

Memoirs of an Ex-Prom Queen

Alix Kates Shulman is the author of fourteen books, including her debut novel *Memoirs of an Ex-Prom Queen*, which established her as a primary figure in feminism's second wave. Born in Cleveland, Ohio, Shulman studied philosophy at Columbia University and received an MA at New York University. She became a political activist, joining the Congress of Racial Equality in 1961 and the Women's Liberation Movement in 1967. Shulman lives in Manhattan and continues to speak on issues such as feminism and reproductive choice.

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Alix Kates Shulman

with a new introduction by the author



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Introduction to the new edition

Half a century ago, in the early, explosive days of women's liberation, I wrote my darkly comic novel *Memoirs of an Ex-Prom Queen* to demonstrate why, given society's treatment of girls and women, a feminist movement was necessary. A sardonic portrayal of one middle-class, white, Midwestern American girl's coming-of-age, the novel takes a wry look at a range of experiences treated back then as either taboo or trivial—violence, rape, illegal abortion, the sexual double standard, daily humiliations, job discrimination, the frantic quest for beauty, the double binds of marriage, motherhood, and love—all business-as-usual between the sexes.

Today, many of the predicaments in which the titular ex-prom queen Sasha Davis found herself have a powerful, emotionally charged name: “sexual harassment”—a term not coined until well after I wrote the novel.

In the three years between my book proposal and the novel's 1972 publication, enough people had been touched by feminist ideas to create a hunger for a new view of women's experience that made my novel a bestseller. My proposal had earned a token

advance, but well before publication the book began to take off. The galley proofs, which as a matter of course circulated among the paperback reprint houses, became hot items, passing quickly from hand to hand among the secretaries (a word that had not yet been replaced in publishing by “editorial assistant”); *Publishers Weekly*, the trade journal that reviews books six or more weeks before publication, announced that “this book already has a substantial underground reputation.” The publishing executives—all male in those days when newspapers’ Help Wanted columns were still unabashedly headed “Help Wanted, Male” and “Help Wanted, Female”—were mystified by the book’s pre-publication buzz and took me aside to ask what its secret appeal could be. Nevertheless, on the day reprint rights were auctioned, not only did every major reprint house enter the bidding, but the winning bid established a new record for paperback rights to a first novel. A pittance compared with today’s prices, but still enough to ensure that I could continue to write my books and to enable me to send checks of gratitude to every feminist journal that had taken the early risk of publishing me—audacious journals with names like *Up from Under*, *Women: A Journal of Liberation*, and *Aphra*, named to honor Aphra Behn (1640–1689), known as the first Western woman to earn her living by writing.

While early reviewers found the novel “shocking,” “astounding,” even “traumatic,” women readers responded with recognition. Feminists laughed out loud as they read it, potential feminists cried, others were puzzled or outraged—like the young man who wrote to me, soon after the novel was published, blaming me for his wife’s leaving him and taking their baby with her after reading *Memoirs of an Ex-Prom Queen*. “Don’t you think,” I wrote back to the fellow, “you might have had something to do with it?”

As the women’s movement continued to spread, turning its ideas from “shocking” to widely accepted, the novel, with its pre-feminist setting, was elevated to the category “feminist classic.” This kept it ever in print in the United States, even as the

anti-movement backlash gained such force that young women spurned the label “feminist” while embracing the many benefits the movement had won for them. As the book enjoyed a 25th anniversary edition, a 35th anniversary edition, and a 40th anniversary e-book edition, Sasha and her author celebrated, but with mixed emotions, knowing that the social movement that had inspired the novel was moribund.

Then I was as surprised as anyone by the grave political upheavals that recently rendered Sasha’s daily struggles baldly contemporary and the subject of fierce political action. #MeToo. #TimesUp. A revitalized women’s movement, diverse and determined, marching through the world in protest. The word “feminist,” so long disdained, is again respected, and media that formerly ignored women’s oppression or scorned women’s work now regularly cover them; at the same time, the revived right-wing backlash against feminism hovers over the present like pollution smog. Along with other feminist “classics,” *Memoirs of an Ex-Prom Queen*, which dramatizes and satirizes every sort of sexual harassment, is being read with new eyes. Sasha Davis, the pre-feminist prom queen, may be seen as a harbinger of today’s outrages, and her story a measure of both how far we have come and how far we still have to go.

Alix Kates Shulman
February 2019

Memoirs of an Ex-Prom Queen

On the Sunday of my first lecture a sealed note was left at my hotel for me. The anonymous writer warned me of a plot against my life: I was going to be shot when about to enter the hall, he assured me. ... I walked leisurely from the hotel to the meeting-place. When within half a block of it I instinctively raised to my face the large bag I always carried. I got safely into the hall and walked towards the platform still holding the bag in front of my face. All through the lecture the thought persisted in my brain: "If I could only protect my face!" ... Surely no man would think of his face under such circumstances. Yet I, in the presence of probable death, had been afraid to have my face disfigured! It was a shock to discover in myself such ordinary female vanity.

—Emma Goldman in *Living My Life*

The girl was ugly. I was bored during the whole journey.

—Casanova in *History of My Life*

I have learned to mistrust symmetry and the decimal system. There was once a time when I would do anything I chose for which I had ten good reasons, or again, anything for which I could find no reason not to, a time when I would not resist a dare.

I am more cautious now. I have children and responsibilities. I am suspicious of reasons and hostile to dares. The evidence suggests that nature is probably unbalanced, that ten is no truer than four, that reason does not prevail.

Accordingly, doubt is my motto. To share what I've learned (and to have something interesting to do now that I am past thirty and the children are in school) I shall compose a memoir. I shall begin my story neither at the beginning, moving forward as a reader expects, nor at the end, moving backward as a writer recalls, but rather somewhere in between, where the truth is said to lie.

In a railroad station in Europe, then, about to cut free of my first husband, likely against all reason.

One



As the Orient Express lumbered into the subfreezing Munich Hauptbahnhof (and I fresh from Madrid!) to spew me onto the platform into the arms of my waiting husband, I was mistress of no grand schemes. I knew only that I had slightly under two minutes in which to bundle myself up, gather my dictionaries and belongings, fish out my ticket, and find the precise and perfect English words with which to shed my spouse. I knew he would be waiting, smiling, at the end of the platform, just one step beyond the ticket puncher, perhaps already holding out to me one of those sausages for which the Munich station was so famous and which—damn him—he knew I loved. There wouldn't be a moment to experiment with attitude or wording. By then I knew that to wait and see would be to hesitate, and to hesitate would be to lose. I had already in my four long years of marriage to Frank wasted too many chances of getting free by taking aim at him. This time I had to get him square between the eyes on the first shot or he would get me.

The letdown of getting settled into a pair of glum furnished rooms in that dreary northern European city that lacked even

the distinction of being a capital had catapulted me south. Frank had his work; I had my nothing. Munich was certainly no place to spend a winter cooped up with a possessive husband in one of those postwar windowless houses six blocks beyond the last stop of the streetcar line; a house with endless locks and keys, a spying landlady, and no telephone. Only Fulbrights for friends in a foreign land. A waste of my youth!

“All right, go on to Spain, then,” he had said when I pestered him for my ticket. “I’ll use the time you’re away to polish my piece on the German Question now that *Intersection* has shown some interest.”

I had been careful not to show my delight. He was clearly ambivalent about my traveling.

“I’ll try to bring some books for you from the library. Maybe you can pick up a little Spanish while you’re there. Enjoy yourself; get it out of your system.”

But obviously if I had really enjoyed myself, how could I ever get it out of my system? I had enjoyed myself too much to answer the letters he sent me in care of every American Express office south of Munich. I would have had to answer them with lies, and I wanted to live open and clean.

Well, my chance to prove my honesty was coming up fast. If he would only give me half the money I’d clear out of his life. He could keep the apartment and the furniture, no alimony, finish out the year here, and wait till New York for the lawyers. Simply reroute. I would go to ... Rome. Let him decide what to tell our friends; let him think of a story for the family. Let him save his face any way he could. Mine would take care of itself.

As the train screeched slowly to a stop, I took a final look in my mirror. Not bad, not good. I was losing my power to judge, now that I was twenty-four. I smoothed the bangs above my eyes, fluffed up my hair at the crown, flexed my smile. Looking good made everything easier. But I felt old—twenty-four and married and old; a has-been like last year’s Miss America. Please God, I prayed, let me be beautiful at least until after my money runs out.

The rosy-cheeked clergyman with whom I had shared the compartment was saying “*Auf wiedersehen, Fräulein*” and extending his pudgy hand. Those handshaking Germans.

“Bye-bye,” I said. They loved to hear you say bye-bye. His chattering away at me in German since just past Nancy had chased the Spanish rhythms from my ears and made me postpone my preparations until the last possible moment. And now he was insisting that I leave the compartment first, when I needed every extra second.

“*Bitte*,” he said, holding the door for me and waiting.

“*Danke*,” I said. And abandoning the last possibility of flight, I walked onto the platform into the lion’s lair.

There was the lion himself, just as I had expected him, a step beyond the ticket puncher, grinning once he spotted me, and carrying an armful of anemones. As though I were returning from a short trip exactly on schedule.

Get *bim!* But my words were not ready.

Achtung! Achtung! blasted the loudspeaker, as Frank glided up to me and gained the advantage by speaking first. Well, let him, I thought. I’ll have the last word: bye-bye.

“Hi, baby. Welcome back. Did you have a good time?” All smiles, he held out the flowers to me. Flowers! They were the first flowers he had ever bought me; he was pulling something. Once when we were both students he had gathered a fistful of buttercups to turn our chins yellow. But that was different. These flowers were premeditated. How hateful of him to bring anemones that I loved, that open and close and grow taller so gaudily right before your eyes, like a time-lapse film. It was as though he knew ... But suddenly it struck me that of course he didn’t know. At that moment I knew everything and Professor knew nothing. It was I who intended to act, I who had the advantage. I was ready to exert all my power—the only kind of power a woman has. Until the night before when I had wired him about my imminent arrival on the Orient Express, he had surely considered me one of the missing or departed; but now he thought me his wife come

home from a little trip. He didn't even suspect that I intended to leave him forever. He thought I would let him correct my spelling and teach me German, that I would cook him *weisswurst* and entertain his friends and explore Bavarian churches while he did his work, and be flattered to belong to him. He didn't even suspect the truth. I avoided his kiss by thrusting my suitcase at him. He put it down. With one arm around my back he squeezed my shoulders and placed a husbandly kiss on my cheek. "Welcome home," he said tenderly with the joy of possession, each syllable visible as a puff of steam in the freezing air of the station.

His words were visible objects in the air. And where were my words?

It was all I could do to keep my knees from trembling. Could he not have noticed how rotten I looked? It should have been so easy for me simply to blurt out the truth. Then why did it seem to be such a dirty business instead? Maybe because I knew Frank believed exactly what he wanted to believe, no more, no less. His cup of tea did not include the dregs, though the dregs are the tea. His brew was nothing but vapor.

"God, I missed you. Why didn't you write?" he asked. But of course he couldn't allow me to answer such a dangerous question. Quickly he asked instead, "What happened to you?" switching me over from active to passive.

How I wished I could tell him that nothing happens to me, that it is I who happen to them, true or not. How I wished I could tell him ... "A lot happened," I said. *Now. Tell him now.* But the loudspeaker interrupted with its *Achtungs* and I lost my nerve.

"I was worried about you. Didn't you get my letters? I wrote you everywhere I could think of. Well. Now you've traveled. I hope *that's* finished! I hope it's all out of your system. Now that you're back, I'll never let you out of my sight again. God, I missed you." A train starting up drowned him out. He squeezed my arm and yelled, "Come on. Let's get some sausages and you can tell me about your adventure. Here, take these." He succeeded finally in handing me the flowers; then he picked up my suitcase.

Why was everything nice he did for me a bribe or a favor, while my kindnesses to him were my duty? Now he was going to try to stall off my revelations with sausages, buy my silence with anemones. Out of the corner of my eye, I watched him bouncing too jovially along through the station carrying my bag, his long legs rushing ahead of him as though they had some place important to take him, and I knew it was only a matter of moments until the right words would come to me, the words with which to tell him the truth. I would use his words, his vaporous vocabulary.

“Frank. Wait. Before we go for sausages there’s something I have to tell you.”

“What?” he asked smiling at me. Always smiling. He didn’t even put down my suitcase or slow his walking to hear what I had to say. He didn’t seem to remember that all the while I was away I hadn’t written him a single letter.

“I was unfaithful to you, Frank.” Casually I brushed the bangs out of my eyes. “In Madrid.”

He didn’t move a muscle, not even to drop the smile. But I knew I had struck him. I could proceed, knowing the words would come easily. How much better to tell the truth than to try to hide it. After that I was sure only the formalities could keep me here and for only a little while, like waiting around after a funeral, and then I would be free to go.

But I took no chances. Solemnly, officially, I said, “I know how you feel about it. I know that’s the end of us.” His turn now.

Yes, he heard me. He began slowing down. Finally he stopped walking entirely. He stood looking at me, picking up my suitcase and putting it down again, like a twitch. His mouth hung open a little, letting the truth seep in. He wiped a hand on his overcoat. Then out he came with it, his simple, automatic response: “No!” Softly at first, then increasing in volume in minute increments of decibels. “No! No! No!” I knew him well enough to recognize each one of them. What a variety of *no*s, relieved now and then by a synonym or a paraphrase: “You didn’t,” “I don’t believe you,”

“It isn’t true,” “You couldn’t have.” A barrage of negatives. The *no’s* allowed me for another instant to hate him. *Listen to him!* I said to myself triumphantly, justifying. But there was really no time for that, and besides, justifying would be a trap. No, I needed simply to press my advantage and be gone.

“Yes,” I whispered to him, unsure of its effect. “Yes,” I repeated softly between bites at the station sausage stand, gently, trying to suppress the note of triumph. But there it was on the counter between us, gaudy as the anemones, our basic matrimonial dispute: “No!” “Yes!” “I won’t let you!” “I shall!” “It’s a lie!” “It’s the truth!” “You didn’t!” “I did!”

Unfaithful. It was a word he could understand, a concept he could manipulate, a clean, abstract, intelligible word, implying order. Order violated, but order all the same. Though he held his face in his hands while I finished my last bite of sausage, I knew he would be all right when I left. He would wring his hands and say to our friends, “She was unfaithful,” and he would believe in my corruption and his purity, and then he would get himself another wife.

“You leave me no choice at all. That’s it, you know,” he threatened.

“I know,” I said, accepting the gambit.

He looked at me hard, frowning and biting his lower lip the way he did when he was working, and then he risked asking, “Don’t you *care?*”

Desperate question. What could I say to him? Poor guy, but it was him or me. “I guess I don’t love you any more. I don’t belong to you any more.” Well, at least it was the truth. I looked down into my beer. After a suitable number of seconds had elapsed I took a swallow. (Any sooner and he would have said, *Put down your mug and listen to me!*)

“Haven’t I allowed you everything? How could you do this to me? Why?”

To him. I shrugged.

“Why did you feel you had to do it?”

Do it. He was as slippery as sperm. No, no—I refused to defend! “I didn’t *have to do it*. I felt like it.”

“But why?”

“I don’t know, I guess because there wasn’t any reason *not to*.”

“I’m the reason not to. Because you’re married to me. Because you made a commitment. You promised me you wouldn’t,” he said puffing up. Puff. Puff.

Technically I had promised. But under protest. Now he would lose me on a technicality. I had promised only because he had insisted. To calm him. Lies.

“But I didn’t have to tell you about Madrid, did I?” I said. “So the promise wasn’t really a reason not to *do it*, was it? It was only a reason not to *tell you*.”

“Quite right. Yes. You promised at least not to tell me. But now you’ve told me. And now it’s too late. Why did you have to tell me? I wish we could wipe it out and forget about it.” Again, he held his face in his hands.

Would it have been unkind of me to point out to him how often he had read over my shoulder my letters to and from my friends, trying to find out? Did he want to know or didn’t he? Generously, I pointed out nothing.

“I told you because I know it will happen again. Because you won’t let me breathe. It will happen again and you’ll find out. I hate lies!”

He blew his nose, snorting loudly. I was embarrassed. It would make red veins on his nostrils and blue veins on his neck. Was he going to carry on in the railroad station? On the radio someone was singing a Dietrich song:

*Ich bin von Kopf bis Fuss auf Liebe eingestellt
Und das ist meine Welt, und sonst gar nichts.*

“If it’s okay with you I’d like to go home now,” I said, getting out my mirror. “I have a lot to do. I feel as though I haven’t had a bath in a month. I’ll try to be out of here in a day or two, three

at the most. That sound all right to you?" I looked worse than I should; I had to see a doctor. I put away the mirror and stood up.

"We'll need to talk a bit first," he said, trying to compose himself.

"Okay. We can talk if you want." It was the least I could offer.

He gazed through to the back of my head, out of focus, saying nothing. I started to walk toward the exit. I knew he would follow me. He left some money on the counter and caught up, lugging my suitcase with one hand, the anemones, which I had forgotten, in the other. He slid up in time to hand me back the flowers and open the door. At the curb he took my elbow commandingly and guided me through the insane Munich traffic to the narrow island where the trolleys stopped. Never forgot his place or mine. Oh, well, I was too weary to mind; I would let him protect me from the traffic, Munich was such a cold and hostile city.

On the island Frank gathered up his wits. "You don't *look* changed," he mustered with a faint smile.

"Please. Let's not talk about how I look. I've been sick. One of the things I have to do before I leave is see a good German doctor."

"What's the matter?"

"I don't really know. I saw a doctor in Madrid, but he didn't help. These Catholic doctors ..."

"What did he say?"

"Something about hormones. And he gave me some pills. I took them for a while, but now I'm afraid to take any more. I think it's crazy to play around with hormones, don't you? I just hope I'm not pregnant," I said laughing and pushing my hair off my forehead.

"Pregnant?" He blinked.

"It's really very unlikely; I always used my diaphragm. It's just that I missed my last period. But that could be for a lot of reasons."

He looked around to see if anyone was listening to our

conversation. “How could you?” he whispered. As if anyone there could understand us or would care. All the people squeezed onto the narrow concrete island were straining to see what number trolley was approaching or trying to keep the wind out of their faces. No one paid the slightest attention to us.

A number-five trolley pulled up behind a number-six and stopped, bells clanging. Frank put down my suitcase and got out a sufficient number of pfennigs. The conductor punched two tickets methodically in several secret places and waved us on, giving the suitcase a shove.

Settled in the back of the car, Frank looked hard at me. “You planned it,” he said.

“What?”

“You took your diaphragm with you. You planned to be unfaithful.”

Oh Christ. “I did not.”

“Of course you did. Don’t lie.”

I refused to answer. I was still saving my last word. It was not true that I “planned” it in the way that he meant. But when you came right down to it, what difference did it make whether I left him two months before or was leaving him then? Poor Professor, out of focus, worrying the wrong question.

“I never go anywhere without it—like you and your spare glasses. We all have to look out for ourselves. But that’s not *planning* anything.”

He didn’t answer. Perhaps he didn’t even hear me.

The trolley stopped short, throwing me momentarily against Frank. For an instant our eyes met and I saw that his were filled with hate. Was it the hatred of the lion facing his tamer or his prey? Something had gone wrong. Quickly he focused away. For the rest of the ride he sat in a pool of silence until we reached the end of the line. Not a word. But his silence didn’t fool me. I had already seen the hate. I knew I must not let down my guard for an instant or he would spring. I suddenly felt afraid.

When the trolley stopped at the end of the line we began our

six-block trudge through the snow-piled streets to the dreary house we lived in. I carried the anemones; Frank carried my suitcase, his head bent in accusation.

How dare he accuse me! “What did you expect?” I shouted. But the only reply I got was the thump-thump of my suitcase against his leg.

Why was I so afraid? Wasn't I free? I swore to get out of there. Fast.

Too late I realized I ought to have gone to a hotel; too late I saw that the distance between the beds was not enough. Even in a separate bed I would be trapped under his ego.

I tried to keep the conversation calm, but Frank would not stay calm. I saw it all: first he would talk about principles and then he would call me names. And if the argument didn't go his way he would shift the grounds and latinize, exaggerate his consonants and patronize. Already he was whispering, “*Quiet! Do you want Frau Werner to know what you are?*” and I, losing my own control, was shouting, “I don't give a shit what Frau Werner thinks! Or what you think either! I care what I think! And what I think is I'm leaving this house and this country and you and Frau Werner!”

“Shut up, you whore! You bitch! You selfish, castrating bitch!”

The names they use! My God, I thought, how did I get into this? I had expected it to be so easy. Hadn't he threatened a thousand times to leave me if I was “unfaithful”? Talk about deceit! It was *his* word that was worthless. Always insisting that a bargain is a bargain—what about *his* side of the bargain? There should have been nothing to it: my confession and punishment, a quick D-and-C, pack up, back on the Orient Express, and out of there. Otherwise time would go by and money would be wasted. I had little enough money or time to waste any more of either on him. I refused to listen to his names. I would not let him manipulate me with assaults and arguments.

“You are trying to make me kick you out, but I won't,” he

threatened. "I'm still your husband. I have rights. If you want to leave me you'll have to do the leaving. I can't stop you, bitch. But I'm not going to help you. Not one cent! You can whore your way around Europe!"

I decided not to answer. I didn't need his permission, of course, but why point it out? The Fulbright money was his, but the rest was mine, earned on nine-to-five jobs he would never have taken, though he was willing enough to live off it. Perhaps after a night's sleep he'd be calm and more sensible.

I asked Frau Werner about getting a bath though it wasn't our night to use the tub. She said of course, she'd run my water. I slipped out of my clothes, and as I reached for the towel she had placed on the doorknob, Frank came up behind me, yanked the towel out of reach, almost knocked over the anemones, and unfastened my bra. The lion raises his paw. As the bra hung loose from my shoulders he slipped his hands underneath and started to fondle my breasts.

"What do you think you're doing?" I wanted to swat at his mosquito fingers and get on to my bath, but I hesitated. There was something desperate in his fast breath on the back of my neck, and I was afraid to fight. "You belong to me. You're my wife," he mumbled into my neck, at once proclaiming his strength and my duty.

"Stop it," I said. I tried to shake him off my shoulders, but he hung on, squeezing my nipples in his fingertips. I began to struggle in earnest. His breath on my neck made me very nervous. "Please, Frank. No fair."

"Please Frank, no fair," he mimicked, adding, "bitch!"

I tried to stay calm. He was very angry. Daddy. As I hesitated to use my nails on his wrists he pushed me onto one of the beds and deftly pinned my wrists over my head. With a wrench of his head he shook his glasses off; they dropped to the floor. I had a picture of myself as a comic-book victim, strangling on my own bra, which was flopping around my throat, and I felt an almost uncontrollable urge to laugh. But Frank looked so helpless

without his glasses, dewy-eyed and unfocused, that bitch or no, I struggled not to laugh at him. Controlling my own impulse to be cruel, instead I said, “I’ll scream!”

“Scream then,” he mumbled. And transferring both my wrists to one of his hands for an instant, he prepared with a minimum of undressing to rape me.

There was no way out. I could hardly suppress the laughter any more. I tried to think of other things. I wondered if Frau Werner was listening at the door and if the bath would overflow. “Don’t! You’ll be sorry!” I cried mainly for the record, hoping not to smile, and then finally, as Frank ignored my wants and his kisses began to tickle unbearably, “For God’s sake, Frank, at least let me take off the bra and put in my diaphragm!”

But nothing doing. “Forget the diaphragm,” he said, and to the accompaniment of my finally unsuppressible laughter, off we went on our last trip together.

Well, so what? He’d done it so many times—what did one more matter? I’d be leaving soon enough. He could do what he wanted: I still had that last word in reserve.

Two days later, when the petals had started falling off the anemones, my last word was still there where it had always been—in reserve. Though I had spent my life trying to arm myself with final words, I had never been able to pull a bye-bye without having a big hello ready for the next guy. Even as a kid, the thought of spending a Saturday night alone could produce in me such anxiety that I’d go out with anyone just to have a date. In fact, from the eighth grade on, no matter how I talked up freedom, I had never managed to spend more than four consecutive months without at least one man to count on, and frequently two, in case one ran out. In high school they called it “boy crazy”; in college, where everything accelerated, “oversexed.” To me it was life insurance.

If I could know for sure I was still beautiful, I thought, it would be easy to leave. If I had been certain of it in Spain, maybe I

wouldn't have come back to Munich at all. Maybe I would have sent Frank a long letter and stayed in Madrid, or else got hold of a good mirror and a good doctor and gone straight to Italy. But as it was, I knew my looks were slipping. When I got a look in Frau Werner's bathroom mirror under a decent light I was appalled by my reflection. Was it the mask of pregnancy or worse? There was suddenly a pale, almost imperceptible fuzz on my upper lip that had not been there in America. Probably from those hormones I'd taken in Spain. I needed a cure. If I couldn't get rid of it or if it spread, I was finished.

Smug Frank didn't notice a thing. In his myopic eyes I was still as lovely as ever—that was his insidious power over me. I could tell from the way he took my arm proudly in public and looked around to see who noticed that he still thought me beautiful. Maybe I should have been grateful, like a junkie getting a fix, but I resented it. Not that I was squeamish about trading on my looks when there was nothing else around to trade on. No, it was just that I would need another fix and another, when all I wanted was out. It was impossible to get younger. My chances of leaving would only be worse next year. It was maddening to be stuck there with Frank on account of a faulty epidermis. I was a coward.

No doubt I had made a mess of things. There I was, after all my resolve, still in Munich. I kept thinking that if I could find one disinterested man to call me beautiful, maybe I could believe it and muster the nerve to leave. Since looks were everything, my only asset, I really had to be sure. Frank's word was not enough. All the other assets that I had so carefully cultivated in my youth I had abandoned somewhere, half-formed, in the flood of matrimony, and now at twenty-four I was too old and frightened to go back and reclaim them. My early promises had all been broken; now all my fragile eggs were in this one worn basket.

There had once been a brief time when I did know I was beautiful. Back in junior high, just after the War, I had had what I considered proof. But even then being beautiful mattered so

much that I always suspected I was just passing my prime, like a miser who counts his riches every night and wakes up in the morning thinking himself poor. Even then mirrors told me very little: all I ever saw when I looked in one was me. The me I had examined in my bedroom mirror when I was a stringy, buck-toothed, pigtailed kid yearning to be beautiful was the same me Beverly Katz had cursed in envy in junior high (“You can’t expect to get away with this shit forever! Someday you’ll pay!”), the very me who was foolishly tweezing hairs in a seedy Madrid hotel the night before leaving Spain for Munich. My mirror image always had to be interpreted. And for that I sought my reflection in someone else’s eyes.



Mid-Depression, when I turned five, my family moved to Baybury Heights, Ohio, one of Cleveland’s coming brick-and-frame neighborhoods sprinkled with vacant lots and apple trees. My arms were just long enough to reach bottom branches and I quickly took to the trees. But even then, a carefree tomboy roaming free, I longed to be pretty. Every girl did.

“Climbing Sasha,” my father called me as I sped through breakfast so I could race to the woods behind our house. Skinny and agile, I scaled the trunks with ease, spending my first summers in the green branches and on the moss beneath. All the kids could manage the apple trees, but only I could scramble straight up to the top of the Spy Tree, a lone slender birch, and see on a clear day all the way downtown to Cleveland’s one skyscraper, the Terminal Tower. “Can you see it today?” my brother Ben would call from below. “Is it foggy or clear?” yelled up Susan McCarthy, who lived next door. And they would just have to take my word for it. I took my lunches in the treehouse with the McCarthy kids. After supper, if the boys let me, I played touch football on our quiet street or kick-the-can with everyone in the neighborhood.

Tomboy or not, I spent my indoor time dressing up in my