.

“No.”

“Yet I did not imagine you wearing panties just now.”

“No.”

“So, you *do* like wearing women’s clothing.”

“Yes.”

“Yes, what?”

“Yes, I like wearing women’s clothing.”

He’d never uttered it aloud before. He braced himself, as if for an inevitable crash.

“Okay then.” Hila shrugged.

His voice was tiny enough to slip through a crack. “I’m sorry.”

“Webster. Please. Don’t ever be sorry for who you are. Be sorry for hurting someone, for causing pain. Don’t ever be sorry for trying to get what you want from this life. It’s yours, to do with as you want. The only thing on this wide, beautiful earth you’d ever need to apologize to me for is not living this life the way you want to live it.”

She came to him then. Knelt between his legs, pressed her face to his inner thigh. He heard the rush of the ocean in his ears. He would have preferred her outrage. In the lean shadow of her anger, he could have drawn a tidy and finite line between them: him, her. He could have made her the antagonist against whom his desires pounded their fists. Her understanding frightened him.

“I’m sorry.” He strung the words together like pearls on a necklace Beverly might covet in his greatest moment of guilt. *Sorrysorrysorrysorry-sorrysorrysorrysorrysorry*.

Hila told his knee that there was nothing for which to be sorry. “Love,” she whispered. “Shhhhhh.”

That night, in bed, starting at the rough soles of his feet, she worked her way upward, kissing the various parts of him: slightly ticklish large toes, pinky toes, indeterminate other toes, the ball of each foot, his inner ankles, the knobs of his knees, the pale flesh of his thighs, the soft crease where thigh

met pelvis. She kissed his pelvic bone, the dip of his stomach. Kissed his right hip, his left hip, his navel. Kissed her way along his side, lingering, it seemed, on the indentions of rib. He had the sensation that she anointed him; conveyed his body to him, as if it had previously been missing. He felt in her kissing that she accepted all of who he was, his particularities and predilections, his tics and foibles, his yearnings, both guarded and uttered. Him, she accepted *him*. Beverly had cringed at the expression “to make love.” He’d reach for her, speaking with a throaty eagerness—*Make love to me*—and she’d turn away. Hila had never quaked over the concept. Quietly, she made love to him, and afterward they lay, awed by the magnitude of what they’d made.

Neither did Hila quake before the realization that Webster Eugene Jackson, who’d once appeared as quintessential man, preferred frothy dresses and silken slips, minuscule panties. A doer and a maker, she promptly began sewing his clothes.

“I won’t have you wearing things you’ve shoved yourself into, like sausage inside a casing.” Kneeling to measure for whatever dress or skirt she was making, she kissed his strong calves.

They went together to the fabric store. Women eyed him curiously; they’d seen so few men in these environs. He saw in their eyes: they believed he should be off wielding a hammer to great effect, eradicating weeds from the lawn. He should be caulking things in need of caulking; men caulked! The world’s leaks and rickety fences and rodent infestations could all be blamed on a man who spent time in the fabric store. The quilters in particular stared at him over bolts of discounted holiday fabric as the turkeys on cotton blend ogled him.

He and Hila selected fabric for a fictional woman they called Shasta, a name coined one late night when they had no mixer for their gin except Shasta black cherry cola. Her name suggested she was the sort of woman who wore little clothing while dutifully stirring a cauldron of beans over a campfire. Because Hila believed women felt plain without the romance of a middle name, Shasta became Shasta Jane.

“I *do* believe Shasta Jane should avoid colors reminiscent of ballpark condiments,” Hila would say over a bolt of satin. “I know she’s fond of mustard yellow, but truth be told, that shade makes her look sallow, like the poor girl needs a transfusion.” Or, “I know Shasta Jane isn’t inclined

toward busy patterns, but her midsection is unfortunately *not* her strong suit. These geometrics might be dizzying, but the chaos will help the good people understand she isn't pregnant. We don't want them thinking Shasta Jane has had *relations*."

"Shasta Jane isn't that kind of girl," said Webb.

"She most certainly is *not*." Hila's laughter billowed like a sheet hung to dry.

One evening, as Hila sewed the geometric fabric into a dress that would obscure Shasta Jane's ample midsection, they turned on the Emmys. They cared less about the awards; they wanted to see the gowns. They dissected the women in their sequined chiffon, debating their hair and accessory choices. And then an envelope was opened, a winner announced, and Webb saw *him*. Clive Murdoch, caught in a web of men clasping one another's shoulders and hands and elbows, nodding effusively at one another with the oh-golly-gee surprise of fishermen who'd ensnared a marlin.

"That's him!" Standing, Webb nearly upturned his card table.

"Alan Alda?"

"Clive Murdoch!"

Hila, blank-faced.

"*Clive Murdoch*, the infamous Missouri wrestler. The magnificent surferboarder. *Mr. Beverly Laurenzi*."

"Oh!" said Hila. "Oh, *oh!*"

Webb wore a ruffly pink nightgown Hila had sewn for him, having insisted that flattering nightwear was the cornerstone of a person's self-confidence. He gathered up its lace hem as if he were accepting an award of his own and, walking to the television, tapped Clive Murdoch's befuddled face as he ascended to the stage. Clive Murdoch fidgeted in the background as a man more important than he gave a rambling speech. A taller man stepped before Clive Murdoch, obfuscating him from view.

"Sir!" Hila said. "I beg you, move!"

And then, music played. The gaggle of chattering men walked offstage together, Clive Murdoch the little red caboose of their fraternity.

Hila—wonderful Hila!—disintegrated into laughter. The sight of her hilarity caused him to join her, and Webb laughed too, then coughed up a sob, then hiccuped.

“I’m not sure what’s funny,” he said, having exhausted his combination platter of emotion.

Hila gathered his face between her hands. “One thing is certain. Clive Murdoch no longer has a wrestler’s physique. That cummerbund was a bit snug!”

Those were the beautiful years: Hila, measuring and sewing, biting her bottom lip in concentration.

Hila sewed late into the nights. “I can’t stand to see you dressed in a muu-muu every day! You certainly knew what you were doing when you chose the home economics teacher. Maybe you found yourself attracted to the biology teacher, with her dewy skin and scientific disinclination towards brassieres, but you realized a dissector of frogs couldn’t properly tailor clothing.”

His lips brushed hers. “The dissectors of frogs are nothing beside you. I feel terrible for the poor, useless dissectors.”

She worked with one pin held at the side of her mouth. Her pincushion—she’d sewed it herself years before as a Texas teenager—was a plump tomato made of now lusterless velveteen. “It’s not as beautiful as the ones *we* grow!” she’d say, pushing pins inside it. When the plants’ yellow flowers made their first appearances, she’d cry, “Webster, our tomatoes are coming!” Hila, sentry of tomatoes. Still dressed in pajamas, coffee mug in one hand, she touched every tiny blossom to welcome it. One evening, drinking Pimm’s cups in the yard, Hila toasted their tomatoes’ heady scent, saying, “From here on out, whenever I smell a tomato plant, I’ll think of you, Webster, and this exact moment in time, as if there’s never been a moment before or after *this* one, with its rosy setting sun and the trill of that bird. I’ll remember the itch between my toes, your beautiful blue eyes, and you, Webster. I’ll remember *you*.”

Nights, watching their favorite television programs, Hila taught him to apply makeup. She gave him manicures and pedicures. Between sips of bourbon, she filed, soaked, cut. He marveled: she could have been a professional manicurist, a makeup artist! She could have been anything: an astronaut, a haughty French chef, a scientist as disinclined toward brassieres as the biology teacher. An activist, a bank robber.

Patty Hearst had just robbed the Hibernia Bank with her rifle and ugly

beret. "Poor Patty," sighed Hila. "Once, she was in the society pages. And now, look at that hideous hat." Hila, Webb knew, would look good wearing a hideous hat; she looked good wearing everything. He marveled that she was his, though he dared not say this to her. Male ownership made her bristle, as did the constant pawing of men. Once, at a dinner party, a drunken friend had wrapped his arm around her waist. She'd flung it aside, saying in a voice chilled by ice cubes, "If I want you to manhandle me, I'll say, *Please, Mark, manhandle me.*"

"That ship has sailed!" Hila declared when Webb expressed an interest in powder. "I'm sure Beverly-the-whore was powdered to high hell when she stood on that beach bandstand lusting for her bejeweled crown, but the fifties are a distant memory. It's the seventies, my love, and *au naturel* is the look. Fortunately, you're a great big hairy man, as *au naturel* as one can get." She applied a sheer coat of foundation to his face. He reveled in the motion of the brush against his skin. "We'll find that tenuous place where *just enough* resides, but I can assure you it doesn't involve powder."

Just enough. *Au naturel* would do for others, those endowed with genuine feminine gifts, but he longed to look like what his mother had called doxies.

"I respect that you want to look like a woman." Hila's face was somber and long. "But here. This is the first lesson: there will always be a contradiction between the things you yearn for and the expectations others have for you. Yes, occasionally I wanted to dress like a hussy, wear a white t-shirt without a bra. Wanted to sit bare-chested in the back of some handsome rogue's pickup, flapping my breasts at the cows, but I couldn't because my daddy's heart would cleave."

He closed his eyes, relished becoming other as Hila tweezed his eyebrows into thin lines. She curled his lashes, applied mascara. ("Your eyelashes *are* unfortunate," said Hila. "As if a penis isn't enough adversity to deal with!") Under her ministrations, Webb felt the coaxing tug of beauty, so different from the transformation of the football locker room, hub of testosterone, with its slapping of sweaty asses and snapping of towels. Its grappling with pads, donning of straps.

Afterward, he regarded his resplendence in the mirror. It was like leaping off a precipice. Like flight.