

THURSDAY, 10/25/2018, 10:25 PM

MY NAME IS Asa Cranford and I am not an alcoholic.

The addictions I do have include (but are not limited to) smoking, gambling, working, procrastinating, appeasing, apologizing, and having a complicated relationship with the truth. Yes, I am the *child* of an alcoholic. (Technically the grandchild: my teen dad got deported, my teen mom died, and her barely-out-of-her-teens stepmother raised me.) I'm also an architect, which is Latin for "masochist." Specifically, I am the assistant senior design architect at TBD Partners, a middling-quality firm in a Class B office building on Cameron Road, a semi-suburban semi-arterial in northeast Austin, Texas. The two things I (usually) like about my building: I can get my Whataburger fix across the parking lot and my therapy fix down the hall. My therapist Dr. Chung-hee "Katie" Woo, PhD, takes insurance. I am a gold mine for a therapist who takes insurance. I make bad decisions.

I made a bad decision.

Yesterday morning I felt like things were looking up for a change. No, I didn't become a mom—but yes, I did land

this sweet little side gig, a contract to design a major-brand gas station—and yes, my usual Wednesday client meeting in Beaumont (four hours east of Austin) really was cancelled. No, I did not tell my boss. Instead I turned the \$4,174 in my bank account into \$4,174 in cash, drove *five* hours east of Austin, sat down at the highest-limit blackjack table in all of Louisiana, turned \$4,000 in cash into \$4,000 in chips, and turned \$4,000 in chips into \$8,000 in chips. Then I placed \$2,000 on the table and was dealt a pair of 10s. You should never split a pair of 10s but the dealer had a 6 and I'd had a few drinks so I split the 10s. Then doubled down. I got a 6 on each 10—but no worries; I'd been counting cards and there was a high probability the next two cards would be 10s. But probability does not entail actuality. The dealer dealt herself another 6...and another 6. $(6 + 6 + 6) = 18 > 2([10 + 6] \cdot \$4,000) =$ I lost \$8,000 in sixty seconds. I drove back to Austin with \$174 to my name, spent \$100 of it on lottery tickets, showered the stink of casino off me, and went to see my therapist.

Seeing my therapist was a bad decision. The law is the law. Yes, even in Austin.

AT TEN O'CLOCK THIS morning I removed my shoes (Dr. Woo's orders), flopped onto her couch, and recited my usual complaints: My Grandparents Hate Me, My Boss Hates Me, and Everyone Hates Me. Dr. Woo sat like always: jaw clenched, lips pursed to a pinhole, and the bows on her ballet flats oscillating in great frustration. I was halfway through the sentence My Best Friend Hates Me and Hasn't Spoken to Me in 8½ Months when Dr. Woo interrupted me. "With respect," she said, "you're fucking lying."

“I can prove that everyone hates me.”

“I’m sure you can, Asa. But that’s not my point. There is the lie of commission, the deliberate untruth. There is the lie of omission, the deliberate deletion of facts from the truth. And then there is the lie of deflection, the deliberate diversion from the truth. You give me the exact same lines every session. You’re trying to divert me. If you divert me, I can’t help you. And if I can’t help you...what’s the point in you seeing me?”

Here’s the point: Dr. Woo reminds me of my ex-high school girlfriend Carrie Anne Nguyen. I do *not* have an Asian fetish. It’s that (like Carrie Anne) Dr. Woo is bigger than me, taller than me, and wears glasses. I have a bigger-and-taller-women-than-me-in-glasses fetish. “Not sure how you can help me,” I said. “Life is like blackjack. Play long enough and you win. Play longer and, um, you lose.”

“How long did you play this time?”

“I have but \$74 to my name.”

“Asa, I told you to stay out of Louisiana.”

“I know. But I felt like things were looking up for a change.”

“And you just couldn’t stand it.” Carrie Anne had this parabolic eye roll—and so does Dr. Woo. “I told you what to do,” she said. “But you didn’t do it. It’s not that you *couldn’t* do it. You *wouldn’t* do it. You *refused* to do it. You don’t do this despite me. *You do this to spite me.*” She threw my patient file to the floor and gave it a much sharper kick than most people would expect from someone in ballet flats. I am not most people. “I never want to see you again,” she said.

Carrie Anne said that once. “It’s not that I won’t do what I need to do,” I said. “I would if I could. But I can’t. But I will. Whatever you tell me to do...I’ll do it. I promise. Please, Dr. Woo. Don’t be mad at me.”

“You make promises. But you do not keep them.”

Carrie Anne said that once, too. “I promise I will never set foot in Louisiana ever again.”

“There are casinos in Oklahoma.”

“I promise I would never set foot in Oklahoma.”

“I don’t believe you,” Dr. Woo said, “but it’s my job to believe you.” She picked my file off the carpet. “Asa, you say much about others. But you say little about yourself. Does this make you uncomfortable? Or do I make you uncomfortable?”

“I make me uncomfortable.”

She pushed her glasses up her nose. “If you can’t or won’t talk to me,” she said, “you can—and will—write to me. Here’s your homework: I want you to journal your feelings. No editing. No erasing. Show me your work next session. I want to read all about you. About *you*.”

“The last thing you want to read about is me. Which is great. Because the last thing I want to write about is me. Also, ‘journal’ is not a verb.”

“It is in this office.”

“Whatever you call it in this office...I don’t have time to do anything but work.”

“Yet you have time to lose all your money.” She looked at her watch and shut my file. “Speaking of time: your time’s up.” I sat up and started to tie my sneakers. “Meant to tell you, Asa. I just *love* your little red Keds! Got a pair myself.”

This explained the weird looks I was getting in the hallway. I make bad decisions when I don’t sleep. I never sleep. So I always make bad decisions. “They, uh, belong to my sister Jack,” I said. “It’s complicated.”

“I bet. Sister Jack, huh?” Dr. Woo typed something on her phone. “Wouldn’t you know it? My eleven o’clock just, uh, got cancelled. Why don’t you lie back down? We’ve got

something new to talk about. You. And your shoes. And your intriguingly-named sister.”

“Let’s not and say we did.”

“Next hour is on the house.”

“The house always wins.”

Dr. Woo went doe-eyed. “Work with me,” she said, “and you’ll find I’m the most accepting and non-judgmental therapist in this building.”

“You’re the only therapist in this building.”

“But work against me,” she added, her eyes no longer so doe-like, “and I will literally kick your fucking ass out of this office.”

“Yes, ma’am.” I lay back down.

“That’s better.” She reopened my file. “*Now* perhaps we can begin.”

“THAT’S MY STORY,” I said. “Told you it’s complicated.”

Dr. Woo reviewed her notes. “Let’s see if I got this right,” she said. “Your pet name for your cousin Ophelia is Sister Jack because she’s like a sister to you and she’s always been, as you so sensitively put it, more a Jack than a Jill. Ophelia drove from California to Austin and showed up at your office on Valentine’s Day in (you were highly specific) a black skirt suit, suntan L’eggs, and red Keds. Y’all went down to Sixth Street, got drunk, went back to your place, and got drunker. You blacked out. She left before you woke up and she left her clothes at your place. 8½ months later—this morning—you got dressed without your glasses and mistook her Keds for your Converse. That explains why you’re wearing girl shoes.”

“Of course it does.”

“Now explain why you’re wearing girl pantyhose.”

Hmm. “No clean socks,” I said. “Yes. That explains it.”

Dr. Woo's eyes steeled. "Asa, do you really think you can bullshit a therapist?" she asked.

"Um," I said, "not anymore."

She softened her glare. "There's nothing to be ashamed of," she said. "Lots of men cross-dress. It's perfectly fine unless it's negatively affecting your judgment or relationships. And women wear men's clothes all the time. Why, what girl hasn't worn her boyfriend's shirts around the house? I certainly have—I mean, I would if I had a boy—but anyway: it stands to reason that, if girls can wear their boyfriends' shirts, then you can wear your girlfriend's pantyhose and shoes. It's okay, Asa. It really is."

"I have neither judgment nor relationships. And I am *not* a cross-dresser. And her name isn't Ophelia. It's Otilia. And she's not my girlfriend. She's my first cousin once removed. And she didn't drive in from California. She drove down from Caledonia. Caledonia, Texas. We grew up there. But I wasn't born in Texas. I'll have you know I was born in New York City. Brooklyn, to be specific."

Dr. Woo leaned forward. "I want to help you," she said, her voice cracking. "But to help you, I need your help. Babydoll...tell me the truth."

Carrie Anne's pet name for me was Babydoll.

"I wasn't lying," I said. "Except Sister Jack is me."

I'M NOT LYING.

Otilia Teresa Chouinard is my late mother Rebecca Jacqueline "Becky" Cranford's stepfather Burton's second wife Carmen's sister (Tia) Juana's daughter. Otilia and I were conceived in the same hotel room on the same night on the same high-school band trip to Chicago. We were polar opposites—I was passive, she was aggressive—but we were unfissionable, indivisible, two bodies but one soul. We

didn't share DNA but we shared everything else including bathtubs, cribs, and a first language. Carmen worked days (and nights) managing a honky-tonk and Burton was only home on weekends so Tía Juana and TV *en español* babysat me until kindergarten. I spent more time at Otilia's house than my own. Her house was heaven.

My house was hell. Carmen was often drunk, Burton was usually a prick, and our washing machine never seemed to work. Bereft of clean Underoos in my third year of life, I wrapped my bunny blanket around my waist. I chanced upon a mirror and I liked what I saw. Correction: I loved it. What I saw, was me in a skirt.

No. What I saw, for the first time ever...was *me*.

It was a rapid progression to slipping into Carmen's clothes, scrunching my hair into pigtails, and sitting down to pee—but still there was this ache in my breast and my loins that I couldn't diagnose until the morning of my sixth birthday. I awoke to a knock on the front door and opened it to find a gift from Otilia: a plastic baby doll. The box said her name was Ellen. I scooped Ellen into my arms, my tears of joy dripped into her pinhole mouth, and five seconds later she went piddles. My pain disappeared. I was now a mommy. Otilia and I would while away many a lazy Sunday afternoon playing house—I'd be *mami*, Otilia would be *papi*, and Ellen would play the part of *mija*—my daughter—though Otilia would always insist that Ellen was *nuestra hija*. *Our* daughter.

Burton tolerated my doll until he caught me trying to breastfeed her. He snatched Ellen away from me, drenched her in Ronsonol lighter fluid, chunked her into the fireplace, and lit a match. It was Christmas Day 1983. As for Carmen—I embarrassed her but she sucked it up and started calling me *mija*. She pretty much had to. I was the closest thing to a daughter she was ever going to get. My

Mee Maw (Burton's mother) always said, "No child is born of Cranford man" which is English for "we Cranfords have a family curse and Burton shoots blanks." This, among other things (including, but not limited to, unfettered and unmonitored access to vodka) drove Carmen to drink. She failed to show up to work one Monday afternoon in the summer of 1984 so an assistant manager came by to make sure she was alive and to report that the club was out of Smirnoff. Carmen said she did not drink Smirnoff. She also said the boy in ladies-size-6 kitten heels dragging a Hefty bag full of empty Smirnoff bottles through the sunken living room was my sister Jack. I think she meant to say Jacqueline but she was really drunk at the time. Otilia thought this story was hilarious. She's called me Sister Jack for thirty-four years.

She hasn't called me for 8½ months.

Life goes on and life went on. I divided my childhood between Otilia's house (next door to the west) and Mr. McConnell's (next door to the east). Lachlan McConnell was an ex-piano prodigy from Glasgow who washed up on the shores of Caledonia Creek in 1974 and got a job as a high-school band director. He was like a father to me. Saturday nights he'd pop popcorn and we'd watch old movies he'd taped off Channel 13 (*Dog Day Afternoon* was my favorite; I was obsessed with the borough of my birth and Al Pacino had a girlfriend like me) or we'd listen to selections from the record collection that filled two of his three bedrooms and half his garage. One night in 1985 he played Billy Joel's "Allentown" and I said to myself: *I have got to make that music*. Mr. McConnell's Steinway baby grand was off-limits but I asked for forgiveness rather than permission and I made that music. He forgave me and agreed to teach me piano. He never laid a finger on me except when he slapped my hands. He did not brook

wrong notes. (He was like Beethoven's father to me.) But I had a breakthrough one Sunday afternoon in 1986. I'd been playing house with Otilia and I'd lost track of time. Mr. McConnell did not brook tardiness, either, so at one minute to three I ran the 130 feet to his house in Otilia's cap-sleeved floral-print church dress and patent-leather Mary Janes. I sat down at his piano and—I wasn't playing "Für Elise." I was channeling it. I wore dresses to lessons from that day forward and he never had to slap my hands again.

I met my first love in fifth grade: my fifth-grade teacher. Emily Choate was six inches taller than me and she wore glasses. She was just my type. And I don't know how but she *got* me. Maybe it was how I cried at the end of "The Little Match Girl." Maybe it was how I held my Trapper Keeper to my chest like a girl. Or maybe it was how I crossed my legs like a girl. Miss Choate let me use the girls' bathroom, she took me to see *Working Girl* on my half-birthday, and she'd invite me to stay after school for what she called "girl talk." We were both outsiders: she didn't fit in with the other lady teachers at Caledonia Elementary and I didn't fit in with anyone but Otilia. The other lady teachers with their interchangeable chambray jumpers and country-kitsch classroom décor were a catty sort given to tittering when Miss Choate came to the teacher's lounge to use the ditto machine. She was dubbed an odd duck for having no ducks on her wall, for having a BA in geography from The University of Texas on her wall, and for having ambition. Teaching for the other ladies was either a slave wage until a pension or a rest stop between an MRS degree and having kids.

But Miss Choate didn't just talk office politics. She'd give me fashion advice. "Dress for the job you want," she once told me—and the job she wanted was superintendent

of the Bethel-Caledonia Independent School District, a job she felt was best done in a black skirt suit. “But dress for the job you have,” she added—and the job she had was chasing thirty-five fifth-graders around a campus the size and population of Scotland. She said this was a job more comfortably done in Keds than kitten heels. She was white as a ghost and it was cold in our portable classroom—thus, she explained, her penchant for suntan pantyhose. She wore white scrunch socks with her tan L’eggs and red Keds (she had the Working Girl look down pat) and she gave not a fuck what the other lady teachers said about her taste in daywear. “When I run this district,” she said, “those bitches will *all* be wearing skirt suits.” (The ladies were already all wearing L’eggs, socks, and Keds. It was freezing in those portables and our campus qualified for its own congressional district.) The only thing I wanted more than to be *with* Miss Choate was *to be* Miss Choate.

Actually, I just wanted to be a girl.

Any girl. I’d lie awake at night and fantasize about wearing a dress to church, wearing a dress to school, wearing a dress to Miss Choate’s wedding, and wearing the other wedding dress at Miss Choate’s wedding. I longed for adulthood, when I’d choose my own clothes and have my own babies. I couldn’t wait to grow up.

I wish I’d waited.

Being a girl was so easy when I was a boy. I had this pointy little chin and these dimpled little hands and my face was as smooth as the black satin babydoll I plucked from Carmen’s Goodwill pile when I was in sixth grade. My voice was as high as Otilia’s (no, it was higher) and I looked just as feminine in a dress as she did. No, I looked more feminine. I acted more feminine, too. Come to think of it, Otilia *was* always more a Jack than a Jill—and it was *she* who said so. She wasn’t ashamed of who she was.

That made one of us.

Burton got under my skin, sometimes, and one of those times was my first day of seventh grade: the day he shamed me into trying out for football. I was too small to do anything else so Coach Metcalfe set up a tee at the 30 and told me to try kicking a field goal. He figured I'd miss. So did I. We were wrong. He asked me to do it again. I did it again. And again. And again. Coach Metcalfe was stunned. "How the hell does a seventh-grader make four 47-yard field goals in a row?" he said more than asked. I didn't tell him it was the pink panties I was wearing. He got mad at me when I told him I didn't want to play football so I played football. Burton stopped getting mad at me when I played football so I kept playing football.

I much preferred playing the oboe. Playing my late mother's oboe was my way of speaking to her (no, it was a form of prayer) and there were no other males in the oboe section. I had those girls all to myself. (Carrie Anne was one of those girls.) There were no girls on the football team, just males like my other first cousin once removed, a psychopath named Eloy Lopez whose pet name for me was *mariposa* which means either "butterfly" or "faggot" and Eloy was not into lepidoptery. My teammates snickered about my taste in underwear and every time I made a field goal in high school, the band played "She's a Lady." They played it so much, other teams thought it was our fight song. (Our actual fight song was "Dixie.") But after I missed a field goal for the first and last time ever the band played "The Night They Drove Ol' Dixie Down" and the starting quarterback took his disapproval out on me in the locker room. I decided to kill myself or, failing that, to leave town at my soonest opportunity. I failed at killing myself so I left town at my soonest opportunity: June 2, 1996, the day I packed my Cabrio, grabbed my Caledonia

High School diploma, then made like a bat out of hell for Austin, the Berkeley of Texas.

It was heaven for all of six hours.

Giddy with newfound freedom, I dolled myself up and went to a lesbian bar. I looked and was dressed like I was on my way to a middle-school dance but the bartender waved off my fake ID, comped my Smirnoff-and-tonic, told me I looked fabulous, and upraised her hand. “Gimme five,” she said. “Keep on keepin’ Austin weird, my *man*.”

I did not give her five.

Had I been *blind* all those years? The truth, when I ran home and examined myself: my chin was flat and shaped like a hoe blade—a man’s chin; my hands were the size of skilletts—man hands; my Adam’s apple was the size of an apple—like a man; and my voice? Not an oboe. A bassoon. I grabbed my crotch and...nope, not a lady dick. A *man* dick. To drive the final nail into the coffin of my self-image, I looked in the mirror. What I saw looking back, for the first time ever, was a dude in a dress.

What I saw looking back was me.

I didn’t want to be weird. I wanted to be normal. The dumpster at my new apartment complex on the East Side was big enough to hold thousands of dollars’ worth of accumulated women’s daywear, nightwear, underwear, and footwear. I cried. I haven’t been able to cry since.

Life went on. I figured I didn’t need to dress like me to be me. I could still (try to) cry at the end of *Working Girl*, I could still hold my books to my chest like a girl, and I could still cross my legs like a girl. To me, these things made me, me. To everyone else, these things made me gay. Except I wasn’t gay. Not that I didn’t try. I got down with the first boy I could. But, I don’t know, I just didn’t feel anything.

I felt nothing whatsoever. My life was colorless,

charmless, dull and dreary. I tried to get high (I put everything into my bloodstream but heroin) but nothing got me high so I made lows for myself. I became a master procrastinator, I lost an entire student-loan check in sixty seconds at a blackjack table in Oklahoma, and I lost twenty-two years deflecting myself from the truth about myself with architecture. Girlfriends came and went—but not too many—and never for long.

But at least I still had Otilia.

Our paths diverged when we left home for college—I went to The University of Texas and Otilia headed for Texas A&M in College Station—but we talked on the phone every night (in the days of land lines and long-distance bills) and we traded visits each weekend. After graduation from vet school Otilia moved back to Caledonia, started a clinic, paid cash for a cherry-red Ford Raptor, and bought a four-bedroom house. Me? I stayed in Austin (and haven't left), I got a job at TBD (and haven't left), and I'm still living in that apartment on the East Side. Otilia matured and found a level of comfort with herself—and I didn't—but we were still the best of friends.

We were still the best of friends on Valentine's Day evening. I returned from a trip to the office men's room to find Otilia in my Aeron chair wearing not cargo shorts and Tevas (her uniform) but Miss Choate's uniform (minus the socks and this was just like her; she never paid attention to clothes, hers or anyone else's). We went down to Sixth Street. We got drunk. We went back to my place. We got drunker. We were polishing off a pack of More menthols and a bottle of Smirnoff on my balcony when she excused herself to go to the bathroom. The next thing I remember is waking up on the carpet in bright streaming daylight, the bedsheets ripped off my futon and her Miss Choate costume in a pile on the floor.

I woke up alone.

I tried to reach out to Otilia. She wouldn't talk to me. I tried to reach out to a therapist. He wouldn't listen to me. He said: yes, I had a persistent cross-gender identification; yes, I had a persistent discomfort with my assigned sex; and no, I did not have both a down below and a deep inside. (He asked me to prove this to him. Then he asked if I could prove it again sometime.) Then he said: no, the fact that I had a college degree, an architect's license, and a "decent" job meant I was "functioning." I had to be dysfunctional to get a sex change.

But I never used the words *sex change* in his office.

And I am *not* functioning.

He told me I cross-dressed to alleviate stress. I said I wasn't a cross-dresser, that the clothes were just the beginning. Then he told me I cross-dressed because I missed my mother. I said I wasn't a cross-dresser, that the clothes were just the beginning. Finally he decided I had a condition called transvestic fetishism: that I cross-dressed to get myself off. I said I didn't get myself off as this would involve touching my dick. I'm not in love with touching my dick. I said the girlwear thing wasn't about sex. I'm not in love with sex, either. I said I hadn't worn girlwear in twenty-two years. I then told him I was not a fucking cross-dresser and that the clothes were just the fucking beginning. He said I was lying and stopped taking my insurance.

I'm not lying.

BACK TO THIS morning (by now, afternoon): Dr. Woo spotted me another free hour of therapy. "Wanna hear a joke?" she asked me.

"God, yes."

“What’s the difference between a trans woman and a cross-dressed?”

“You tell me.”

“The trans woman’s the one wearing pants.”

I checked. I was wearing pants. “Good one, Dr. Woo. But I don’t believe you have the right to tell trans jokes.”

“I do believe I do.”

No way!

“Does this make you uncomfortable?”

No way.

“Or do I make you uncomfortable?”

No...wait. Maybe I had an opening here. “Dr. Woo, you said you were the most accepting and non-judgmental therapist in this building. Is this statement still true?”

“I’m the only therapist in this building. And I was a linebacker in high school. Choose your next words wisely.”

“Not sure if these words are wise but here goes: after our first session, I did an Internet search. Would you like to know that for which I searched?”

“Choose your next words wisely.”

“I typed the words ‘im in love with my therapist.’”

“Oh.”

“This statement is still true.”

“I...see.”

“You don’t make me uncomfortable.”

“That’s...good.”

“I can see that this makes you uncomfortable.”

She gave me that sad, lip-biting smile that says I’m Flattered But. I get this smile from women all the time. “Outside this office, it’s called love,” she said. “Inside this office, it’s called ‘transference.’”

“Of course.”

“Asa, we need to keep our relationship within what we call the ‘therapeutic frame.’”

“Of course.”

Dr. Woo tried to brighten the proceedings. “But I’m pleased you told me about your feelings for me,” she said. “And I’m pleased you told me your feelings in general. This is progress. But there’s a lot of work to be done. You and I share a condition. That condition is called gender dysphoria. And you and I share a solution. I think you can see the solution.”

As Nietzsche once said: the thought of a solution is a great consolation; by means of it one gets through many a dark night. His solution was suicide. My solution would be a sex change. But it’s not in my cards. Sex-change surgery would involve the sight of blood and I’m not in love with the sight of blood. Changing my sex would also involve changing my birth certificate—which would involve obtaining my birth certificate—which would involve going back home for the first time in twenty-two years and entering my grandfather’s closet—which would involve the sight of blood. For when I was but eight years old Burton held a loaded Ruger to my head and said: “You go in my closet? I kill you.” And as St. Augustine once said: Lord, grant me death...but not just yet.

(Actually, St. Augustine was referring to chastity. Speaking of chastity: I once wondered what Burton was hiding in that closet of his. His stated goal in life was, and is, to stick his dick into every assigned female from Caledonia to Kalamazoo. I once suspected this included my mother. I figured this was why he’d never allowed me to see my birth certificate. But no. Family curse. I turned my mind off.)

“I’d have to pay out of pocket for a sex change,” I told Dr. Woo. “And as has been seen: my pockets are empty. Thanks to my Bible-thumping boss, my insurance doesn’t even cover the pill. I have to pay for the pill out of pocket.”

“Birth control pills?”

“For the estrogen.”

“How on Earth did you get a doctor to prescribe you birth control pills?”

Dr. Otilia Chouinard, DVM, left more than her Miss Choate costume at my place on Valentine’s Day. She left her prescription pad. “I’d rather not say,” I said.

“Asa, you need to not take birth control pills.”

“I know, Dr. Woo. I want me a baby.”

“And sex and gender are two different things. You and I both know this.”

I know this—and Dr. Woo knows this—but my hometown state representative Trip McCord (R-Caledonia) does not know this. Trip wrote and passed the Keeping Texas Women Safe Act. It is a Class A misdemeanor punishable by a fine not to exceed \$4,000 to enter a bathroom not pertaining to the gender on one’s officially-certified birth certificate. Not sex. Gender.

“And we don’t use the term ‘sex change’ in this office,” Dr. Woo said. “We call it ‘gender confirmation surgery.’ It’s not a change. It’s confirming what you were born to be. That being said: you don’t have to, shall we say, get confirmed to become what you were born to be.” She pointed to the wall above me. “Read me the name on my Harvard diploma.”

Quynh Anh Nguyen’s English name was Carrie Anne. “Chung-hee Woo. But Katie’s your English name. Got it.”

“Asa, Chung-hee is a man’s name.”

“Got it,” I said. “I feel like I would have gotten it sooner if I spoke Korean.”

“Here’s my point: I was born Chung-hee. I was born to be Katie. I don’t need hormones to be Katie. I don’t need surgery. All I need is me—that, and Korean cosmetics.”

“You totally pass, Dr. Woo. You fooled me.”

Her eyes shot lasers at me. “We do not use the term ‘passing,’ in this office or otherwise. It implies deception. I’m not trying to deceive anyone. And you won’t be, either. Not anymore. Not after I’m done with you.” She folded her hands in her lap. “What we’re about to embark upon is a journey towards the real you,” she said. “Every journey starts with a first step. Here’s your homework: take that first step.”

“More specific, please.”

“I want you to be the real you in public.”

“Less specific, please.”

“You said you’d do whatever I told you to do. You promised.”

“How public?”

Dr. Woo put her pen to her lips. “Let’s make your first step a baby step. After work tonight, be the real you and take a walk around the block. See how it feels to be the real you out in the world.”

“I’m an architect. There is no after work tonight,” I said. “There is only work tonight.”

“Then do it this weekend.”

“I’m an architect,” I said. “There is no weekend.”

“Then be you at work.”

This was funny. “I can just see it now, Dr. Woo. I will prance into TBD in my skirt suit. My boss will take me aside. He will call me ‘boy’ and he will use incorrect grammar. ‘Boy,’ he will say, ‘you and me need to talk.’ He will cite me for violating TBD’s strict no-side-work policy. He will also tell me I am going to Hell. I will walk into his office the assistant senior design architect at TBD. I will walk out of his office the former assistant senior design architect at TBD. I will not have a paycheck to cash on Wednesday and this will be not positive as my rent is due on Thursday. I will be evicted. This couch sure is

comfortable. Mind if I sleep here? I promise I'll take my shoes off. And I promise I never sleep."

"Do your officemates typically work late?"

Ha. "They are *not* my mates," I said. "I work late because everyone else works early. Also, working late is the only way I can do side work undetected."

"Then here's an idea," Dr. Woo said. "Take a break from all that work you do, go do you, then go do your work while doing you. Get a feel for how you feel." She opened the blinds. "Then go over and get a Whataburger."

No way. "I wouldn't walk into that place late at night dressed as a man, much less as a woman," I said. "Late at night over there gets, um, *interesting*. Nothing but cops and weirdos. I'm not in love with either."

"I go there all the time, at all times. I'm still here."

"You're a bit more intimidating than me, Dr. Woo."

"I get clocked all the time."

"But you're intimidating enough to clock people back."

"When that bartender called you a man, she 'clocked' you. But I shouldn't be using that word in this office, or otherwise. It doesn't matter what people think you are. It only matters who you are. It doesn't matter what people think when they see you. If you like what you see when you see you—that's all that matters."

"But I don't like what I see. I hate my chin, I hate my brow, and I especially hate my hands."

"I don't know, Asa. I like what I see." Dr. Woo then looked for something to like. "I like your hair," she finally said. (They call it a man bun. I just call it a bun.) "And your eyes," she added. "They're pretty."

I cannot take a compliment without returning one. "I'd kill for your thighs," I said.

"Next time, just say 'thank you for the compliment, Dr. Woo.'"

“Thank you for the compliment, Dr. Woo.”

“Call me Katie.” She looked at her watch. “Time’s up,” she said. “I’ve cancelled two appointments. If I cancel a third, my patients will lose their patience, hee hee.”

“Good one.” I completed the tying of my sneakers and rose to leave. “Two questions. First question: do I still have to, as you say in this office, ‘journal’ my feelings?”

“You said you’d do whatever I told you to do. You promised. And remember: no editing and no erasing. I want to read all about you. About *you*.”

“The next-to-last thing you want to read is what I’ll write about me. The last thing you want to read is what I’ll write about you. But you asked for it. Second and more important question: what about the Bathroom Bi—”

Dr. W—I mean, Katie—got stern. “We do not use the words ‘bathroom bill’ in this office,” she said. “Nor do we call it the Keeping Texas Women Safe Act.”

“Then what do we call it?”

“Bullshit.”

“Good point. As I was saying, or asking: what about the, um, Bullshit Bill? Send a quote-unquote lady to Whataburger and she’ll want to wash her hands. When she washes her hands in the ladies’ room, she’ll get a \$4,000 fine. When she gets that \$4,000 fine, she’ll have to declare bankruptcy. But if she washes her hands in the men’s room, she’ll get killed...or worse.”

“They don’t enforce the Keeping Texas Trans Women Unsafe Act in Austin, Asa. Trust me.”

“I don’t trust you but it’s your job for me to trust you.”

Katie took my face in her hands. “Babydoll, you have a fear of joy,” she said. “Be not afraid. Go forth, and be joyful.”

. . .

THIS AFTERNOON I felt like a winner. Katie didn't shame me, she didn't blame me, and she named a feeling I'd been feeling my entire life. She opened my eyes to a new way of living and we were now on an English-name basis. I should have quit while I was ahead.

But I just had to play longer.

I should have gone home, switched Keds for Converse, then gone to work and finished the design for that elementary school in McAllen that's due on my boss's desk by tomorrow morning.

But I just had to play longer.

So instead I drove up to H-Mart and spent \$217.48 on Korean cosmetics. My credit card was not declined. I went home, showered, then sat down at my vanity for two hours' worth of quality time with my new makeup. Then I did laundry, having found a roll of quarters in my glove box under the lottery tickets I'd bought, and I pressed Otilia's skirt suit. (Among the things we share, or shared, is a dress size of 11 and a shoe size of 8.) At long last I slipped into that blouse, pulled up those L'eggs, zipped up that skirt, buttoned up that jacket, stepped into those Keds, stood in front of the mirror, closed my eyes—and then opened them. What I saw looking back was an older Miss Choate. Minus the socks.

No. What I saw looking back, for the first time since June 2, 1996—was *me*.

My heart beat like butterfly wings and I felt a lightness, a weightlessness, a release, a burden relieved. It was as if I'd locked myself out of my life and I'd finally found my spare key. In short: I was three years old all over again. I should have quit while I was ahead.

But I just had to play longer.

I should have walked around the block, walked back home, switched black skirt for black turtleneck, and gone

to the office to finish my work after my “mates” had gone home for the day. I should have quit while I was ahead.

But I just had to play longer.

So instead I stepped out my front door like Laverne and Shirley, ready for the world. A gentle breeze wisped my bangs and there was the promise of a chilly Texas autumn night in the air. Sunlight was lighter, colors were brighter, and the shape of things snapped into focus like when I’d first gotten glasses. I hit every green light to my building, parked right up front, and strode to the door like Mary Tyler Moore.

I thought I was gonna make it after all.

We become what we wear. I put on a mesh jersey and I became a football player. I put on a black turtleneck and I became an architect. I put on a skirt suit and Keds and I became a plucky twenty-three-year-old elementary-school teacher with a BA in geography and a total imperviousness to the slights of others. Miss Choate was comfortable in her own skin and it made her beautiful even though her complexion was more lunar than luminescent. (She had more pimples than I did and I was going through puberty in the fifth grade.) Miss Choate had flaws. She didn’t care. She didn’t have to care—she once told me that nothing diverted the eyes of others from the truth about one’s facial features like a pair of cute glasses and, being honest, I can’t recall what her face looked like. All I remember is her glasses. They were cute. Thick. But cute.

I checked my reflection in the front door. I had flaws—my chin was still flat and my hands were still big—but no matter: I was wearing cute glasses. I swiped into TBD like I owned the place. I owned the place. I was alone. I made a cup of coffee, settled into my Aeron chair, and achieved that elusive mental state that Mihaly Csikszentmihályi called

flow: I designed like I was running on major-brand premium gas, synthesizing the wants and needs of thirty teachers, ten administrators, and one public-school superintendent into what Frank Lloyd Wright called a *Gesamtkunstwerk*, a total and unified work of architecture. Ten o'clock rolled around and all I needed to do was to print my work, plop it on my boss's desk, and go home a winner.

But I never go home a winner.

Instead I went to the ladies' room.

Except I never made it.

Every winning streak inflects to a losing one—like when a player's 20 loses to a dealer's 21—or when there's a “Closed for Cleaning” sign taped to the ladies'-room door. The smart gambler knows to make for the exits and the smart me knew to make prints and make for my apartment. I would have fulfilled the letter of my boss's assignment and the spirit of Katie's. Instead I saw my therapist in the hallway—or, rather, she saw me. Her eyes were liquid with happiness. “Babydoll,” she said, “it's finally *you*.”

“Is it now.”

“It is.”

I gestured in the direction of the men's room. “Gotta go,” I said. “Literally.”

“Have you completed your assignment?”

“Which one?”

“You *know* which one.”

“Maybe some other time.”

Katie's jaw clenched. “You said you'd do whatever I told you to do. Asa, you fucking *promised*.”

Seeing my therapist was a *bad* decision.

. . .

I HAVE things to do and places to be. Of course I do! It's why I'm journaling instead.

I pee-pee-danced across the parking lot and crashed through the door of the Whataburger. As predicted, nothing but cops and weirdos—specifically, two Austin police officers and two Mormon missionaries. (There is no bigger weirdo to an Austinite than a Mormon missionary.) I ran to the first bathroom I saw, barged into a stall, did my business sitting down, flushed, washed my hands, opened the door—and found myself face-to-face with one Officer B. Johnson #1348 who charged me with entering a bathroom not pertaining to the gender on my officially-certified birth certificate. Did I have my officially-certified birth certificate on my person? No. Does anyone? I was thus set up with a court date on Monday.

This coming Monday.

Officer Johnson said the decision wasn't hers to make. "The law is the law," she said. "Even in Austin. You can't bullshit Judge Rashida Shipman and you sure as hell ain't bullshittin' me. Girls can tell who's a girl." She slapped a citation into the palm of my big ugly man hand. "Best cough up that \$4,000," she said. "Lady, you ain't allowed in the men's room."