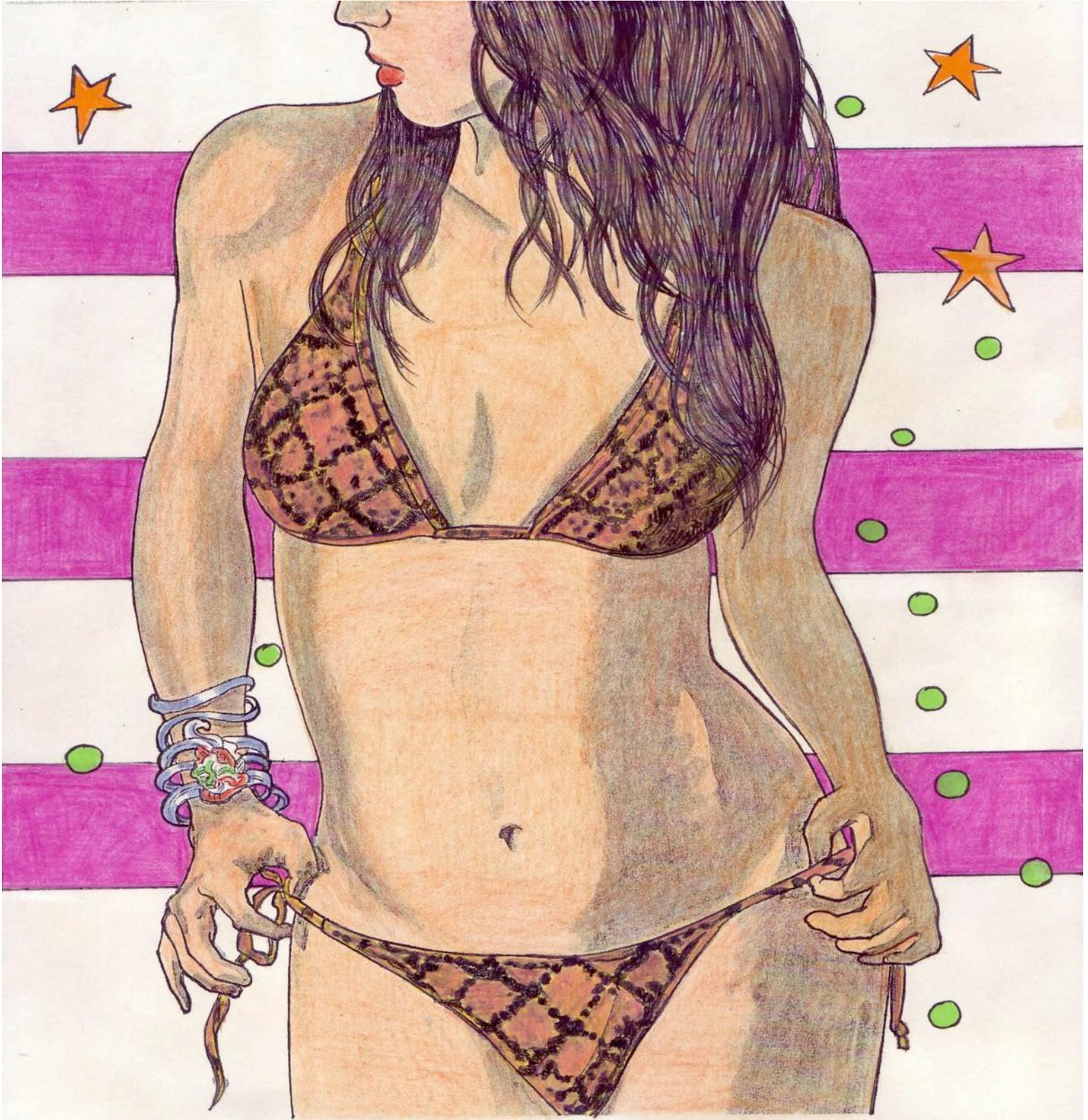


Chapter 1
Crazy Game of Love



When Maria came into a room she was there, no doubt. She generated warmth, excitement, and interest. Her voice was distinctively clear and friendly. In a social setting, she was “on”, making sure no one could get through the surface to break her apart into smaller pieces, to melt her down into the atoms of self-doubt she was made of.

She shed any criticism from others like rain off a roof. She did everything to impress, and then would see herself through the eyes of those she had impressed, thereby taking on a completely new significance. If she brought you into her circle and spent time with you, you would be certain she lived a lush life. She ate big, she drank big, she worked big, she thought big.

This portrait is not the whole truth. The fact about Maria that only a few sensed (her sister, an old high school friend who knew her when she was awkward and unpopular, her husband and son who each encountered the daily contradictions in her personality, and then her daughter who understood her like no one else) was that all this housed an ego so vulnerable, so fragile, she had no choice but to build up that high density protection. It took ever-increasing energy to keep it in place.

Much of this energy was spent looking for food. She always went to food, as though she was in love with it, as though food had open arms, as though food had kind eyes, or a gentle voice, or a warm body; she went to food, as though food had brains, and compassion, and would be good company.

She always went to food, as though food could sympathize, as though food could say *not to worry*, as though food could give her a kiss.

Maria had some inkling of what she was after when she went to food, but could never know for sure. Ideas came sometimes, not at those food moments but at off times, a fleeting thought here, a flashback there. She had practiced and practiced and was a real pro at pushing those deeper thoughts away.

On the other hand, a clothes fit was an everyday affair, and it went something like this.

Well, the blue shirt is okay, but to leave it open means the t-shirt will show and so will the belly roll. Off come the blue shirt and the tee, back on goes the blue shirt by itself. But now it's obvious why she never wears it this way; there are gaps between the buttons and at certain angles you can see right in. Off comes the blue shirt, it drops to the floor. Down comes the black shirt, my goodness it's way too short, it gets dropped next to the blue. Hands on hips, she walks up and down along the hanging clothes, dark blues, browns, charcoal grays, blacks, an occasional burgundy scarf and brightly patterned shawl. A fleeting image of the on-trend jeans with the perfect fit that Ava would surely be wearing sends her over to three pairs of identical stretch jeans in different shades of blue hanging side by side—but no, she hates that old-lady look in jeans, not even a zipper, just a tell-tale elastic waist. Well, what about that black linen skirt and jacket? It's a nice set so on it goes, but it

is too obvious an attempt at camouflage. Everyone knows when a fat woman is hiding her fat inside a loose skirt.

She could not reveal or even know her feelings at that moment.

There's a knock on the bedroom door. Her husband says, "let's go." She pulls down the same old trusty black cotton scoop-neck top, black velour stretch pants, crimson velvet scarf, and slides into the four-inch suede platform clogs. She calls, "coming," to the dear husband who knows she struggles even though she never speaks to him of it. He is the lovely man whose fault it is not, who accepts her whether on a diet or off, who doesn't really understand but tries to help in a quiet way. She steps over the mound of discarded clothes, which she knows in the pit of her stomach she will have to face again later.

When they get to the restaurant, he puts an arm around her and leads her to a table where dinner and friends are waiting, where she will have an interior fight with herself about what to order.

You wouldn't know it from such struggles, but Maria had been a beautiful girl, and became an even more beautiful woman. She didn't think of herself as beautiful; she felt her presence in the world was marred by her weight. There it was up front, as though she let those conspicuous 60 extra pounds speak for her: **SOMETHING IS WRONG WITH ME.**

She didn't show this elsewhere in her life. She was strong enough to turn over a whole new square of garden or single-handedly plant a tree. She could win the war against weeds season after season. At 46 she was one of the best book editors at any publishing house in town. She got along well with the temperamental creative types she came up against. She could carry either one of her teenage children through the pain of a broken heart on the strength of her love alone. She could create a key lime pie for her husband with exactly the right tart-to-sweet balance.

What she could not do, and she knew it only too well, was control her weight. Therefore she couldn't bend easily, she couldn't run, she couldn't play tennis because of her knees, and she couldn't buy beautiful clothes (they don't come in size 18). She couldn't feel attractive or graceful at any waking moment of her life.

She would dream of being so light and airy that she flew, she soared, so featherweight she was beyond the pull of gravity. It was only a dream, but she hung on to it.

Another inventive notion she entertained was how she was only temporarily wearing a fat suit and at night she could take it off, step out of it to dream, then in the mornings put it on again before getting out of bed.

A different kind of dream she'd had more than once was that she would come to a meeting dressed in her usual conservative gray pants suit with crisp shirt, but the suit was way too big and she was tiny, floundering inside of it.

Riding the train to work each day she'd play with thoughts like: coming soon, Maria so hot in low-slung size four jeans with two carats in each ear that jump out at you and dazzle against the thin contour of her face, a fitted Chinese-red leather blazer, makeup so flawless you don't notice, and knee-high boots that zip over her calves with ease. Or: pretty, sexy Maria in a skimpy black silk wrap dress that falls to just above the knee. She loved these visions of some other Maria, a Maria who could switch back and forth between sexy and sophisticated, for whom getting dressed every day would be a thrill instead of a nightmare.

She imagined this parallel-universe Maria. She dreamed of it, fantasized about it, but never brought it to life. This was a Maria she coveted and felt she had somewhere in her. This Maria was not fed the right things, not nurtured, not coaxed out of hiding. This perfected Maria was held up as a "someday", an "I will", an "if only", but always at arm's length.

Such a Maria stood in opposition to the everyday known quantity and quality of herself. How could she let such a stranger into her life, not only into her life but center stage, not only center stage but everywhere? Each time Maria invited this idea into her mind she got afraid of the unknown, anxious about change, reluctant to let go, so she rejected it. One thing in its favor was a living breathing voice now whispering in her ear: try, try.

There were layers of Maria. Looking at her you would not have seen the struggles on the surface because there was a thick wall protecting her. She couldn't get out of the trap. She had to bear it, the weight. *What's the big deal*, she'd say to herself, *I'm forty-six. Does weight even matter any more?*

Those olive green eyes really stood out. They were clear and calm, but the serenity was a sham. If you were allowed the chance to look deeper, (which you never were) you would find worry, misgivings, self-criticism, disappointment, and sometimes desperation. When Maria stood before the mirror she was not shocked, she was not disgusted, she did not get hopeless. What she felt was shame so deep that words could not capture it.

If she were to allow the unfolding of it all, it would have to be slow, careful. She didn't want to feel painful things. Her problem with eating would not yield to common sense. It had never succumbed to an easy, trick-answer. The only time she would ever have a spark of understanding was to sneak up on it, discover something by accident. She didn't know then how to hold on to such a discovery, keep it in her consciousness, tap into it.

Here's what she did know how to do.

"Tomorrow I am going on a diet."

Maria said this a total of thirty times in her life (the first time she said it, she was 14). The day she would say this, that day before she was to start her new diet was always sublime with a real holiday feel to it, because she knew the next day would change her whole existence. She would have a full day to revel in the anticipation and she didn't have to deny herself anything just yet. This was a fantasy system that made her feel immediately more competent, more in control, because the very next day she would be a perfect dieter.

Tomorrow nothing would be in disarray. She'd eat like a grownup, only the good things the diet said to eat. She would instantly know how to fulfill herself in non-eating ways, no more acting out. She never remembered that she'd have to make painful choices, that she'd ache for what she couldn't have. She could only picture how she'd revel in dieting, not how she'd lose her emotional balance, not how her patience and commitment would once again be on the line, how she would feel stiff and unhappy.

She respected the word 'diet'. To her it was a concrete and basic reality, a piece of required behavior. A diet was a room Maria went into to be contained, held, guided, told, and regulated, free from conflict and responsibility.

The day before she was to start a new diet she would simply choose to forget many things—on low-carb, she'd worry about not getting enough fiber; on low-fat high-carb she'd get lightheaded from lack of protein; on liquid meals she'd feel sick to her stomach; on low-cal she'd be starving; following a menu planner she'd hate going out to dinner; if a diet was too one-sided she'd rebel; if a diet was too permissive she'd be confused.

All she could anticipate about tomorrow the day before was that very soon she would be on the diet, under its wing, back home where she belonged, protected from hopelessness and frustration. She would start to feel thinner already, just anticipating how everything bad was surely going to change for the good—*tomorrow*.

But the truth was she could not see herself ever getting thin enough. She thought things like, *It's no use, what's the point*.

This is how she was feeling one day after having lunch with Ava, her outrageously beautiful friend, a woman Maria envied for the way she looked and the size 2's she wore. That particular day Maria was able to find comfort in the perception that maybe Ava didn't look quite as thin as usual. She might even have gained a few pounds. Maria was glad, secretly. Later she thought, *what kind of a person am I to be envious and jealous of a good friend, wishing something bad for her?*

She hated feeling competitive, putting down other women, yet she did it all the time. She knew how ironic it was. Wherever she was—at a party, at the movies, out to dinner, shopping for clothes, on vacation, at the beach (especially at the beach), whatever—she always looked other women over, and she was very critical. She didn't miss a thing. There could be a beautiful, thin woman dressed really well, but Maria would pick out a slight thickness to her ankles; or a woman would look

really great from the front, so she'd discreetly go around back to take a peek and see if (hoping) her rear was too big. No one, but no one, passed the test.

She made an art out of judging like this. It was not that she didn't know how far from being perfect she herself was, she did. She kept on appraising women's looks anyway, especially their bodies. What was this thing she had about perfection? Was that what she thought she had to be...perfect? Or was it some sort of bizarre double standard, one for Maria and another one for everybody else. Although she couldn't control it, she was smart enough to understand that all of this had a purpose. If she found fault with everyone else, her own faults wouldn't seem so bad.

She wasn't proud of this one-sided, undercover woman-on-woman assault. It made her feel sneaky, small minded, and ungenerous. She wanted to stop doing it because she knew it was so unfair. She tried not to be judgmental like this with people in general. She wanted to be able to see mostly the good in people, not dwell on their imperfections. If only she could have done that with herself as well. But life's harsh experiences kept her from doing so.

When Maria was fourteen years old, she went on her first real diet ever without her mother's help, without anyone's help. She had been chubby through eighth grade, she preferred it that way. She was the smart daughter; her younger sister Claire was the popular daughter. Except then came the inevitable day when she liked a boy and there was no chance he would notice her. He was the cutest boy in the class, every girl knew it, and Maria was obsessed with romantic thoughts of him. She was already beautiful then, but fourteen-year old boys simply couldn't see beauty in a chubby girl.

Maria's first diet brought her back to ninth grade that fall incredibly gorgeous, 25 pounds lighter. A summer tan was just the thing for those green eyes. No one at school could believe it.

She looked at John and of course now he looked back. He began to call her, the first boy who did. There were parties and they paired off. Within weeks, Maria and John were a recognized and revered couple.

It was one of the warmest Septembers ever, and it stayed that way into October. One weekend Maria and her in-group took advantage of a seventy-degree Saturday and went to the beach, all the popular guys and popular girls. It was a new experience for her to wear a two-piece, not too skimpy, but skimpy enough. When she pulled off her tee shirt the new boyfriend took one look and told her she was too fat. He said it loud and everyone in the group heard. He broke up with her right there. To him it was no big deal, it was just that he had to protect his image, didn't want to be seen with anyone not perfect, because he was the most popular fourteen year old boy in ninth grade.

She never discussed with anyone what this did to her. It was too private to tell. It spoke to that single most disturbing underground feeling Maria had about herself: she was not good enough to be loved.

This feeling resurfaced at unpredictable times.

Claire: So, how's the new puppy? Did you name her yet?

Maria: Tillie. She's the loveliest little thing. Of course it's falling to me to do the taking care of.

Claire: What you need to do is lay down the rules. I mean, the kids wanted the dog, they should do the work.

Maria: But I'm home most of the time, so it works out. I'm in love with her anyway. Wait 'til you see her.

Claire: You always do this, Maria. You take on too much. I mean, I love Steve and Zoey with passion, you know I do. But they just don't respect you enough. They walk all over you and you let them.

(Maria was feeling smaller and smaller.)

Claire: You know, you don't have to be the savior of the world, you don't need to do it all, you can delegate. That's the trick, that's what I do. Everybody in the house has their job.

Maria: You know I'm not that organized.

Claire: I know! That's your problem. That's what I'm trying to tell you. And you know, you should get someone in to clean. I mean that's something you don't have to do. Even just every other week. Then you know it's basically clean. You know, underneath clean. I have this great new service—"Ladyz"—all women, it's great. I'll give you the number.

(Maria was feeling like 12, no 10, no, about 6 years old)

Maria: Are you trying to tell me my house is dirty?

Claire: No, of course not. I love your house. I'm just saying you do too much, that's all.

Maria: I don't like cleaning for the cleaners. You have to pick up everything before they come. It's harder than doing it myself. The most important thing is, I don't want my privacy interrupted on the days I work at home. I start early and I usually don't finish until around four. I hate interruptions, you know? Just having people in the house breaks my concentration. It's perfect for me to work when everyone's gone.

Claire: Why couldn't they come on a day when you're at the office? I'm just saying two times a month.

Maria: I know. But still.

Claire: Well, I say get more help, delegate. Maybe then you could concentrate on yourself more. Get into shape.

Maria: You mean lose weight.

Claire: You said it, I didn't.

(Maria was now feeling criticized, angry, AND fat)

Claire: You know, you really need to do what you need to do for yourself. I mean, when I'm on a diet, the rest of them just have to deal. I come first, you know? I learned that from Mom.

Maria loved Claire. She needed Claire. She ached to share with Claire, have a real exchange, talk about dreams and sorrows and vulnerabilities. But her sister was closed to Maria; she couldn't crack that shell, no way.

Not just with her sister—too many times for Maria's good, with too many people it ended up like this, and it stole her strength of spirit. Maria needed to speak up, not the way she spoke up in social settings so everyone would fall for her but a different kind of speaking up, a speaking up that would say, I'm okay, worthwhile, whether you think so or not.

What really cut into her ability to feel worthwhile were secrets. She had a lot of secrets, especially about eating, but her dresser drawers held a secret too.

Maria bought things, lots of things, too many things, things that were meant to fill the void. Each next wonderful thing held the promise of doing it, although nothing ever did. When she saw an item she really wanted—a scarf say, or earrings, even a good book—the feeling was that something might happen to it and she had to have a back up. She never felt like she had enough of what she wanted or needed.

Her top drawer was filled with silky, smooth underthings, tops and bottoms, matched pairs, many of them, from the same store, same style, assorted colors. This was a magical underworld, a support of sorts, those drawers and closet shelves piled with duplicates, shoes in multiples, even a few doubles in cashmere sweaters. She had to guard against running out, whatever it cost.

There was a certain logic encoded in all of this, unspoken. Get all you can while you can so that even when something you love breaks or wears out or tears or disappears, you'll never be without. Amass lovely things, as many as possible for a later date when there might be a terrible drought.

Neither the hoarding of loved items in her closet and drawers nor the excess food she ate went far enough in nourishing her. You might say the stockpiles stood for love. Even though this thought crossed her mind from time to time, it didn't help

Maria. Even if things did stand for love, they were not love, and they left her still in need. So she went on eating and buying.

The funny thing was she even bought things that didn't fit her, things that were too small. Some of them were way too small. They got put away in a reserved section on the high shelf in her closet. They were stored there as a treasure for later, when she lost the weight.

Her stack of diet books belonged to this same obsession. They were in rows, shelves of them, the collection growing all the time. They were there just in case at some wild moment of the day or night she needed advice, guidance, an emergency remedy. Maria considered all of these things proof of her full-fledged weirdness.

Put thought to the weirdest of behaviors and it can become understandable. One day out of the blue before she had even made a decision like going on her last diet, Maria had this breakaway thought: *Fill up your closet, your dresser drawers, your shopper's wagon, your bookshelves, your pantry, your plate, your calendar, your stomach. Fill them all to the brim with everything and anything you think your little heart desires, but what do you get —that same void, the deep hollow that stays empty as things pile up around it and never even touch it?*

Several Christmases before, Maria walked into her mother-in-law's feeling so good. They were always careful to split it up evenly, Christmas with her in-laws, Christmas eve with her family. They didn't want anyone to be hurt. Maria put a lot into it, always. She bought exceptionally good presents for everyone—that year even the wrappings were very creative, all glittery with gold and silver ribbons. She had been on Weight Watchers for three months and was twenty pounds thinner. She was feeling very good about herself, plus the fact that she had gotten her hair cut at a pricey new salon and it was just the look she was trying to achieve.

There was more. She wore her size 12 black velvet Christmas slacks, the ones she hadn't been able to zip up all the way in two years. She walked in and her mother-in-law hugged her and said, "You look terrific! Someone finally figured out how to do your hair right."

Because she was so good at doing it, Maria was able to stop that remark from crashing through her heart, at least temporarily. Later she would wonder if her mother-in-law thought she was ugly. Was her hair all wrong before? What else did Michael's mother hate about her?

Such a little thing, such a casual remark (her mother-in-law had made little cuts in her like this before) but Maria could hardly contain herself. She made it through the party by eating a lot of the homemade Christmas delicacies, saying over and over how good it all was. She did what she could on the spot to get her mother-in-law to forgive her for having looked so all-wrong before, to accept her finally after twenty-one years, to maybe love her.