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The Empress of Charcoal

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Appel: The Empress of Charcoal

WINNER

THE EMPRESS OF CHARCOAL

Jacob M. Appel

The note arrived on Yale University letterhead, neatly typed, three years to the month after she'd lost her husband:

May 15, 2007

Dear Elsa,

I imagine you don't remember me. I was a student in Professor Stanley's figure drawing class at City College during the spring semester of 1962, when you served as a model. After the course ended, I asked the Visual Arts Department for your name, but I didn't have the courage to contact you. I suppose you will think me foolish—and no doubt I am—but that remains among the greatest regrets of my adult life. My wife of thirty-six years passed away last August and my son helped me find your address on the Internet. Would you be willing to have lunch one of these days?

Sincerely,

Morton D. Belldauer, Ph.D.

Professor Emeritus

Department of the History of Mathematics

PS: If you are not the same Elsa Kalamaransky who modeled at City College in 1962, kindly disregard this message.

Elsa was *not* the same woman who had modeled for Professor Stanley's class. She'd already been teaching five years at Bonneville by 1962, initiating her girls into the marvels of Balzac and Flaubert. But ever since the balmy, cloudless morning when she'd discovered Bruce facedown in his beloved Jacuzzi, skin bloated and puckered like a bobbing apple, springtime tormented Elsa

with its insincere promise. It was during one of her lonely spells that she replied to Belldauer in longhand:

Dear Morton,

What a delightful surprise! I confess I do not remember you, but 1962 was an eternity ago, wasn't it? My life here in Rhode Island has been a good one. As Emily Dickinson wrote, "To live is so startling it leaves little time for anything else." I retired six years ago from teaching at The Bonneville School, shortly after it merged with an all-boys academy. At the end, I was teaching only French language, but I was initially hired as an instructor of Italian literature as well. Are you a fan of Leopardi? I do hope so.

As of now, the summer is surprisingly open. My late husband (39 years together, 3 apart) was an avid gardener, and although I fear I lack his natural gifts, I'm doing my darnedest to keep my thumbs green. I believe I can claim some success, as this weekend the peonies are staging a wondrous show.

Please do come see the daylilies while they are in bloom.

Most warmly,

Elsa Kalamaransky

She reread the letter twice before sealing it inside the envelope, unsure if she'd included too much or too little. She'd been one of six sisters, and all of her life she'd worked among women, so what little she understood of men came from interacting with Bruce and his colleagues in the Providence Philharmonic—not, most likely, a representative sampling of the species. At the central post office in Creve Coeur, she tore open the envelope to verify that she'd printed the correct telephone number beneath her signature, and she had to purchase a replacement at the counter.

Elsa sent the letter on Saturday morning. Belldauer phoned in the early evening on Wednesday, and now it was Saturday again, and she was expecting him at noon. "At my age, I don't like to put anything off," he'd joked in a voice as deep and resonant as a kettle drum. "Besides, the way I see it, I'm already forty-five

years overdue.” Elsa had expected him to sound more patrician, less ethnic Brooklyn—like Cary Grant without the effeminate tinge. But the professor did come across as very much the gentleman. Bruce, rest his soul, had been a slow-spoken tenor with an accent to shame the Kennedys.

She’d started planning their meal the evening that Belldauer phoned and, in hindsight, she’d gone a bit overboard: After all, he was a stranger who’d been sweet on her nearly half a century ago. Not even *on her*. *On a woman who had shared her name!* But Elsa had endured so long without cause to indulge, that now she couldn’t resist a drive to the gourmet supermarket in Providence for fresh Bluefin tuna and hand-picked Nyons olives. She tossed the tuna in a homegrown spinach salad. Then she covered the wrought-iron table in the garden with her late mother-in-law’s daisy-print cloth. As lunchtime approached and the skies remained clear, she set out a basket of assorted breads, a porcelain platter of camembert and brie, and the swan-shaped glass water pitcher that her wealthy grandaunt had bestowed upon her and Bruce as a wedding gift. All night long, a driving rain had pummeled the neighborhood, forcing Elsa to reassess her plans, but by Friday morning, the air had turned crisp with potential. On the slate patio, puddles shimmered under the high white sun.

Belldauer’s car—a dignified jet-black Oldsmobile—pulled up at the curb ten minutes early, but the professor waited inside the vehicle until precisely twelve. Elsa watched through the bay windows in the living room as he advanced up the front path and paused under the crabapple tree to adjust the sleeves of his sports jacket. He was trim and long-limbed, with an grand forehead and a bushy, salt-and-pepper mustache. The mustache, reflected Elsa, might take some adjusting to. Otherwise, Belldauer was as handsome as any man she’d laid eyes upon—at least, since that distant night when Rachel Kalamaransky, her colleague at Bonneville, had invited Elsa backstage at the symphony to meet her unmarried and “pleasantly eccentric” brother. The professor even carried himself rather like Bruce, his magnificent head

cocked slightly skyward, as he stepped onto the front porch, holding his bouquet of lilacs. How fortunate that she'd had the nerve to write back! Then her chest fluttered with second thoughts: What if he realized she was the wrong Elsa? What if he didn't, but rejected her when she later confessed? What if the other Elsa Kalamaransky had been significantly less busty? Or black? Or an achondroplastic dwarf? When the doorbell chimed, she found herself paralyzed with anxiety. After a pause, the bell rang again. Elsa clenched her eyelids together, as though she were about to dive into a pool of icy water, and she crossed briskly through the foyer to welcome her guest.

The portico stood a step down from the entryway, so when Elsa opened the door, she and Belldauer faced each other at eye level. He said nothing, at first. For half a second, he just stared at her, his brow furrowed as though reconstructing a puzzle in his mind from memory. And then he flashed her a broad grin. "Goodness, Elsa Kalamaransky," he said. "It's really you, isn't it?"

"Please, come inside," answered Elsa. "I'm so glad you're here."

Soon they were standing in the parlor, surrounded by upholstery and knick-knacks, and again he was examining her. She accepted the lilacs from his outstretched hand and her gaze followed his nervously around the room. Photos of her long life with Bruce cluttered the piano bench and the end tables, including several from their first honeymoon in the Canadian Rockies, and now Elsa regretted not having moved them upstairs.

"Did you have an easy drive?" asked Elsa.

"Oh, it was fine. I just can't believe it's actually you," said Belldauer. "The Empress of Charcoal, in the flesh."

"Excuse me?"

"That's what I used to call you. The Empress of Charcoal," he explained. "I suspect you'll laugh at me if I tell you why."

"Try me," answered Elsa. She felt herself growing confident, even flirtatious. "But first, let's head onto the veranda. As far

as I'm concerned, it's far too lovely an afternoon to squander another moment out of the sun."

She took hold of the professor's hand and led him through the sliding glass doors. Belldauer's skin felt warm to her touch. Outside, on the low-hanging branches of the Japanese maple, a pair of orioles serenaded each other; from beyond the forsythia hedge rose the cries of the neighbor's children, and the occasional blast of a firecracker. Elsa tucked Belldauer's lilacs into her plastic watering jug and centered the bouquet atop the gas grill. Bruce had enjoyed hosting barbecues for his fellow musicians, but ever since she'd lost him, Elsa used the device as a sideboard. "Now where were we?" asked Elsa, smiling coyly. "Oh, yes. I was about to laugh at your story."

"I wouldn't blame you," said the professor. "As I was saying, the office adjacent to Dr. Stanley's belonged to the chairman of the history department. Big, meaty fellow—I've forgotten his name. In any case, the two of them shared one of those long glass-enclosed bulletin boards, and Stanley used to post our charcoal sketches next to this pictorial genealogy chart of the royal houses of Europe. So one afternoon, I was standing in the corridor, looking over the various ways the class had portrayed you, and somehow 'The Empress of Charcoal' popped into my head. Foolish, no?"

"Not in the slightest," said Elsa. "May I offer you a drink?"

"It's only noon. I wouldn't want to give you the wrong impression."

"Nonsense," she retorted. "I still have a pitcher of frozen banana daiquiri left over from my niece's birthday picnic. How about I pour us each a glass and then I give you a walking tour of the garden?"

"I never say no to a lady," answered Belldauer. "Or to a chilled cocktail."

Elsa retrieved the crystal decanter from the mini-fridge and filled two cognac glasses. She'd prepared the contents the evening before, several weeks *after* her niece's birthday celebration, but it was a harmless lie. The truth was that she hardly drank at

all—champagne on New Year's, Manischewitz at her sister-in-law's Passover dinner, an occasional Bloody Mary at a wedding or shower—but she didn't want Belldauer to think her puritanical. Secretly, she also hoped to limber up his judgment.

"Here's mud in your eye!" she declared. "To second chances!"

They clinked glasses and she drank.

"It's amazing how you expect something to turn out one way, and it works out so differently, yet it's still just as good," said Belldauer.

"What do you mean?"

"It's hard to explain." He sipped from his glass. "I still remember how stunning you looked that first afternoon when you slid that Japanese dressing gown off your shoulders, and all you were wearing was that startling blue bracelet around your wrist. For some reason, I expected you to be reserved, aloof—and you're so friendly."

"I suppose I might have come across as aloof *back then*," said Elsa. "I can pretend to be less friendly, if you'd prefer." She sensed the heat of the daiquiri in her temples. "Or even downright mean."

"That won't be necessary," said Belldauer, beaming. "I have a strange confession to make. After I wrote to you, I still wasn't sure that I'd have it in me to meet you face-to-face. I'd be lying if I didn't admit that I miss Louise. Like hell, I miss Louise. Every day. I'll be reading a book or listening to the radio and my mind begins drifting to what she looked like during those final nights at the hospice. Of course, my son—he's a headshrinker at Johns Hopkins—assures me it will get better."

Bullshit, thought Elsa. It might be *different*, but never better. She still woke up *every* morning, three years later, shocked not to find Bruce, his paunch poking over his boxers, hogging the pillows onto his side of the bed.

Elsa squeezed Belldauer's wrist. "Poor dear," she said.

"Honestly, I wasn't thinking too clearly when I sent you that note," he continued. "I had no idea what I'd do next—whether

I'd even follow up at all. But do you know what sealed the deal for me?"

"What?"

"That you'd kept your maiden name." The professor shrugged. "I know that sounds ridiculous, but I liked that you were still a Kalamaransky."

"Why couldn't Kalamaransky be my husband's name?"

"I did the math when I received your letter. If you've been married thirty-nine years and widowed three, you were still single when you posed for us. It makes a man wonder. Had I only written to you then." Belldauer allowed this idea to drift unfinished into the azaleas. "I've always been vehemently opposed to women changing their names when they get married," he said. "It's a particularly retrograde practice, to be blunt, based on historical notions of wives as chattel. I'm proud to say that Louise was born a Kappelgruber and, rest her soul, she died a Kappelgruber."

Elsa wasn't sure she agreed with Belldauer about name-changing, but she found endearing the vehemence with which he voiced his opinion. "Are you ready for a stroll around the yard?" she asked. "Before the morning glories and the portulaca close up shop for the afternoon?"

Elsa topped off Belldauer's drink and passed it back to him.

"And on the subject of math, Mr. Professor Emeritus at Yale University, maybe you could tell me about the variety of mathematics you studied."

"*History* of mathematics," Belldauer corrected her.

Elsa polished off her second daiquiri. "*History* of mathematics," she echoed. "Twice as impressive."

She reached for his hand again, this time clasping it more decisively, and steered him between the neatly manicured beds of dahlias and gladiolas. Now that she'd spread store-bought bark chips around the perennials—as she'd already done for several years with the zinnias and pansies—the entire patch looked far more professional.

"Most of my work focused upon cuneiform tablets, on whether

the Babylonians ever developed an authentic trigonometry,” said Belldauer. “I also authored several papers on advanced functions in the Sumerian system—cubic equations, Pythagorean triples. I developed a particular expertise regarding a tablet called Plimpton 322. Truthfully, I can’t imagine it would interest you in the slightest.”

“You might find yourself surprised,” Elsa answered. But rather than inquire anything further about Mesopotamian numerology, she pointed out the various strains of daylilies. “This over here is Honest Abe’s Beard,” she said, cupping the petals of a tall blossom fringed in black. “Those two red ones behind the phlox are Emma Goldman and Alexander Berkman. What was it Goldman once said? ‘I’d rather have roses on my table than diamonds on my neck.’ Personally, I couldn’t agree more.”

“You’ve bred all of these yourself?”

“Heavens, no. Not *me*. Bruce.” Elsa wondered if she was talking too much about her husband—but, after nearly four decades of marriage, what else was she supposed to talk about? “He played the oboe. You should have seen him: Such a large man blowing into such a tiny instrument. But his real passion wasn’t music. It was cross-breeding flowers. In Bruce’s study, I still have an entire filing cabinet full of daylily pedigrees that I can’t make heads nor tails of. I can’t bring myself to discard them.”

“Louise was a dietician,” said Belldauer—reflectively, almost as though he were thinking aloud. “She worked at the university hospital.”

Elsa said nothing. One of her own sisters had also been a medical dietician, specially trained to counsel renal patients, before she’d suffered a breakdown and filed for permanent disability. So the Louise Kappelgruber whom Elsa now imagined, wandering the dialysis clinic, warning diabetic truck drivers against eating foods that appeared white, looked like her own dear, hopeless Gladys. Elsa didn’t mention any of this, because she wanted Belldauer to think about his wife as infrequently as possible.

They circled around the far corner of the garden—past

the firewood pile, the strawberry patch, the shaded hemlock arbor where Bruce had installed a polished cedar bench. The quarter acre beyond the hemlocks, up to the stockade fence, was overgrown with oak and hickory saplings. This was also where, in a small clearing, Bruce and his brother-in-law had been attempting to restore a twenty-one foot cutty cruiser that they'd salvaged from a rummage sale. The craft's lichen-coated prow still waited for them on cement blocks, oblivious to Bruce's aneurysm, unaware that Gary and Rachel had since retired to the dry heat of Phoenix.

Belldauer tapped the side of the vessel with his fingers, generating a hollow thud. "One of my former students owns a boat like this," he observed. "He takes me out on the Sound two or three times every summer." This reminded Elsa of her girls from Bonneville, all of whom were now adults, many with fully-grown children of their own. One was even a grandmother—to twins! And another, Maria Coats, was the provost at Bryn Mawr College. Elsa had many regrets in life—not having children, not spending more time with Bruce—but choosing a teaching career was never among them. She reached for Belldauer's elbow and led him further into the lush greenery, keeping her feet on the flagstones to avoid the mud. +

She paused in front of Bruce's favorite lily—his prized accomplishment. The blossom wasn't *officially* blue according to the American Hemerocallis Society's standards—technically, it was aquamarine—so Bruce hadn't won their challenge award. But it was certainly blue enough to fool the average observer. "These beauties here are the Ida Kalamaransky blooms," said Elsa. *Named after Bruce's mother*, she almost added. But she caught herself in time, and blurted out, "Bruce named them after *my* mother." She held her breath, waiting for Belldauer to call out her lie—but he didn't. He merely smiled warmly, so Elsa leaned forward and sniffed the blossoms, more to conceal her face than to inhale the mild aroma. "Aren't they glorious?" she asked. "They always remind me of those lines from the Wordsworth poem about daffodils:

*I gazed—and gazed—but little thought
What wealth the show to me had brought.”*

Much to Elsa’s amazement, Belldauer answered:

*“For oft, when on my couch I lie
In vacant or in pensive mood,
They flash upon that inward eye
Which is the bliss of solitude;
And then my heart with pleasure fills,
And dances with the daffodils.”*

The professor held his lapels like a ringmaster while he declaimed, clearly proud of his performance. “You look surprised,” he said.

“I *am* surprised.”

“Why? I’m an historian of mathematics, so I can’t be cultured?”

Elsa feared she might weep from joy. “Of course, it’s not that,” she answered—but at some level, it was precisely that, and in any case, she had no opportunity to present an alternative explanation. Instead, a sharp, high-pitched whistle made her look up with a start—and then a staccato of explosions sent her diving into the hollyhocks with her arms over her head. Bright sparks, orange and pink, shot from the grass around the zucchini plot. Nearby, a portion of the chicken-wire trellis collapsed, toppling with it the nascent pumpkin vines. Then Elsa’s entire world turned beige as Belldauer shielded her from the blasts with his sports jacket. He stood bowed over her, like a hawk protecting its brood, and her cheek pressed against his chest.

After what seemed like months—but must have been only seconds—a deathly hush descended upon the garden. Elsa could hear her own sharp breaths and the cadence of Belldauer’s heart, the two sounds merging into one complex rhythm. Then, from above, a lone catbird began trilling its chipper reveille. Elsa drew

her hands away from her face and climbed out of the flower beds. The elbows of her blouse were streaked with clay, and a run slashed across the knee of her left stocking.

“What on earth was that?” she asked.

“I’d guess three or four bottle rockets,” answered Belldauer. “And half a dozen cherry bombs.”

“We’re being bombed?”

“Firecrackers,” he explained, as he dusted splinters of bark from his trousers. “It appears as though your neighbors have turned their artillery on us.”

The professor stepped into the vegetable patch and poked under the chicken-wire with a jagged stick. Elsa watched anxiously as he kicked a spent rectangular canister out from the undergrowth. She wanted to warn him to be careful, but feared he would think her a worrywart. “Don’t go cleaning these up on your own,” said Belldauer. “Your fingers are far too adorable to risk losing. I’m afraid you’ll have to ask your neighbors to call in a professional—just in case any of these shells are still active.”

“I don’t understand,” said Elsa. “We’ve never had any trouble before.”

It figured that, on her first date in forty-two years, she’d face an armed attack. If this actually were a date, this is—and not just one-time reunion.

“They seemed like such decent boys,” she added. “Their mother’s a rabbi. Rabbi Bonomi. Italian Jews.”

As though on cue, the Bonomi boys appeared at the break in the forsythia hedge. They were both pudgy kids with broad foreheads and impressive jaws, topped with matching shocks of auburn hair. The older youth, who could not have been much beyond ten, pushed the younger child toward Elsa and Belldauer. “My brother, Zachary,” he said, “has something that he’d like to say to you.”

Zachary stepped forward in increments, his eyes fixed on the damp grass.

“I’m sorry,” he said—his voice soft and tentative. Elsa thought he might sob, and she felt an urge to hug him. “I did something

dangerous and I'm very sorry I did it."

"Firecrackers *are* dangerous," answered Belldauer. "How old are you, Zachary?"

"Eight and seven months."

Belldauer winked at Elsa. "Do you know what I liked to do when I was eight and seven months? I liked to study the stars."

Zachary Bonomi kept his head down, his arms tucked to his chest. The older brother stepped forward and placed a reassuring hand on the boy's shoulder.

"A telescope," said Belldauer, "that's what a young *mensch* like you needs."

Elsa could sense that her date had once been an exceptional father. Speaking to these boys, he sounded as avuncular as the Wizard of Oz—only Jewish.

The professor reached into the breast pocket of his jacket. His hand emerged moments later, fingers wrapped around a short brass tube. The metal gleamed. Belldauer tugged on the cylinder and it expanded rapidly to become a foot-long telescope.

"Here you go, kid. But you shouldn't use it until the sun goes down."

The boy reached tentatively for the telescope. He peered into the broad lens, then turned the apparatus around and gazed down the narrow end.

"Can I keep it?"

"You can share it with your brother," answered Belldauer. "But on one condition. You promise not to set off any more firecrackers."

"Anywhere?" asked the boy.

"Yes," Belldauer said firmly. "*Anywhere.*"

Zachary looked to his brother for guidance. The older boy nodded.

"Okay, it's a deal," said Zachary. "Thank you."

Then the boys turned and ran, a blur of dungarees and sun-burnt flesh.

"I'm not sure what to say," said Elsa. "Do you always carry

around a telescope to give to wayward schoolboys?"

"I do, in fact," answered Belldauer. "But not for wayward schoolboys. I'm rather a devotee of the night sky—it's reassuring to think that I'm seeing the same constellations as Euclid and Archimedes." He stepped back onto the path, and this time it was he who took her hand. "You'll have to decide whether you want their parents to pay to have the firecracker shells removed," he said. "I can't say I envy you that decision."

They began walking back toward the house, arm-in-arm, like a Victorian couple on a promenade through Vauxhall Gardens.

"You are certainly a man of many surprises," said Elsa. "I'm afraid to find out what else you have hidden away in those pockets of yours."

"You should be," answered Belldauer. His voice contained a new seriousness, a sense of purpose. "Let's sit down and I'll show you."

He dried off a chair for her at the lunch table and drew up his own alongside it. Then he cleared off a small square of tablecloth between the bread basket and the platters of cheese. Elsa realized what he was going to show to her at the very moment he removed the drawing from inside his coat. The sketch had been folded over many times and bore deep, irregular crease marks. One corner of the paper canvas had been shorn away entirely. In several places, the charcoal itself had streaked. But there was no mistaking the subject of Belldauer's forty-five year-old illustration. It was a young woman—a *nude* young woman—standing arms akimbo on a wooden stepladder. Fortunately, the portrait neither looked like Elsa nor unlike Elsa. Whatever his other attributes, the young Morton D. Belldauer had not been a particularly gifted sketch artist.

"I can't believe you've kept it all these years."

"I had a terrible crush on you for an entire semester," answered Belldauer. "Bear in mind, you were the first woman I'd ever seen without her clothes on."

Of course, thought Elsa. That wouldn't have been at all remarkable, back in 1962. What a different age that had

been! Bruce, too, had been the first man she'd ever seen fully unclothed.

Elsa held the precious drawing as tenderly as she might hold a baby. Her hand trembled and she braced it against the tabletop. "You had talent," she observed.

"I didn't, but it's very kind of you to say so," answered Belldauer. "I've taken it up again, though. Drawing, that is. Ever since I retired from the department. I've got my art supplies in the trunk of my car."

He reached for the pitcher and poured them each a final daiquiri, shifting back and forth between glasses to ensure an equal distribution.

"I know this is going to sound crazy," said Belldauer, "but I was wondering if you'd let me draw you again."

He sounded so innocent, so gentle. Like a fourteen-year-old schoolboy seeking permission to kiss her for the first time. The man's big dark eyes gazed into hers, brimming with tender hope, and his devotion made Elsa feel bashful. Her own eyes darted away from his quickly. Across the lawn, chipmunks scampered on the stone retaining wall opposite the cellar steps, and a dopey, overweight woodchuck sunned himself shamelessly beside the sprinkler head. She felt Belldauer's attention fixed upon her, waiting for his fate to be sealed.

"Are you serious?" Elsa asked. She had never modeled before, and she wasn't sure she'd even know how to do it. It was probably one of those feats that proved far harder than it first appeared, the sort of challenge her Bonneville girls had always relished—like drinking a gallon of whole milk in five minutes. Besides, she sensed that Belldauer had a specific sort of modeling in mind. "You don't mean...?"

"If you'd be willing. Just like in class."

"Oh, good heavens, Morton. I haven't done anything like that in years...I'm out of practice..."

"You'll do the best you can," he replied. "Let's make today the first day of your second modeling career."

"*Today?*"

"Today. Right here in the garden." Now Belldauer glanced away, his voice shifting to a softer, less fervent note. "I do hope I'm not offending you," he apologized. "I don't mean to put you on the spot."

"Not at all." Elsa downed what remained of her drink and rose deliberately from her chair. "Go get your supplies, Morton. I'll be back in a moment."

"Thank you," he answered.

She retreated into the house and quickly exchanged her blouse and skirt for Bruce's navy dressing gown. The silk charged her skin with desire. How unfathomable that she'd only met Morton Belldauer several hours earlier. She felt as though she'd already known him for an eternity, that the time before he'd entered her life was no longer readily accessible. Maybe this was what her Bonneville girls were feeling when they composed those essays defending Emma Bovary for having sex on a first date. Elsa assessed herself in the bedroom mirror: her rutted skin, her tired mouth, the flesh too thick between her chin and her neck. What a loon she must be, at the age of seventy-one, to compare herself to Emma Bovary. When she returned to the garden, clad only in the robe and a pair of sheepskin slippers, Belldauer had already set up his easel on the tier of flagstone across from the wishing fountain.

"You look ravishing," the professor said. "I'll never forget Dr. Stanley warning us that the models were employees hired solely to further our artistic development—that we shouldn't look upon them as women.... I intended to do exactly that until the moment you walked into the studio."

Elsa scanned the perimeter of the yard. Over the years, the rhododendrons and forsythia had grown high enough to block the neighbors' view. In any case, it was her own property, wasn't it? She had every right to engage in an artistic pastime on her own property! Who would dare say otherwise?

"Where would you like me?" she asked.

"How about in front of that fountain?" suggested Belldauer. "Maybe you could climb up onto the wall so I can capture those

white flowers behind you.”

“Honeysuckle,” said Elsa. “During the nineteenth century,” she added nervously, “teenaged girls were forbidden to sniff honeysuckle because the blossoms were believed to induce unseemly dreams.”

“They’re stunning flowers,” he answered. “A perfect frame for a portrait of a stunning woman.”

Elsa slid out of her slippers and inched along the stone wall as though advancing toward the end of a narrow branch. Belldauer stepped from behind the easel and watched as she allowed the robe to fall slowly from her shoulders.

How exposed she suddenly was! How vulnerable!

“I feel like a schoolgirl,” said Elsa. “All jitters and nerves.”

Belldauer stared at her body pensively, his fingertips pressed over his mouth. He looked as though he were discovering her for the first time. Elsa felt the shame building inside her. What a disappointment she must be! Here he was, clinging to a forty-five year old vision of youthful beauty, while all she had to offer were sagging breasts and cellulite. She wished she’d had the good sense to keep her clothes on.

Belldauer appeared troubled. More surprised than disappointed.

“That blue bracelet of yours,” he said. “What was it? Cobalt?”

“I don’t know,” stammered Elsa.

“Do you still have it?”

“Maybe,” she replied. “I could check for you.”

Why had she said that? For the sake of the charade? Or because she was mortified to pose naked on a stone wall in front of a complete stranger? Morton Belldauer was, after all, nothing more than a stranger who’d written her a letter by mistake. Elsa reached for her robe. “I’ll be right back,” she said, and she scurried through the sliding glass doors into the living room.

Inside the house, of course, there was nothing Elsa could do except to wait until a sufficient interval of time had elapsed. She obviously did not own the other Elsa Kalamaransky’s

cobalt bracelet—or anything she might substitute in its place. If Belldauer learned the truth, she wondered, would he still track down the correct Elsa? Or would he cut his losses with her? Bruce, in Belldauer's shoes, would have worked his hardest to laugh off the entire episode. He certainly wouldn't have held her little falsehood against her. Quite the opposite: Bruce was one to appreciate a stunt so audacious and madcap. He might even have attempted something truly nutty, once he'd forgiven her—like inviting the other Elsa K. to join them both for dinner. But Elsa sensed a sober streak in Morton Belldauer that might prevent the man from looking beyond her deception so easily.

She waited for the grandfather clock to strike three. On the third peal, she strode back onto the veranda. Belldauer was seated on the edge of the stone wall, posed thoughtfully on the very stones where she was to model.

"I couldn't find the bracelet," said Elsa.

Belldauer nodded. His fingers kneaded his magnificent forehead.

"I couldn't find the bracelet," she continued, feeling her tongue grew loose in her mouth, "because I don't have the bracelet."

"How foolish of me to expect it," he answered. "It has been forty years."

He was still scrutinizing her—probably trying to reconcile her naked body with the image frozen in his memory. Elsa drew in her breath.

"I *never* had the bracelet," she said. "I have a confession to make—"

Belldauer held up his hand. "Don't," he warned sharply.

"But I have to," continued Elsa. "I wish so much that I'd been that woman in your drawing class, but I wasn't."

"Please, don't," Belldauer repeated. Louder. "I already know."

"You know?"

She could tell by the deep sadness in his face that he'd seen through her.

"I believed you at first. Forty-five years *is* a very long time. But I knew the moment you removed your robe," said Belldauer. "You were so shy just now, so gloriously shy. How did you describe it? 'All nerves and jitters.' But the one thing I'll never forget about the woman who posed for us in Dr. Stanley's class was how confident she was, how comfortable in her own skin. I'd never seen such sophistication. That's not the sort of self-possession one ever forgets—not even after forty-five years."

So there it was. Over. Done. What a fool she had been.

"I'll assume this means you don't want me to pose for you," said Elsa.

Belldauer frowned at her, his face beset with gravity. This must have been the face he used when investigating mysteries in cuneiform. Elsa felt a dark, unforgiving ache pooling within her chest.

"Nothing survives forty-five years without evolving," he answered. "Not attraction, not love, not even memory. Maybe I'm imagining all that self-possession and sophistication." He stepped behind the easel decisively. "Of course, I still want you to pose," he said. "Why should a lost cobalt bracelet make any difference?"