

Mary Gaitskill is the author of the novel *Two Girls, Fat and Thin*, as well as the story collections *Bad Behavior* and *Because They Wanted To*, nominated for the Pen/Faulkner Award in 1998. Her stories and essays have appeared in the *New Yorker*, *Harper's* and *Esquire*. In 2002 she was awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship for fiction.

Praise for *Veronica*

“This characteristically oblique glance at the US fashion modelling industry of the 1980s is written with all the psychological kick that distinguished Gaitskill’s last collection of stories.”
—DJ Taylor, *TLS Books of the Year*

“*Veronica* is an intense study of pain, illness, rejection, and of glamour’s tyranny. This Gaitskill achieves in writing that transcends mere style. Her unique language allows her to probe her characters’ psyches with microscopic observation and relentless originality. The novel is richly metaphorical, and image succeeds startling image with a breathless, yet precise, invention...illuminating and moving. Gaitskill’s talent is both prodigious and refined, and she is unafraid to articulate the anguished thoughts and feelings from which we prefer to turn away.”
—*Independent*

“Gaitskill deserves some sort of monument [for this] beautiful, devastating new novel... There are paragraphs like poems in *Veronica* that lure you back, over and over.”
—*Elle*

“A highly perceptive and recommended read.” —*Aesthetica*

“*Veronica* has a deadly, elegant grace... Gaitskill is steely-eyed and unafraid, dissecting her characters with a surgeon’s precision.”
—*Metro*

“A heady evocation of a lost life...a dizzying, optimistic, visceral reminiscence.”
—*The List*

“Gaitskill probes the small, dirty corners of her characters’

lives...a very plain book about beauty. Gaitskill is not interested in telling a moral tale: everything is grubby and indistinct. Her characters do not go about learning valuable lessons about right and wrong, they simply battle on through an unforgiving reality... Gaitskill's disdain for simplistic contemporary attitudes is positively winning.”
—*Spectator*

“This extraordinary novel is a shattering and glittering account of the brittle riches of the 1980s... A tremendous account—funny, sad, surprising and beautiful—of a life falling apart.”
—*Psychologies*

“[An] arresting novel about beauty, fame and friendship... For all its sad truthfulness, this is also a story filled with soul.”
—*Daily Mail*

“A fierce look at the mystery of human relationships.”
—*Big Issue*

“A sadly truthful story, filled with soul.”
—*London Life*

“An exploration of the humanising relationship between the glamorous and the grotesque...a song about the impossible complications that a well-lived life brings...a beautiful and complicated piece—a novel written in the voice of a poet, but undeniably focused on the glamour of pop.”
—*Time Out*

“Gaitskill is enormously gifted... [*Veronica*] is a masterly examination of the relationship between surface and self, culture and fashion, time and memory. Gaitskill's brand of brainy lyricism, of acid shot through with grace, is unlike anyone else's... Her palpable talent puts her among the most eloquent and perceptive contemporary fiction writers.”
—*New York Times Book Review*

“Fierce, night-blooming... Beauty and ugliness do battle in *Veronica*, not only within the minds of its tormented characters but also on the page. Ms. Gaitskill writes so radiantly about violent self-loathing that the very incongruousness of her language has shocking power.”
—*The New York Times*

“Through four books over eighteen years, Mary Gaitskill has been formulating her fiction around that immutable question of how we manage to live in a seemingly inscrutable world... The marvel of *Veronica* is how finely this novel reveals a life, and how the novel itself becomes a kind of revelation.” —*Harper's*

“Gaitskill's work goes against the corrective grain in American fiction, a grain that is deeper and more pervasive now than it was when her first stories appeared... [*Veronica*] is the best thing she has yet written. At the moment when many of our best novels seem to have been written in a borrowed or restored language, *Veronica* has the sound of original speech.”

—*The New York Review of Books*

“Unsparring and unsentimental, the book is a powerful meditation on some of Gaitskill's favorite themes: cruelty, sex, desire and beauty.”

—*Newsweek*

“There are novels that speak a language entirely their own... *Veronica* creates an atmosphere, provokes a response, and suffuses us with an emotion that we can easily, all too easily, summon up. It's art you can continue to see even with your eyes closed.”

—Francine Prose, *Slate*

“Engaging and penetrating... Never before in fiction has a model been this knowing, this feeling or this poetic. Yet every sentence rings true... As soulful as it is sordid.”

—*The Seattle Times*

“Striking... Reading Mary Gaitskill is like having a flock of birds fly straight at your face: You recognize the beauty, but you still want to cover your eyes... *Veronica* is true in ways that few American novels are willing to be true.”

—*The New York Observer*

“The current in [Gaitskill's] livewire prose runs in the direction of the psychological and the impressionistic... *Veronica* bleeds from [Gaitskill's] lacerating intelligence, the rueful wisdom of an author who has aged with her tremendous novel.”

—*The Village Voice*

“[Veronica] will leave you shaking and joyful simultaneously, dizzy with the proximity of private terror and bottomless hope.”

—*The Oprah Magazine*

“There is no moral here; just the burning sense of youth as Alison and Veronica torched their way through it: head-on, a new disease waiting in the wings... Gritty... Sincere and true.”

—*The Plain Dealer* (Cleveland)

VERONICA

MARY GAITSKILL



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INTRODUCTION

by Mary Gaitskill

“The more withered the reality, the more gigantic and tyrannical the dream.”

I wrote this book in 1992, or at least I wrote a draft of it then. It is hard for me to remember that time; in my memory the world was very different than it seems now, but of course the seeds of *now* were present *then*. Some people seemed to think the book was about the decade called “the 80s;” one critic said it described the “epic heartlessness” of that era. I still wonder at the statement. In the 80s we weren’t officially torturing people.

At the end of the 80s I moved from New York City to a canyon in Marin County, California. I lived in a renovated garage/cottage with a floor like plywood covered by thin carpet; in this one particular spot, I could peel up a loose edge of carpet and see the ground (once even a bug!) under the wood. I remember thinking I should be disgusted by this, but I was not. It was my first actual house that I didn’t share with anyone else, and in it I had my first full complement of furniture including a couch which felt luxurious to me. The canyon around me was luxurious too, lush and dense, full of colors and shapes that I had never seen before; in the winter chartreuse moss was so thick on the trees that it grew away from trunks in rough hairy phalanges. I walked in this place for hours sometimes, absorbing the feeling of the moss and everything else:

the floor of dirt and crumbling leaves, the quick, shining skin of a creek; fallen trees with dried bark crumbling off them; slender, humorously twisted trunks of ochre-colored madrones.

This natural abundance was amplified by what seemed almost unnatural social and economic abundance: all around me were enormous, elaborate homes built up steep hills and surrounded by gardens, the air of which was daintily dotted by wind chimes—except when the dainty dots were blotted out by the tireless hammers and drills of home improvement, which was often. It seemed as if the beautiful homes were *constantly* being improved. The people who lived in them also had countless opportunities for improvement; everywhere were advertisements for healing, therapy, meditation and personal evolution. Even at the grocery store and the fruit stand, flawless, free-range food was on display, and the rows of shining produce seemed to strive to be something more than mere food, something impossibly ideal.

I had never owned a television before; I had not paid much attention at all to “culture;” I had been too busy trying to pay my rent and to negotiate the world immediately around me. Now, in this strange, abundant place I turned on the TV and listened to the radio; I opened magazines of all kinds. I took very seriously what I saw there, absurdly and naively so. I read the endless, hectoring opinions telling us who “we” were and what “we” were doing (Welcome to the age of White Trash! Now Feminists want to have sex! We used to be Sincere and now we’re Ironic! We’re a Culture of Victims and it’s terrible!) with great, baffled interest. But what stood out, most loudly and violently were images of beauty so intense they were almost warped; some of these images were human. The fashion model seemed suddenly at the center of the cultural world, inextricably wound in with music, art and cinema. These human images snagged in my imagination, which twisted and turned reactively, picking and chewing over them, foolishly trying to get nourishment from them—for I wanted to be part

of this vibrant and powerful world. I wanted beauty too, not merely physical beauty, but the heightened pitch of existence the magazines hinted at. I think I believed in some murky way what I was being shown, that ideal experience could be found in a particular, *correct* example of human identity and form, form that appeared in a variety of magazine personae that were subliminally linked to higher ideals.

My mind, of course, knew better. My mind did not like my psyche's vulnerability to this chimera and sounded the alarm with imagistic assertions of its own: I remember seeing *Pet Sematary* (Stephen King's horror story of burial and re-animation) during this time and being pierced by the image of a grotesquely reanimated person digging with his hands in somebody's yard, looking for bones to chew on, bewildered and ashamed but unable to stop—unable too to get any nourishment from the bones he dug up. To me it was an image of compulsion that represented, with blunt, poetic accuracy, my psyche's stimulated wish to have the "beauty" being fed it, along with a great collective psyche's stimulated wish. This understanding protected me from more fully absorbing such poisonous wishes because of the truth I intuited in the image; the seed of deprivation hidden in a fevered dream of perfection. Indeed, part of the reason I think this "dream" was so compelling to me from the start was my stricken feeling for the underlying wound of deprivation.

This fixation was made more compelling to me by its proximity to another kind of wound; grief for the death of a friend. Her name was June. She was about ten years older than me, and we had met at the job I'd had before publishing my first book. If we had met in a more conventional social setting I doubt that we would have been drawn to each other; she had a strange, baroquely-shaped personality that she expressed in too-heavy make-up, stiff, mannish clothes that did not suit her womanly body and an aggressively mannered way of speaking. I was socially misshapen myself, probably in more ways than I

am capable of seeing in retrospect. But we had the chance to get to know each other differently, beyond social presentation, because the job required us to sit in a room with nothing to do but talk, sometimes for hours.

I don't remember the complicated shifts that must've happened as I slowly came to feel past her rigidly shaped outer being, how I gradually felt, through the clumsy artifice and habitual hardness of the shape she had built for herself, something that was warm, alive, humorous and deeply kind; something I can only call goodness. It strikes me that it was perhaps the awkward nature of her persona that made it easier to feel the real woman beneath it, the lush soul flowing through the cracks in the weird mask. But this is also true: I came to feel the connection between that warm, live inner character and the outer "mask" that gave it expression in the world; I came to feel the private delightfulness of that connection.

And then she got HIV. It was 1987 and as a woman with the condition, she felt herself alone and judged, even by her gay male friends. I don't know if she was right in this. But I do know she was very alone. She became more outwardly rigid, then angry and defensive; she accused and insulted people and pushed them away, friends and total strangers alike. People said that I was good to stand by her. What I could not adequately explain to them was that even in the extremity of her suffering *she* stood by me. Her kindness during this time was incredible, especially in its naturalness; it was just *there*. Perhaps this was because my need of her kindness made her forget how sick she was, made her feel the value of her remaining strength. I only know that whatever support I gave to her, she returned two-fold, without thinking about it.

I remember feeling this especially when my sister came to visit me in New York and the three of us went out. My sister was ill herself and also ill at ease; she is not someone who has ever been able to construct a mask of any kind. June made her feel easy. She made her feel good. She did this

completely without ostentation. I'm not describing *how* she did this because I described it in *Veronica*, with some differences because *Veronica* is a novel. In the novel I also described the conversation I had with my sister when I told her that June had died. I told her of a dream that an acquaintance had about my friend, in which she saw June at a party in a magical house full of beautifully dressed, wonderful people, that June was herself so beautiful that the acquaintance did not recognize her at first and wondered who that amazing woman could be. Then June smiled at her and, with dream logic, walked into a waiting elevator which then took her up. To me the dream expressed the hidden truth of my friend. My sister didn't understand this. "But why hidden?" she said. "It wasn't hidden, she *was* like that."

I was glad that my sister had perceived so quickly what it had taken me months to see. I was also a little ashamed of how I had described the dream, as if I had to explain June's quality. And I was sad to realize that I hadn't begun to comprehend the depth of what she had suffered, not only in her illness but in her life before that, the seemingly adverse forces that had formed her, and to which she had reacted with courage and humor. It was not entirely my fault that I didn't comprehend—maybe it wasn't my fault at all. June was not easy to know or to get close to and neither was I. Still we found a moment of love and comfort. Perhaps it sounds pathetic. But so many people live like this, finding each other only briefly; small people in every class and culture struggling to live and grow and find a shape for themselves in a monstrous, grinding world of social gaming, power and florid illusion, while the million-headed hydra of mass culture screams "We are this! We are that!" and explodes with pictures that promise to hold us forever, deathless and lifeless too.

Some people find *Veronica* dense with similes and metaphors to the point of nearly choking. But similes and metaphors make secret connections between seemingly unrelated things,

and it was through these connections that I tried to feel my way into the pith of this story about the mystery of feeling and identity, about the strange faces and forms we assume, sometimes randomly defined as beautiful or not; the social clothing with which we dress our raw unknowable selves, searching for a form that will be recognized and understood by others, that can move in the world, love and be loved. Some people are very skilled at this, some are not at all. But how peculiar that it is so important; how terrible the loneliness and suffering that comes from simply getting the outfit wrong.

Now it is normal to favor torture; there has even been a TV series in which the hero tortures people in the name of national security. We have cut the natural world out from under our own feet and the oceans are turning to vinegar. If June and I met now, we might never have had our first tentative, awkward exchanges; we could instead have sat there together and worked our phones.

The last time I visited the beautiful canyon where I used to live it was parched and brown and the trees were diseased. It is hard to remember it as it once was, so lush I could disappear into it, as if between curtains of heavy grey rain: on one side of me the structured world of beautiful homes, on the other side the world of trees and grasses, fungus and flowers, silently disintegrating and re-forming, each thing there also wanting to find its shape. As I walked, these worlds blended with one another, came apart and grew up again. The natural world held the social world with equanimity, even as the social world blithely devoured it; I believed I could feel every nuance of personality, impulse, emotion, expression or artifice voicelessly alive, devouring, growing and dying all around me. It was not about words; it was too big for words and did not care about words. But I needed words; I needed form. And so I found it.

When I was young, my mother read me a story about a wicked little girl. She read it to me and my two sisters. We sat curled against her on the couch and she read from the book on her lap. The lamp shone on us and there was a blanket over us. The girl in the story was beautiful and cruel. Because her mother was poor, she sent her daughter to work for rich people, who spoiled and petted her. The rich people told her she had to visit her mother. But the girl felt she was too good and went merely to show herself. One day, the rich people sent her home with a loaf of bread for her mother. But when the little girl came to a muddy bog, rather than ruin her shoes, she threw down the bread and stepped on it. It sank into the bog and she sank with it. She sank into a world of demons and deformed creatures. Because she was beautiful, the demon queen made her into a statue as a gift for her great-grandson. The girl was covered in snakes and slime and surrounded by the hate of every creature trapped like she was. She was starving but couldn't eat the bread still welded to her feet. She could hear what people were saying about her; a boy passing by saw what had happened to her and told everyone, and they all said she deserved it. Even her mother said she deserved it. The girl couldn't move, but if she

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could have, she would've twisted with rage. "It isn't fair!" cried my mother, and her voice mocked the wicked girl.

Because I sat against my mother when she told this story, I did not hear it in words only. I felt it in her body. I felt a girl who wanted to be too beautiful. I felt a mother who wanted to love her. I felt a demon who wanted to torture her. I felt them mixed together so you couldn't tell them apart. The story scared me and I cried. My mother put her arms around me. "Wait," she said. "It's not over yet. She's going to be saved by the tears of an innocent girl. Like you." My mother kissed the top of my head and finished the story. And I forgot about it for a long time.

I open my eyes.
I can't sleep. When I try, I wake after two hours and then spend the rest of the night pulled around by feelings and thoughts. I usually sleep again at dawn, then wake at 7:30. When I wake, I'm mad at not sleeping, and that makes me mad at everything. My mind yells insults as my body walks itself around. Dream images rise up and crash down, huge, then gone, huge, gone. A little girl sinks down in the dark. Who is she? Gone.

I drink my coffee out of a heavy blue mug, watching the rain and listening to a fool on a radio show promote her book. I live right on the canal in San Rafael and I can look out on the water. There're too many boats on it and it's filthy with gas and garbage and maybe turds from the boats. Still, it's water, and once I saw a sea lion swimming toward town.

Every day, my neighbor Freddie leaps off his deck and into the canal for a swim. This disgusts my neighbor Bianca. "I asked him, 'Don't you know what's in there? Don't you know it's like swimming in a public toilet?'" Bianca is a sexy fifty-year-old, sexy even though she's lost her looks, mainly because of her big fat lips. "He doesn't care; he says he just takes a hot shower after." Bianca draws on her cigarette with her big

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lips. “Probably get typhoid.” She blows out with a neat turn of her head; even her long rosy neck is sort of sexy. “I hate the sight of him flying through the air in that little Speedo, God!”

Sure enough, while I’m looking out the window, Freddie, all red and fleshy, with his stomach hanging down and his silver head tucked between his upstretched arms, vaults through the air and—*wap!*—hits the water like a bull roaring in the field. I can just see Bianca downstairs muttering “Shit!” and slamming the wall with her fist. He’s a big fifty-something, with a huge jaw and muscles like lumps of raw meat just going to fat. His round eyes show one big emotion at a time: Joy. Anger. Pain. Fear. But his body is full of all those things happening at once, and that’s what you see when he’s swimming. He attacks the water with big pawing strokes, burying his face in it like he’s trying to eat it out. Then he stops and treads water, his snorting head tossing and bobbing for a second before he turns and lies down in the water, like a kid, with total trust—ah!—face to the sky, regardless of the rain or turds.

Even though he’s big, Freddie’s got the face of somebody who’s been beat too many times, like his face is just out there to be beat. He’s also got the face of somebody who, after the beating is done, gets up, says “Okay,” and keeps trying to find something good to eat or drink or roll in. He likes to end stories by saying, “But they’d probably just tell you I’m an a-s-s-h-o-l-e,” like, Oh well, what’s on TV? That’s the thing Bianca hates most, that beat-up but still leaping out into the turds for a swim quality. Especially the leaping: It’s like a personal affront to her. But I like it. It reminds me of the sea lion, swimming into town with its perfect round head sticking up—even though the lion is gliding and Freddie is rough. It’s like something similar put in different containers. Sometimes I want to

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say this to Bianca, to defend Freddie. But she won't listen. Besides, I understand why he disgusts her. She's a refined person, and I like refinement, too. I understand it as a point of view.

The writer on the radio is talking about her characters like they're real people: "When you look at it from her point of view, his behavior really is strange, because to her, they're just playing a sexy game, whereas for him it's—" She blooms out of the radio like a balloon with a face on it, smiling, wanting you to like her, vibrating with things to say. Turn on the radio, there's always somebody like her on somewhere. People rushing through their lives turn the dial looking for comfort, and the excited smiling words spill over them. I drink my coffee. The novelist's characters dance and preen. I drink my coffee. People from last night's dream stumble in dark rooms, screaming at one another, trying hard to do something I can't see. I finish my coffee. Water is seeping in and soaking the edge of the carpet. I don't know how this happens, I'm on the second floor.

It's time for me to go clean John's office. John is an old friend, and as a favor, he pays me to clean his office every week. Into my patchwork bag I pack the necessities—aspirin, codeine, bottle of water—then I look for my umbrella. When I find it, I realize it's broken, and I curse before I remember the other one, the red one from New York that I never use. I got it at the Museum of Modern Art gift shop when I lived in Manhattan. It has four white cartoon sheep, plus one black one, printed on its edge, along with the name of the museum. The decoration is precious and proper, and it reminds me of Veronica Ross. She is someone from my old life. She loved anything precious and proper: small intricate toys, photographs in tiny decorated frames, quotes from Oscar Wilde. She loved MoMA and she loved New York. She wore shoulder

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pads, prissy loafers, and thin socks. She rolled her trouser cuffs in this crisp way. On her glass-topped coffee table, she had miniature ashtrays, gilt matchboxes, and expensive coasters decorated with smiling cats.

When I go out into the hallway, Rita is there in her housecoat and slippers, holding a little plate of fried chicken livers. She offers me some, says she made too many last night. They smell good, so I take one and eat it while I talk to Rita. She says that last week “that son of a bitch Robert” fired up the barbecue again, on the puny deck right under hers, sending up poisonous charcoal fumes, which, she has explained time and again, are terrible for her hepatitis.

“I knew he still had that grill out there, and sure enough, the sun came out and I heard him mobilize it. I heard the charcoal in the bag. I heard him slide the lid off. I sat down and I meditated. I asked for help. I asked, What is the most powerful force in the world? And the answer came to me: Water.”

Rita has hepatitis C; so do I. We don’t discuss it much; she doesn’t remind me that codeine by the fistful is like dropping a bomb on my liver. I don’t remind her that while charcoal smoke is not a problem, her fried-food diet is.

“I filled every pot, every pan, every jar, glass, and vase, and I set them all out on the edge of the deck. And as soon as he fired it up—”

“You didn’t!”

“I did. I doused the grill, and when he cursed me out, I doused him. He just stood there a second, and then you know what? He laughed! He said, ‘Rita, you are a pissier.’ He liked it!”

We talk a minute more; I laugh and say good-bye, step outside onto the wooden stairs. I snap open the umbrella and

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remember the last time I visited Veronica. She served me brownies in pink wrapping paper, fancy cheese, and sliced fruit she was too sick to eat. I remember the time I said, “I don’t think you love yourself. You need to learn to love yourself.”

Veronica was silent for a long moment. Then she said, “I think love is overrated. My parents loved me. And it didn’t do any good.”

My street is all functional apartment buildings set back from the sidewalk. White plus a few black people live here. Two blocks down, it’s semifunctional buildings and Mexicans. Turn the corner and it’s warehouses, auto-body repair shops, and a bar with music coming out of it at 8:00 in the morning. Blunt, faceless buildings that are too much trouble to tear down. Grass and weeds and little bushes silently press up between the buildings and through every crack in the concrete. At the end of the street is a four-lane highway that you can walk along. Big businesses live here—car dealerships, computer stores, office retail—and things I can’t identify, even though I walk by them almost every day, because the bigness makes me feel mute. The mute feeling isn’t bad. It’s like being a grain of dirt in the ground, with growth and death all around. A grain or a grass or a stone, a tiny thing that knows everything but can’t say anything. It isn’t just the bigness of the businesses. It’s the highway, too, all the hundreds of cars roaring in the opposite direction I’m walking, the hundreds of heads blurrily showing through hundreds of windshields.

This happens sometimes when I walk along here; my focus slips and goes funny. I think it’s something to do with walking at a slow pace against the speeding traffic, and today the rain blurs everything even more. It’s like I get sucked out of

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normal life into a place where the order of things is changed; it's still my life and I recognize it, but the people and places in it are sliding around indiscriminately.

A fat white man pedals gravely past on a green bicycle, one hand guiding the bike, the other holding a small half-broken umbrella over his head. He examines me; there's a bolt of life from his hazel eyes and then he's gone.

A dream from last night: Someone is chasing me, and in order to reach safety, I have to run through my past and all the people in it. But the past is jumbled, not sequential, and all the people are mixed up. A nameless old woman who used to live next door is reaching out to me, her large brown eyes brimming with tenderness and tears—but my mother is lost in a crowd scene. My father is barely visible—I see him by himself in the shadows of the living room, dreamily eating a salted nut—while a loud demented stranger pops right up in my face, yelling about what I must do to save myself now.

Meanwhile, a middle-aged Mexican woman is kneeling on the sidewalk, patiently replacing the clothes that apparently spilled out when her big red suitcase broke open. She has no umbrella and her hair and clothes are plastered to her body. I stop and crouch, trying to help her. With an impersonal half glance, she shakes her head no. I straighten and pause and then stand there, holding my umbrella over both of us. She looks up, smiling; I'm invoking civility on this concrete strip between roaring and hugeness, and she appreciates it. Her smile is like an open door, and I enter for a second. She goes back to her nimble packing. She picks freshly wet little blouses, underwear, baby clothes, and socks up off the sidewalk. She retrieves a clear plastic bag of half-burned candles and a T-shirt that says 16 MAGAZINE! on it. She shakes out each thing and refolds it.

Veronica

Toward the end, Veronica's shoulder pads used to get loose sometimes and wander down her arm or her back without her knowing it. Once I was sitting with her in a good restaurant when a man next to us said, "Excuse me, there's something moving on your back." His tone was light and aggressive, like it was him versus the fashionable nitwits. "Oh," said Veronica, also light. "Excuse me. It's just my prosthesis."

Sometimes I loved how she would make cracks like that. Other times it was just embarrassing. Once we were leaving a movie theater after seeing a pretentious movie. As we walked past a line of people waiting to see the other movie, Veronica said loudly, "They don't want to see anything challenging. They'd rather see *Flashdance*. Now me, if it's bizarre, I'm interested." There was a little strut to her walk and her voice was like a huge feather in a hat. She's not like that, I'd wanted to say to the ticket holders. If you knew her, you'd see.

But she *was* like that. She could be unbelievably obnoxious. In the locker room of the gym we both went to, she was always snapping at somebody for getting too close to her or brushing against her. "If you want me to move, just tell me, but please stop poking me in the bottom," she'd say to some open-mouthed Suzy in a leotard. "Fist fucking went out years ago. Didn't you know that?"

The Mexican woman clicks her suitcase shut and stands with a little smile. My focus snaps back to normal, and the woman slips back into the raining hugeness. She smiles at me again as she turns to go, returning my civility with rain running down her face.

In the dream, it's like the strangers are delivering messages for more important people, who for some reason can't talk to me. Or that the people who are important by the normal

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rules—family, close friends—are accidental attachments, and that the apparent strangers are the true loved ones, hidden by the grotesque disguises of human life.

Of course, Veronica had a lot of smart cracks stored up. She needed them. When she didn't have them, she was naked and everybody saw. Once when we were in a coffee shop, she tried to speak seriously to me. Her skin was gray with seriousness. Her whole eyeball looked stretched and tight; the white underpart was actually showing. She said, "I've just got to get off my fat ass and stop feeling sorry for myself." Her tough words didn't go with the look on her face. The waitress, a middle-aged black lady, gave her a sharp, quick glance that softened as she turned away. She could tell something by looking at Veronica, and I wondered what it was.

Veronica died of AIDS. She spent her last days alone. I wasn't with her. When she died, nobody was with her.

I'm feeling a little feverish already, but I don't want to take the aspirin on an empty stomach. I also don't want to deal with holding the umbrella while I get the aspirin out, put it back, get the water, unscrew it, squeeze the umbrella with one arm, the one that's killing me. . . .

I met Veronica twenty-five years ago, when I was a temporary employee doing word processing for an ad agency in Manhattan. I was twenty-one. She was a plump thirty-seven-year-old with bleached-blond hair. She wore tailored suits in mannish plaids with matching bow ties, bright red lipstick, false red fingernails, and mascara that gathered in intense beads on the ends of her eyelashes. Her loud voice was sensual and rigid at once, like plastic baubles put together in rococo shapes. It was deep but could quickly become shrill. You could hear her from across the room, calling everyone, even people she hated,