

“Therapy”

“Damn it! *God damn it!*” Chloe hammered on the plate glass sliding door leading to the pool and the back yard. Pinto-The-Little-Fuck was about to mow down the hibiscus that Chloe had planted just two days before. By now it seemed almost a ritual. At least once a month Chloe planted a new hibiscus and at least once a month Pinto the Yard Man mowed it down.

Chloe pulled on her old, yellow and white stripe seersucker robe, its front festooned with cigarette burns, guilt-producing vestiges of a former habit. It was still one of her favorite things to wear; she refused to throw it away. She lurched onto the patio in her bare feet, stubbing her big toe on the doorsill as she exited the house. “Ow! Shit!” She hopped on one foot. “Pinto! Pinto, for God’s sake, watch that hibiscus, will you?”

Pinto looked up from his mowing, mopping his leathery, brown face with his sleeve and staring at Chloe as if she were an apparition. He couldn’t hear anything that she said, but her frantic gestures seemed to signify that she had something to communicate. He turned off the lawn mower resignedly, his face flat and closed.

“Pinto, the hibiscus!” Chloe screamed. She was so used to trying to talk to Pinto while the lawnmower was running that she failed to register that he had turned it off. She pointed at the forlorn plant. Max-the-Dog had already gotten his leash wrapped around it when he’d torn away from one of the girls and his ensuing frantic leaping and twisting had ripped the hibiscus’

lower branches off. Right now, it looked like a stick with a crown of leaves. After the Max episode, she'd enclosed the hibiscus in a little fence-like thing she'd found at Home Depot. It was designed to protect small shrubs, but Pinto had never seen a fence he couldn't mow down, in her experience, and this one was only a couple feet tall, and flimsy.

When Pinto had first started taking care of their yard—he did all the yards on the street—she and Eduardo had referred to him as Pinto the Yard Man. But not too long after he'd started, and not too long after he'd begun to wreak his signature destruction in their yard, Chloe began thinking of him as—calling him in her head and occasionally out loud to Ed—Pinto-the-Little-Fuck. Now sometimes Ed called him that too.

“Si, wha ju want, Missus?” Pinto asked sullenly, scratching at his bulging crotch.

“I want,” Chloe said calmly, “that you not mow down my hibiscus. I want you to look where you're mowing. That is a brand new hibiscus! It's not some reincarnation of the one you mowed down last month!”

Pinto-the-Little-Fuck gave her a dark look and pulled the starter cord on the lawnmower. The mower roared into action and, Pinto trailing, sped across the yard, barely missing the hibiscus and clipping the trunk of the grapefruit tree, which already looked, although dripping with grapefruit, as if it were contracting that fungal thing that meant you had to cut the tree down. If you didn't, the city of Boca Raton would do it and then bill you.

Chloe was sick of the yard and its failures and sick also of dark looks. Just an hour earlier, Sissy, her older daughter, had given Chloe a *really* dark look and said, voice dripping with disgust, “Mother, I wish you would remember that my name is Sylvia. I would appreciate you saying my real name. Sissy is a *baby* name and it is not my *real* name.”

The fact that Sissy was, at almost eleven, the spitting image of her father made her scowling pronouncements even more annoying to Chloe. Eduardo was the master of the dark look and also of the extended whine; Sissy seemed to be following in his footsteps. If she ever decided to divorce Eduardo, Chloe thought, his dark looks would follow her in the person of Sissy. That he could forever exert that kind of control over her made her crazy.

Chloe couldn't help it—she *engaged* with Sissy, just what that nut-job shrink had warned her not to do. “You know, Sissy has been a perfectly good enough name for you ever since you were four years old. *You* are the one who made up that name for yourself when Denise had trouble saying Sylvia. You may not realize this, but it's a little hard to all of a sudden start calling someone by a different name than the one you've called them for six years. But, now that you mention it, you *do* have a point: Sylvia *is* a grown-up name and it's difficult for me to call a person a grown-up name if that person won't even take a shower and wash her hair. Most grown-ups choose not to go around looking like they've just stepped out of a month in solitary confinement without benefit of a shower.” She glared back at her greasy-haired child.

Just recalling this exchange made her stomach lurch. Sissy—now Sylvia—used to be such a sweet kid. Now not two minutes went by without some kind of fight. And she used to be a cleanliness fanatic too, insisting on a bath every night. Now she seemed to love her long, stringy locks—and she refused to use deodorant too. Now—hard as it was to admit—Chloe had become the mother of a pre-teen who would probably soon need a bra ... and who had the olfactory appeal of a sweating ditch-digger!

And Neesie—she was turning into such a pervert! All she could talk about was *private parts*! Seven years old and fascinated with pubes! What about Dora the Explorer? What about

Nancy Drew? When Chloe had flung open the bathroom door this morning, trying to get Neesie to move a little faster so she wouldn't be late for the school bus, the kid had shrieked like she was being attacked and accused her mother of trying to "see my private parts. And you know, Mommy, that's just weird!"

Chloe's cell phone rang insistently. She glanced at the incoming call number and flicked the on button. "Hi, Mom," she said dispiritedly. "No, nothing's wrong," she told her mother. "When the phone rang, I thought maybe it was that crackpot Rosenkrantz. You know, that shrink that Ed and I went to for counseling? He's taken to calling me to remind me to come see him. What kind of a shrink personally calls his patients to tell them to make appointments?"

She deepened her voice and assumed a pontifical tone. "*Now, Chloe, you haven't been in for several months. You must have things you need to discuss.*

"I swear, I make his day when I go in. First I have to tell him I like his shirt. Then I have to give him a detailed description of my whacked-out day. Then he tells me I should get a job so I'll have some other interests. He probably goes home feeling really normal and sane after I've been in. The other day I'm driving down Route 95, bumper-to-bumper traffic, and my phone rings and it's him, telling me I'd better make an appointment! I want to say to him, *Get a life, Dr. Rosenkrantz! Or at least get a new goddam Ferragamo shirt.* He's had the same one on every time I've gone in for the last three months. It's getting a little hard for me to work up a compliment for his good-looking shirt when I've seen the damned thing fourteen times! I made the mistake of telling him I loved his shirt the first time he wore it and now I swear he thinks he has to wear it every time I come in. That's probably why he calls me to make an appointment—

so he knows when to wear that shirt!” Chloe paused to take a breath and flicked the phone to her other ear.

“What? Oh, no, we don’t go for couples counseling any more. Ed decided that he didn’t like him. You know, he always decides he doesn’t like any shrink he goes to. They all tell him he needs medication and then he decides he doesn’t like them and throws the medication away. That’s his way of dealing.”

Chloe listened for a minute, holding the phone slightly away from her ear. “No, Mom, I’m not deliberately trying to drive you crazy! No, that’s just my life! Listen, here comes Pinto-the-Little-Fuck to get his unearned money. I’ll call you back later.” She clicked the phone off, sighing. She loved her mother, but what a pain in the ass! After Pinto leaves, I’ll get dressed and go get a Starbucks, she thought, looking vaguely around the kitchen, pawing through the heap of bills and take-out menus and parent/teacher meeting reminders that littered the counter, trying futilely to remember what she’d done with her wallet. I *need* a good cup of coffee.

“Is Rosina feeling any better?” she asked Pinto as she handed him the folded bills. “Why don’t you get a grocery bag in the pantry and take her some grapefruit from the tree? Maybe grapefruit would taste good to her.” Pinto’s wife Rosina sometimes helped Chloe with food preparations when she was having a dinner party. Chloe liked her; unlike her sullen husband, Rosina was friendly and cheerful ... and a good worker too. Rosina hadn’t been feeling well lately; Chloe had the distinct feeling that Pinto had something to do with that: maybe Rosina was pregnant again. Some time ago, Chloe had realized that Rosina was trapped; all her relatives were back in Puerto Rico and she had no money of her own; with three babies under five, she

really had no hope of getting any. Sometimes when Chloe was feeling slightly trapped in her own life, she thought of Rosina and felt lucky.

Pinto stood stolidly, his arms hanging limply at his sides. He made no move to get a bag. There was a Yiddish word her father had used to describe someone like Pinto, Chloe thought. *Golem*. That was it. Like a zombie. “Oh, forget it,” Chloe told him, disgusted. “I’ll get her some grapefruit. Just wait a minute. I’ll bring them.”

While Chloe was getting dressed, Eduardo emerged from his home office. When he announced two years before that he had decided to work from home, Chloe was pleased; Ed would be here for the kids if she were late getting home, he’d be able to shove a roast in the oven, he could let a repairman in if need be. But nothing like that had come close to happening. If she did need him to do anything, he was either on a conference call or leaving to take a tennis lesson. He wouldn’t even answer the phone if it rang. The only changes wrought by his being home were that he left uncapped mayonnaise jars and lettuce and crumbs all over the kitchen counter and that, when the kids were home and playing, he usually emerged screaming, “Can’t you keep them quiet? I’m on a conference call!” Luckily, his sales job sent him on the road for a couple weeks each month; otherwise, Chloe felt, she would have gone bonkers.

“I’ve been thinking,” Eduardo said.

Studying Eduardo’s chiseled features, his striking prematurely salt and pepper hair, his handsome face alight with a new “idea,” Chloe had a sinking feeling. During her first years with Ed, she had been entranced when he got one of his new ideas. Now she knew that whenever Ed had “been thinking,” all hell was sure to break loose in some form or another. She didn’t want to encourage him. She pretended not to hear. “Have you seen my wallet?” she asked.

“I’ve been thinking that we should hire a limo to take the kids to the movies for Sissy’s birthday,” he continued, undeterred, “and then out for pizza after. They’d love that.”

That stopped Chloe in her tracks. “A limo?” she squeaked. “Where did that come from?” They had just gotten out from under the financial fallout from Eduardo’s last “thinking” episode: he had decided they had to re-do the master bathroom completely because his friend Bono had re-done his. Eduardo was living proof that “keeping up with the Joneses” was far from dead despite what all the financial analysts were calling “perilous financial times.”

“Sissy told me that Blossom’s mother was thinking of hiring a limo to take them to a swim party,” Eduardo explained. “Sissy’s birthday comes before Blossom’s. We can do the limo first. Let them think of something else.”

“Oh, for God’s sake,” Chloe exclaimed. “Sissy’s going to be eleven years old! She doesn’t need a limo. And she’s not going anywhere for her party. She’s going to have a party right here in the house, a swim party and a sleepover. Do you know how much a limo costs?”

“Bono has a friend who’ll only charge seventy-five dollars,” Eduardo explained with injured dignity. “You are such a bitch! You have to shoot down every idea I have!” He downshifted into an irritating whine. “This is what Sissy *wants* more than *anything!*”

This was Eduardo’s method. He decided that *he* wanted something, for whatever dim reason, and then he told her that one of the kids wanted that something . . . more than *anything!* “No limo,” she said firmly. “And I’ve had it with Bono’s friends too.”

Bono had been Ed’s good friend when they were teenagers together in Guatemala and Ed seemed to hang on every word he said. It was one of Bono’s great finds, Cedro, whom Ed had hired to re-do the bathroom. First Cedro had ripped it all up in one day—torn out the tile and the

fixtures so the bathroom was completely unusable. (*It's a damned good thing we have two bathrooms!* Chloe shrieked.) It had stayed that way for two weeks because Cedro's truck broke down. Then his mechanic had gotten beaten up in a bar fight and was unable to work on the truck for a week. When Cedro finally came with a truckload of tile, his helper failed to show up to help and he was able to unload only a little bit of the tile before, according to him, his back went out. Then when he went home after doing next to nothing on the bathroom, he was forced to park on the street a block from his house because his wife's wanted-for-questioning brother had parked in the garage so his car would be hidden. And while Cedro was parked on the street (*Wouldn't you know? No surprise here!* Chloe told Ed) somebody stole the tile from his truck. The bathroom was finally finished, as Ed pointed out, and, as Chloe pointed out, it had only cost twice as much, in both money and stress, as it would have cost to hire a real bathroom makeover company.

Then Ed accused Chloe of dissing his Latino heritage and hating all things Latin. Chloe countered that only his father had been Latino—he was from Guatamala—and that his mother's family had practically come over on the Mayflower. And that she *didn't* hate all things Latino—many of her own friends had Latino roots, she pointed out; she only hated Bono's friends. This was an old argument, actually, and one that never got anywhere. It was handy for Ed, allowing him to dispense guilt easily, and it did provide regular financial infusions to the steady stream of incompetent Latinos that Chloe was left to deal with while Ed went blithely on his sales trips.

Chloe knew that Eduardo counted on making her feel guilty as his way to goad her into doing what he wanted. When she first met him, at a party in Washington where she was working for a do-good non-profit, she had been drawn to him by his good looks and by the mystique that



surrounded him simply because he had been born in a foreign country. And there had been something else: a certain, sweet, “little lost boy” quality—accompanied by a lop-sided semi-apologetic smile. His mother had died when he was fourteen, he had told her. And then his father had spirited him off to Guatemala until he was ready for college. He had never fit in anywhere, he told her softly, his brown eyes staring soulfully into hers. On and on. But damn! Chloe had thought for some years now. How many lost cell phones can you blame on your mother’s demise?

The day after Cedro finally finished the bathroom and drove away—for good, Chloe fervently hoped—she got a text message from him on her cell phone: *OW U R ?*, it asked.

*FINE*, she wrote back.

*I NO FINE*, came the answer. *I AM DECEPTION MY X. U WANT DRINK WITH ME?*

*NO! NO! NO!* Chloe wrote. Jesus, she thought in despair. When I really think about it, I no fine either. I far from fine.

“No limo,” she repeated emphatically to Eduardo. “No friend of Bono will drive a child of mine in a limo.”

Before lunch, Chloe dragged Max-the-Dog to the dog park, where Max launched himself joyously at the other dogs, who sometimes ignored him, which made Chloe feel bad, or alternately, snapped at him, which made her furious. Max himself was oblivious to cold shoulders and insisted on lurching playfully at every living thing, dog or human. Chloe was humming to herself and thinking about a job application she was planning to fill out—maybe—when a woman she didn’t know walked up to her. “Has your dog had his rabies shots?” she asked.

“Yes,” Chloe told her hesitantly. “Why are you asking?”

“He just bit me,” the woman said, “and I wanted to make sure he’s had his shots.” She showed Chloe a small indentation on the back of her hand. “He was just playing,” she assured Chloe. “He didn’t mean to hurt me.”

Later, when her friend Lauren called, Chloe told her about the woman. “Well, yeah, of course I felt bad,” Chloe reported, studying herself critically in the bathroom mirror. “But I paid six hundred bucks for a trainer!” she said indignantly. “I mean, if he bites them, what do you want me to do about it? I mean, I spent a lot of money!” Just once, she thought, I’d like something to work! But this last haircut was a good one, she had to admit. She tossed her head and watched her shiny, brown hair whip across her face ... her daddy’s face, really, long and narrow.

At one o’clock, Chloe went to the gym, to her own trainer, Absalom, who berated her mercilessly for her flabbiness. “Leave it to Ab to get your abs in shape!” he bellowed to his clients, hammering dementedly on his stomach to show his superiority as mentor and guide and sterling example. Chloe allowed herself to be brow-beaten, liking it even. Sweating and groaning, she gasped out arch, flirty replies, then bent in humble submission ... and then she left, aching pleasantly. As far as she was concerned, her abs were not too bad—and not the rest of her either—and she knew that, if pressed, Absalom would have to admit it too. She was quite sure that her next-door neighbor thought so; he looked her up and down very thoroughly when she dragged the garbage cans out to the street in the mornings. The gym was a form of punishment, it was true ... but punishment more pleasurable than most. It made her feel purposeful.

At two-thirty, Chloe spent some time on-line, searching for jobs. She had a somewhat unformed idea that a challenging job might, right now, be a good thing. In her work history, before her kids were born, she had had several—and she had been good at all of them. Ed was always shrieking that she should get a job and “make a real contribution to this family!” That made her wonder how he classified what she was doing now. When she thought of her day—chauffeur-ing the kids to their various clubs and practices, volunteering at their schools like a good mother was supposed to, grocery shopping, cooking, running to airports to bring Ed his forgotten cell phone or passport or laptop or briefcase before his plane left, cleaning up the messes left by her family and her incompetent Latino hirelings and her untrained dog—her head swam. To add a job on top of all this? The thought made her feel exhausted, debilitated, drained.

At three o’clock, Sissy and Denise crashed into the house, ravenous. They rifled through the cupboard searching for unhealthy snacks—and finding plenty, Chloe was sure. Periodically she went on a health kick and replaced the chips and sugary cereals with granola bars and carrots, but the kids whined and nagged so much that eventually she gave in. At least they like fruit, she rationalized.

Denise went into her room to change into her bathing suit for swim team practice; Sissy immediately turned on the television and sat three feet in front of it with her mouth hanging open, a particularly unattractive habit, Chloe thought, another inheritance from her father. *God, I hope she doesn’t get a paunch*—the thought slunk unbidden into her mind ... because Ed was certainly beginning to get one. *Well, she thought, Sissy will get one over my dead body. I’ll whip her off to Absalom at the first sign!* She rifled through the kids’ lunch boxes throwing out

tangerine skins and Frito crumbs. She found what she judged to be three-quarters of Sissy's tuna sandwich mashed into a soggy ball. "Did you eat the granola bar?" she asked Sissy. "Sissy!" she yelled when there was no answer.

"Wha . . . um, no," Sissy offered vaguely, her eyes still glued to the TV.

"Why not?" Chloe demanded.

"Jamie-Sue ate it."

Jamie-Sue was currently Sissy's best friend, a short, chunky, thug-like child with terrible manners who, like Sissy, seemed to shun deodorant. It had occurred to Chloe that Jamie-Sue bore a certain resemblance, in both build and demeanor, to a fireplug. She had tried, delicately, to probe the fascinating question of why Sissy couldn't ever seem to have a *normal* friend, to no avail.

Although exactly what she meant by *normal*, she wasn't sure. If she used her own middle-class Ohio childhood as a measurement, *everything* about her current life was *abnormal*—the hard, white sunlight of Florida, so strong that she felt it pressing and throbbing behind her eyelids like sharp-edged diamonds, the brown-fringed palm leaves sliding against each other in the breeze with a sound like knives being sharpened, the crunchy lawns of zoysia grass, the tiny, green lizards scurrying across her living room ceiling, everything glaring loudly and crackling and swishing and hissing. There was no silence here.

Lately Sissy had been reporting that Jamie-Sue ate this part of her lunch or that part of her lunch and Chloe, at wit's end, had threatened to call the teacher and ask her to tell Jamie-Sue to eat her own lunch. Sissy was a notoriously fussy eater; it was maddening trying to find something that she would eat at lunchtime. Chloe didn't need stolid Jamie-Sue wolfing down

Sissy's lunch like a prison inmate who'd been let out for the day. Sissy had, of course, gotten hysterical at the thought that Chloe might tell the teacher and Chloe had made her promise to eat her lunch herself ... or else.

Sissy had apparently forgotten this threat. "Why did you let Jamie-Sue eat your granola bar?" Chloe asked evenly.

Sissy looked up. "Mo-om," she said in a long-suffering voice, drawing the word out to two syllables. "I didn't *let* her eat it. She asked me if she could have it. And I said no. So she grabbed it and then she *licked* it. And then she said, 'I licked it. Now can I have it?' It was gross. Eww! I didn't want it. You wouldn't want me to eat a granola bar that Jamie-Sue *licked*, would you?" She rolled her eyes.

Chloe stared at her daughter. She couldn't win. Why try?

Later, driving Neesie home from swim team practice, Chloe suddenly remembered that she had promised to make cupcakes for Sissy's class for tomorrow's field trip—Jesus! Had she also promised to be a chaperone?—and she had used the last egg at breakfast. "I've got to swing by the grocery store," she told her daughter, shivering in the back seat. Neesie had refused to change to dry clothes in the locker room because somebody might see her private parts.

"God," Chloe muttered out loud, "everybody's driving like they're brain-dead today. Move your fat ass!" she shouted at the octogenarian in front of her who was ensconced in the turning lane, seemingly permanently, having failed to turn for two green lights now. It occurred to Chloe that possibly the driver had died; that happened more times than you could count in southern Florida.

From the back seat came the stern voice of judgment: “You know how we feel about bad language.” There was a silence implying severe displeasure. Then, sweetly reasonable, “Why don’t you try *buttock?*”

“Buttock?”

Chloe swung around and stared unbelieving at her suddenly prissy seven-year-old, a seven-year old who lately felt compelled to say at the sight of anything that might possibly be male—human, turtle, dog, gerbil—“Does he have a *penis?*” She accompanied this question with a suggestive leer, as if implying to the listener that she had uncovered a salacious secret that she was willing to share. Last week on the phone she had asked her grandmother slyly, “Do *you* have a penis?”

“Move your fat *buttock?*”

“Yes,” Neesie told her. “Buttock.” Then she started giggling. “Buttock, buttock.”

Chloe swung around to look at her one more time, then, “Move your fat buttock!” she shouted at the car in front of her. The car started up with a jerk, belching a cloud of exhaust. She gave Denise a thumbs-up.

They cackled the rest of the way to the supermarket. Mother-daughter bonding, Chloe thought. Rosenkrantz will have a field day with this one. Maybe I’ll make an appointment for tomorrow. Make his day.

Chloe pulled into a parking slot. She turned and studied her younger daughter, that sweet, skinny little girl curled in the back seat, her thumbs darting over the Game-Boy in her hands. My days are all the same, Chloe thought. But any day ... anything could happen to her, to Sissy, to any of us. She had a sudden, sharp vision of her father the last time she had seen him

alive, his once-robust body shrunken under a thin blanket, his strong, confident voice turned querulous and weak. Tears filled her eyes. *My daddy. Who will take care of me?*

“Neesie,” she asked earnestly. “Do you think I take good care of you? Do you know how much I love you? Do you love me?”

Slowly Neesie’s head came up from the Game-Boy like a swimmer surfacing for air, her eyes glazed slightly from peering so intently at the tiny screen. “Mommy?” she questioned. “Duh!”

Neesie unfastened her seat belt and stood up, leaning over the front seat. She smelled of chlorine and sweat and, incongruously, salty potato chips. She patted her mother’s head gently. “Have you been watching Oprah again, Mommy?” she asked.