

Boundaries, Bodies, Breath

Now that her husband Samuel is becoming Tracy, Rachel is almost grateful for the weirdness of the middle aged women in Lubbock with their faux tans and their cleavage, and the leather-faced men who look like extras in a cult version of Urban Cowboy. Just such a couple is seated at a table by the door when Rachel steps inside L&O Coffee on a dusty afternoon in late May. The woman's tousled, blonde hair must take hours to style, Rachel finds herself thinking, and she cannot imagine how the man manages to keep his hat on in this wind.

After ordering, Rachel scans the tables and recognizes the quiet art scholar from Singapore who's a regular in her yoga class. It's the first time she's seen him in street clothes. There's something sleek about him, Rachel thinks, almost feline. He might not be as flexible as most of the other people, the majority women, but his breathing radiates calm—why Rachel likes to place her mat next to his and just listen to his deep inhale and soothing exhale, a little like the ocean of the Massachusetts summers she spent with her ex-husband Max all those years ago. Could she ever go out with the art historian? Now that her husband wears pantyhose and push up bras, it's a question that comes up.

“Will you be at Carmen's yoga class this Saturday?” he asks when Rachel approaches, holding her big white cup of cappuccino, a caffeine bomb she shouldn't be drinking this late in the afternoon, especially given her recent insomnia.

“I'm planning on it,” Rachel says. “Why?”

“It'll be her last,” he says, running a well-kept hand through his thinning hair.

“I don't recall her saying anything.”

“Third year of medical school: she doesn't think she can keep up.”

“I’ll miss her.” Though she and Carmen only talk once a week after class for at most five minutes, Rachel has come to rely on her energetic attitude, her spunk.

Among the books opened on the table, she recognizes a reproduction of David’s portrait of Juliette Récamier. The art historian’s dark eyes are clear behind his Lennon-esque glasses. “I’m giving a paper on portraiture after the French Revolution in two weeks.”

“Where’s the conference?”

“Montreal.”

“Nice.” She smiles. “I should let you get back to it. Looks like you’ve got plenty to do.”

Turning away, she thinks back to the trip she and Samuel took to Paris the winter before Amy was born: the hours they spent wandering the Louvre, the way the Récamier held Samuel spellbound. At the time, Rachel thought he was admiring her legendary beauty; now she wonders if it wasn’t the post-revolutionary hostess’s femininity he was studying. And yet they’d made love almost every night of that trip, and most mornings, lingering in the white double bed in their tiny Montparnasse hotel room, the window open to the gleaming dome of Sacre Coeur in the distance. Breakfast, they ate at a small café down the street where they sat at a wrought iron table, knees touching, talking and laughing, lovers in Paris.

It was one of their happiest times together, that trip; and now especially Rachel finds herself returning to the long walks they took along the Seine in the evenings, the lights of the city reflected off the water’s surface, tiny points of bright potential, and in this way like the shared future she envisioned for Samuel and herself. *Yes*, she tells herself, quoting Lennon, *life is what happens while you’re busy making other plans, but what life should include a husband who’s decided to change his sex?*

Not far from the art scholar, Rachel recognizes Karen, her silvery-blond neighbor who drives a BMW with a leather interior and always seems totally put together, if a little packaged. Today, however, Karen’s eyes are puffy, as if she’s been crying. Rachel is about to turn away, but

Karen looks up, and smiles.

“Want some company?” Rachel hears herself say, sloshing cappuccino onto her jeans as she comes over.

“Hi.” Karen’s voice holds unexpected warmth, and an edge, too—an anxiety Rachel recognizes.

The last time she and Karen talked, maybe two months ago, Karen’s Schnauzers were barking in the yard at eleven thirty p.m., and Rachel, unable to bear it any longer, actually phoned and asked Karen, as politely as possible, to bring the dogs inside.

“Everything okay?” Rachel hears herself say, and instantly regrets it.

“Oh, I don’t know. We’ve just begun to settle in here, and now Milo’s taken a job in Los Angeles,” Karen says as she cradles her own mug of herbal tea in both hands, a gesture that makes her look small, almost girlish.

A hot little fist of annoyance takes hold in Rachel’s belly. “Didn’t you guys move here from some big city a few years ago?”

“Baltimore,” Karen says. “We were in Baltimore for eight years.”

Well, you drive a BMW, and three of your daughters drive foreign vehicles, and with your husband’s salary you should be able to keep your cars and pay the gas prices in L.A. so what’s the problem? It’s only recently that Rachel’s started coming up with these contrary statements, side effects of her inability to sleep through the night, the volcanic confusion bubbling up within her.

“I grew up in IdaLou,” Karen says at last. “West Texas is home for me.”

Rachel would have bet good money on Karen having come from somewhere back East; or at least an affluent suburb adjacent to a Midwestern city. She has a hard time picturing this well-groomed woman with her seashell-colored nails and her perfectly done hair in tiny, dusty IdaLou where the houses look pre-made and wear aluminum siding.

All Rachel knows about Karen's husband, Milo, is that he's descended from some branch of Thailand's royal family and is beautiful in the way of Michelangelo's David, his features chiseled, his ebony hair and eyes riveting. Karen's daughters, all four of whom wear their hair at shoulder or waist length, are dark-haired like their father and have inherited his almond-shaped eyes and glowing caramel skin.

"When will you move?" Rachel asks.

"July," Karen says. "Leanne was accepted at Reed, so we'll go up in time to get settled before she has to leave for school."

Rachel nods. What would Karen say if Rachel were to tell her that during the months when Leanne was applying to colleges, her own husband was investigating gender-reassignment surgeons in Dallas and Houston? Not that Karen and the rest of the neighbors on the street aren't all too aware of the physical changes taking place within Samuel, now Tracy. Even ninety-three-year-old Dorothy Kellerman, whose eyesight and hearing are both severely diminished, couldn't overlook the way Sam's elegant, worn tweeds have become silk dresses and wool separates, the beard he once wore now revealing skin polished by makeup.

Is it better or worse that he's talking to Dennis about the three-year-vision for the gender reassignment surgeries? Rachel asked herself when she overheard Samuel discussing the process with their neighbor, a biologist at the university, as he would a re-evaluation of some facet of the Russian history to which he's devoted his professional life?

"We're going to have a garage sale next month," Karen says, "but I've already begun setting aside a few things for Amy. There's a bike in great condition and some toys and puzzles. She likes dolls, doesn't she?"

"She's wild about them," Rachel says, for her six-year-old daughter has three babies which she bundles and rocks and feeds and sings to nightly, as well as a pair of Cabbage Patch kids that

Rachel's mother sent last Christmas.

Will it be easier for Amy because she's a pre-adolescent girl, Rachel now wonders, when Samuel fully becomes Tracy, than if Amy were a boy of about the same age? What will happen to Amy's coveted status as Daddy's Girl then? Not just in the immediate future but when she's thirteen and in need of a male role model?

Rachel can't even begin to imagine her own role as the wife of the medically transformed Tracy, despite the conversations they've had, the emphasis Tracy has placed on their staying together. "It's not like this neighborhood isn't full of non-traditional families," Tracy says whenever Rachel tries to give voice to the fault line that has opened up within her.

And yes, of course, their circle of university friends includes several gay couples, many of whom have biological or adopted children. But Rachel isn't gay, and Tracy is not the man she married.

Life is what happens...

"Hey," Karen says, touching her hand. "How are you?"

"Me?" Rachel attempts a smile, her voice trailing into nervous laughter. "Nearly a decade of marriage, and I never came home to find my closet or lingerie drawer in disarray. Now it's lipstick and higher heels than I've ever worn. Bad balance." More nervous laughter. "It's weird really. I mean, I married a man."

"Yes," Karen says, holding Rachel's hand now. "But at least Samuel—I mean Tracy's upfront about it."

"Like a butterfly that's been released from a chrysalis," Rachel hears herself say, tasting the bitterness and grief in her voice. While Rachel cringes at her husband's new passion for clothes, makeup, and all things feminine, Tracy is ebullient, celebratory, and in these ways not unlike the brightly-colored butterflies drawn to the flowers in Rachel's garden.

It was almost twelve years ago that Rachel arrived in Lubbock, having sold or given away every artifact from her fifteen year history with Max. On the long drive out west, Rachel told herself the geographic distance from Chicago where she and Max had lived since they met in college was a godsend, despite the increasing desolation of the landscape.

Fourteen hours into the drive, she spent a sleepless night in Joplin, Missouri, where she checked into a navel orange and pink hotel room, ate vending machine pop tarts for dinner, and wept through a pay-per-view-showing of “Annie Hall,” which she and Max had first watched together. It remained unfathomable, really, the fact that he had left her, and not for the usual reason—‘I’ve met someone else. I’ve fallen in love with her.’ Nor did he say those agonizing words her friend Leah lived with—“I just don’t love you anymore.”

No. One afternoon in early spring, the neighborhood gardens and window boxes abloom with daffodils and tulips, and the cherry and crabapple trees just beginning to flower, Max came home from the laboratory school to tell Rachel that he just couldn’t ‘do marriage’ anymore, talking about their life together as if it were a sport, like soccer or tennis, and not a sacrament, a vow.

“But I love you,” Rachel had said, “and I can’t believe you don’t love me.”

Max, beautiful, tender-hearted Max, who brought every stray dog or cat home, and used to sing her back to sleep when she had a nightmare, took her hands within his own and said, “I do love you, Rach, but I just can’t be married anymore, not to you, not to anyone...”

And so began Rachel’s first unreal journey, the job search, the move to the southwest.

It was that night in the hotel room in Joplin that Rachel swore she’d take her time before getting involved with anyone again anytime soon.

Then, during late October of her first semester at Texas Tech, Rachel met Samuel Dunham in the rare books archive. They were the only two people there on a Friday afternoon. Rachel was

officially there to look at a first edition of one of Edna St. Millay's collections, though the truth was she loved the archive's stained glass windows, its smell of old books, and a quiet that brought back her graduate school years. Besides, her rental house smelled of the last tenant's cats, and she had trouble getting work done beneath the fluorescent lights of her office.

"They're cutting down a fifty-year-old oak tree outside my office," Samuel explained across the aged maple table, once they introduced themselves. His hair was blonde and curly, and he had a deep dimple in his left cheek that made him look boyish, young, despite his forty-six years. Since losing her virginity to a graduate teaching assistant in her first American Lit seminar, Rachel has had a thing for men in tweeds; and Samuel, with his broad shoulders and agile, tennis player's build, wore his very well.

By the time five o'clock rolled around, Samuel had begun packing up his notebooks. "I'm driving out to Caprock Canyon early tomorrow morning to do some hiking," he said. "Care to join me?"

Rachel didn't own a pair of hiking boots, but she said 'yes' immediately.

"I packed a picnic lunch," he told her the following morning as they trekked up a pink clay path, the air still tinged with the chill of morning. "I hope you like cheese and tomato?"

"I sure do," she said, for she'd brought along only a Cliff Bar, a Ziploc bag of raisins.

Some three hours later, in the heart of the canyon, the leaves of the trees shone orange-gold in the sunlight. "For you," he said, handing her a bottle of sparkling water, as from his backpack he produced a red plaid blanket and then the sandwich lunch which included oatmeal cookies he'd made and a salad of fresh fruit. After sitting down, Rachel loosened the laces on her new boots and watched, a little amazed, and they ate this marvelous meal—there were pomegranate seeds in the fruit salad, and such care took her breath away. Soon, he was telling her of his current work on the jeweler Fabergé's relationship to the last czar, and afterwards he listened closely as she told him of

her research on Millay.

“Isn’t it a little soon?” Rachel’s mother said, some four months later when Rachel told her that she was engaged, leaving out the way Samuel had gotten down on his knees with a diamond solitaire in that very same canyon, the hours they’d spent kissing in the drowsy late afternoon sun.

“Maybe, Mom,” Rachel had said, “but I know, deep down, that this is the right decision. I love him. He’s smart, grounded, and he makes me feel that way too—.”

“So, if there’s anything I can do?” Karen says, before climbing into her silver BMW. They are standing in the parking lot outside the coffee shop, where one of Rachel’s former students calls out and waves, just as Karen reaches out to give her a hug.

“Thanks,” Rachel says, almost wishing she could step into Karen’s life. How hard could it be to pack up a half a million dollar home and head west with her handsome, successful husband who goes through foreign cars the way Amy goes through shoes.

Amy: the number one concern as well as the anchor in Rachel’s life. Her six-year-old daughter is smart, lovely in a way that Rachel never was, and tirelessly ebullient. Some nights when Rachel wakes on her study’s day bed, the sheets sticky around her, she tells herself that she should run away to teach English abroad, or drink a poisonous tea made from the oleander flowers in another neighbor’s garden.

Until she recalls her daughter’s coppery hair, her full lipped smile, the exuberant way she calls out “Mommy!” and she knows that she has to keep going.

And then, though her faith in these moments is diminished or at least taxed, there are still times when she and Tracy sit together at the kitchen table, sharing coffee or tea and talking about the day, the plans for transforming the screened-in porch into a greenhouse, their daughter; and for that small space of time, Rachel is content—at peace—or at least as close to this elusive state as she

ever was.

It is the continuity of these moments she tries to bank on now.

And the well being of Amy.

By the time Karen has maneuvered her BMW into traffic, Rachel is on her way to the elementary school where Amy is in the final weeks of kindergarten. If she walks fast, she'll be there just before the three o'clock bell, in time to see her daughter in her school world, check up on her.

Amy's teacher, Ms. Taylor, is a sturdily-built woman somewhere in her thirties with the nondescript blonde highlights so many west Texas women favor and a wide, wide smile revealing seemingly flawless teeth.

Entering the classroom, Rachel breathes in the comforting smells of Elmer's glue and sleepy children, and quickly spots Amy at the water table with Emily and Aiden. She looks happy, Rachel tells herself, studying her daughter's concentrated stance, for she is constantly on the lookout for any sign that Amy is being disturbed by the changes going on at home.

"Mommy," Amy says, rushing into her arms.

Her child crushes up against her, and Rachel's whole body turns to sun-warmed caramel. "How was school, sweetheart?" she asks, kissing Amy's warm forehead which smells slightly of milk and sun.

"Good, good. I'm so glad you're here. Emily has Barbie Snacks. I told her that you would buy them for me, okay?" Amy's hazel eyes, so like Rachel's own, are absolutely in earnest.

"Maybe tomorrow," Rachel says, wishing that Emily, with her shiny Tinkerbell shoes and her Tangled back pack, was in the other kindergarten classroom. Every week, it's a new battle. Before Barbie Snacks, it was a princess crown, and before that, a unicorn pillow pal for naptime.

"Why not today, Mommy?" Amy asks, wide-eyed, her left cheek dimpling as she smiles. "I know you told me today yesterday."

Ms. Taylor catches Rachel's eye, grins, so that she almost expects her to say, 'Well, Mom? I heard you, too. You shouldn't make promises you don't intend to keep.'

I suppose I should be grateful that Amy isn't asking me why Daddy is wearing lipstick and mascara and getting his/ her nails done every week at the salon frequented by the gray-haired matriarchs and thankfully not by the co-eds who take our classes, Rachel considers telling Ms. Taylor, for she, too, knows about what's happening in Amy's home, Amy having told her class—with that terrifying innocence of children—about her Daddy's new dresses, his Rockette-pink lipstick.

"You will be at the Parents' Dinner on Friday?" Ms. Taylor asks, as Rachel gathers up Amy's nap blanket and her threadbare Pooh.

"Oh yes," Rachel says, with affected casualness, her gaze inadvertently falling to Ms. Taylor's freckled cleavage, all too apparent in her clingy fuchsia dress. *How does she get away with it? This is an elementary school for chrissake.*

"And Dr. Dunham? Will he be joining you?" Ms. Taylor's smile is so big she reveals the coral of her lipstick staining her teeth. "We'd like a head count for the meal, you see."

"I'm afraid my husband has a faculty meeting that evening," Rachel says, certain that Ms. Taylor knows that she is lying. Samuel stopped coming to Roscoe Wilson right after he began wearing Donna Karan separates and heels, intuiting that a kindergarten classroom was not the place to try out his emerging identity as Tracy, though he and Rachel never talked about it outright.

"Well, at least two of the other fathers won't be here either." Ms. Taylor blinks under the bright lights, her perfectly mascara'd eyes looking momentarily garish, though her smile does not break.

Rachel stares back at her, astonished by the need she suddenly feels for a fight, for some release, a sick, sinking feeling taking root in her belly.

"Ms. Taylor!" Scrawny, little Jacob rushes forwards, and then he's wrapping his arms around

her knees. “Ms. Taylor, Megan called me ‘pie face.’”

“Let’s go talk to Megan,” Ms. Taylor says, laying a hand on the boy’s head with a tenderness that makes Rachel want to pull her own hair. *Who in the hell lashes out at a kindergarten teacher? I am becoming such a bitch.*

When Rachel and Samuel met, he was in his second year as Chair of the university’s Honors College, which meant that he taught one to two courses a year, usually in his own area of interest: Russian history, specifically Czarist Russia, a rather odd choice, Rachel thought, until talk of the sex change came up two years ago. After that, Samuel’s passion for Rasputin’s murderer, the cross-dressing Prince Yusipov, began to make a little more sense.

By the time Samuel was wearing skirts and twin sets to work, the Honors College had asked him to play a less visible role in their administration. “The kids might be stoners. They might be having sex in the stacks, but their parents, the donors, at least most of them, voted for Bush,” Samuel said philosophically.

And perhaps this is the hardest thing for Rachel to take. While her own life is falling apart, Samuel—who has been Tracy professionally for the last five months—seems the epitome of calm. Is it the hormones? Or simply the release of being allowed at last to live the life Tracy believes that he was intended for all along, for the chrysalis/butterfly analogy is all too fitting, given the happiness with which Tracy now goes about the day.

“You were dishonest with me,” Rachel said, once Samuel told her about Dr. Markson and the surgery they had scheduled for July.

“Clarification, Rachel,” he said. “I was dishonest with myself. When I met you, I really thought I could live the rest of my life as a man.” He stroked her shoulder, kissed her there.

How could it be that Samuel now Tracy could still be attracted to her? Did that make Tracy

a lesbian? Rachel didn't know. She did know that she couldn't imagine having any version of sex with Tracy again. All she manages are chaste kisses and the occasional, deeply needed hug.

"You okay?" Tracy said just the other night when he opened the door to Rachel's study and found her lying face up on the day bed and staring at the ceiling.

Rachel turned towards Tracy, wishing, fiercely wishing, that this could all somehow prove to be a dream, a very bad dream. "How can you even ask that?" she said.

"I'm still me," Tracy said, and sat down beside her.

"You can't say that to me and expect me to really believe it." Tears pierced her eyes, and she turned away, refusing to cry with Amy playing in her room just down the hall.

Tracy tried to enfold her in his arms, but Rachel tensed up, drew back.

"We made a commitment to each other, and we have Amy," her husband said, his voice scratchy, still troubled by the hormones. Her husband's hands, Rachel thought, studying them, would always be a clue to Tracy's former life—her real life—as a man. "Amy needs both of us, especially now."

"Yes, yes, I know all that," Rachel said, recognizing the earnestness in Tracy's face, the way s/he was leaning towards Rachel feeling almost like a supplication.

"But?" The question hovered in the air between them.

"You wear a bra now for god's sake." Rachel took a series of long deep breaths, squeezed her eyes shut.

"Please, Rachel," Tracy said in that gentle voice Rachel remembered falling in love with, the stability she believed she heard there, one that would buoy her.

"I'm not going to leave," she said at last. "But I still don't how I'm going to manage to stay."

"We'll find a way, promise."

It was the best Tracy could offer, under the circumstances, and when Tracy reached out

again, Rachel tried to shelter in her husband's embrace, comforted by the strong shoulders, the muscular arms that had always made her feel so protected, and trying not to think about how they, too, would change.

Some half an hour after leaving school, Rachel and Amy turn onto their street and soon they are at the house. "Look, Mama," Amy cries. "There's a cardinal in the bird birth."

"Yes," Rachel says, drinking in the beauty of the red bird against the backdrop of pink and purple flowers. Even now, five years after moving into this house, the garden continues to surprise her—*can this really be mine?* Standing on the lawn, Rachel surveys the foxglove and snapdragon and lobelia glowing beneath the shimmering live oak, the fifty-nine purple irises she planted last November, and feels almost happy.

A comfortable home, a garden, a child—yes she wanted a daughter—and a husband are the facts of Rachel's life that have always given her the most pleasure. This is the life she'd envisioned with Samuel when they exchanged vows in the university chapel. Yes, the tenure track job is rewarding, but it's also a vindication of what she's been all of her life: a reader, a thinker. Who would have thought those conversations about Woolf and Eliot could keep her in good shoes, a used Volvo, and a respectable address.

"Daddy!" Amy says, and Rachel looks up to see Tracy standing in the doorway. He is wearing a tasteful pale pink dress, definitely silk, and taupe sandals. There are pearls at her neck and ears.

What I wouldn't give to see Samuel standing there in that wrinkly linen blazer we bought in Santa Fe, Rachel thinks, as Amy rushes into his arms, kisses him.

"There's a present for our Amy." Tracy's voice is still deep, despite the hormones. "One of Milo's daughters dropped it off."

“The dolls,” Rachel says, stepping away when Tracy tries to hug her. “I ran into Karen at the coffee shop. She said she had some dolls for Amy.”

“Oh?” Tracy tilts his head, his densely sprayed hair moving like a helmet.

“They’re moving,” Rachel says, self-conscious given the details of that conversation. “L.A. I guess we’ll have new neighbors.”

“Yes—.”

“It’s a bike, Mommy,” Amy says, once she steps through the doorway.

And sure enough, it’s not a tangled mass of half-clothed Barbies that Rachel beholds, but an iridescent purple bicycle with training wheels and a wicker basket between the pink-tasseled handle bars.

“Will you help me ride it, Mommy?” Amy says, already climbing onto the old-fashioned banana-shaped seat, also pink.

“Of course.” Tears sting the edges of Rachel’s eyes, not because her husband is wearing nail polish and taking female hormones, but because the baby who nursed at her breast for two years is growing up. Pretty soon, Amy will be pedaling away like that little girl in the C. K. Williams’ poem that Rachel so loves but hasn’t been able to find again. Rachel looks over at her husband, wondering if Samuel—Tracy—is thinking something like this, too.

“I would have loved a bike like that growing up,” Tracy says.

Rachel recalls her old blue Schwinn hand-me-down, its color a non-sequiter, and her breath gets trapped in her chest. She squeezes her eyes shut and tries to imagine herself beside the quiet art historian; tries to find his oceanic breath.

Amy is pushing the pedals, but she cannot turn the bike to the right. “Mommy, help me!”

“Mommy’s coming,” Rachel says, hurrying down the front walk, the slap of Tracy’s sandals

on the pavement echoing behind her own.

On Saturday morning, Rachel is the last one to arrive for Carmen's class. Through the doorway, she sees about a dozen brightly-colored yoga mats laid side by side and wonders how she'll manage to squeeze herself in. Immediately, the art historian from Singapore—*Benjamin*, Rachel remembers his name only now—scoots his mat closer to the wall to make room for her.

"Thanks," she says, rolling out her mat beside his, as he nods, his pale forehead already glistening with sweat.

At the front of the room, Carmen stands on the raised platform. Her sleek black hair is up in a high ponytail, and she's wearing an eggplant-colored tank top and matching leggings. She's twenty-seven at the most, newly married with a diamond on her finger, about to start her third year of medical school, and gorgeous. Plus, she's a certified Baptiste Power Yoga Instructor who can linger in handstand for three whole minutes without wavering.

Rachel was never that put together.

"Let your yoga practice today be a model for how you're going to go about the rest of your day," Carmen says, striding among the sweating bodies, making an adjustment here, touching a shoulder or hand there.

Yes, there were the halcyon first weeks when Samuel cooked and they stayed up late watching movies from the 1930s and 40s—"Bombshell," "The End of the Affair," and anything starring Bette Davis—but for the most part their life together has always been a grown up's happiness, one based on career, mortgage, shared values and plans; and at the heart of it all, the raising of Amy. Though Rachel didn't scrutinize herself until Samuel told her of his medical plans, she understands now that what so drew her to Samuel was his intelligence, his warmth; and yes, his stability. This is a man who would stay, a man who would build something with her that would last.

And here, Rachel has to admit that her mother is right. They still have a hefty mortgage. She doesn't dare think about the costs of Samuel's coming surgeries, the debts. How will they manage? Her heart beat quickens, threatening her tenuous semblance of calm.

Beside her the art historian is breathing evenly, deeply, and although he moves a bit stiffly, he does so with real purpose and calm. She tries to deepen her inhale, but she just can't shake what she saw a few minutes ago—the reason she's late, the reason she almost missed class.

Tracy has been growing his hair out for the last few months, so that he now wears it in a neat honey-brown bob just above his shoulders. "Why not let your natural curls have free reign?" Rachel asked once, having always longed for naturally curly hair, and trying to be sympathetic or at least more playful than disapproving.

But her husband, newly infatuated with the world of women's styling products, seems to enjoy the straightening iron and the salon goop that goes along with it.

This morning before Rachel left, Tracy stood at the bathroom mirror, his hair newly highlighted, his face already carefully made up with the Clinique products she (like Rachel) favors. Samuel's chest hair is gone, and Tracy now wears a C cup bra. And panties. It isn't like Tracy could fool everyone, at least not yet, for his jaw remains too square, too chiseled; and his hips narrow, a male athlete's hips.

Nevertheless, with the mist from the shower fogging the glass, Rachel could almost believe the illusion, or at least the surreal dream that is becoming a reality right before her eyes. The first surgery is less than two months away. Dr. Markson will surgically remove Samuel's penis and create female genitalia for Tracy. From the photographs, the outcome looks dauntingly realistic.

Carmen instructs the class to move from down dog to warrior three—one of the most difficult of the balancing poses. "Imagine that you're flying," she says. "Let your standing leg grow so strong, so anchored, that your arms can grow light. Reach," she cries out. "Reach."

Rachel plants her left leg and steps off, her arms extended in front of her, palms facing each other, neck and shoulders aligned. She wobbles at first, and her left hamstring begins to cramp, but she doesn't let go. Is it the art historian—Benjamin's—breathing that helps anchor her? Listening, she feels almost as if she is riding the wave of his breath, and pictures herself in the ocean, the water cresting up and over her body as she lies face up, a starfish, facing the summer sky.

“Reach,” Carmen calls again, and this time her hand is on Rachel's sacrum. For just a moment, Rachel feels incredibly light, but then the heat from Carmen's hand begins to burn, and tears stream down her cheeks.

Still she holds the pose, holds warrior three once the other people in the class, all twelve of them, assume horseman. Rachel is still listening to the art historian's breath, only now her own breath has synchronized itself with his.

During Shivasana, when they are lying side by side on their mats, their arms extended, their legs gently open, hip bones tilted towards the sky, Rachel lets her hand linger near Benjamin's. Her fingertips brush his, and she tells herself that if he invites her for coffee afterwards, she will say 'yes.' After all, Tracy has taken Amy out for brunch. They will not be home until mid-afternoon. Will the people who see Tracy and Amy together take them for mother and daughter? Grandmother and daughter, more likely, Rachel thinks, and somehow this comforts her, but only for the moment, here, now, in the semi-dark.

