

## Silence & Silhouettes

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She only felt beautiful at night. Among the tranquil shadows of her bedroom, she somehow found that the color of her hair and skin, even the shape of her hips, no longer mattered. There, she did not have to think about her stalling college education, or the tiresome waitressing on the weekends, or even that she did not love the man she made love to in the dark. She did not have to worry that she could not call it sex. Because her mother was a woman who believed in the vacuous promises of romance novels, it had always been *making love*. The rush of blood to her cheeks, the sounds they could not help making, the stifling smells of beer and smoke and skin, and the way he never listened were all insignificant. There was only the smoldering warmth and palpable darkness, wrapped around her like his awkward, fumbling limbs.

After, when her soul's discontent had ebbed from her body, Mandy smoked and watched Shaun slumber in her bed. Her mind too troubled for sleep, she eventually rose and left him there, leaving the cigarette to wither in the ashtray she'd bought just for him.

In the shower, she scrubbed her olive skin, all she'd ever inherited from a wealthy, intractable father. Her mind felt as tumbled and elusive as the water rolling off of her body and slipping down the drain. While toweling off and putting on a frayed robe, she noticed her blurred reflection stirring in the foggy mirror. She stood before it, obscure and colorless like one of her drawings. She suddenly thought of her mother, locked away in some little room so she could no longer find ways to hurt herself. Mandy was grateful that she could not see her face in the misted glass because she knew her mother's smooth, wounded eyes would be staring back at her instead of her own.

She returned to her bedroom and dressed quietly. In the dark she could barely make out her drawings spaced out along the apartment walls, but she could see Shaun clearly. His face looked round and pale in the dim room, the features lax with drunkenness.

Seeing him that way, a sudden urge overcame her. She imagined picking up one of the specialized markers she'd bought for her drawings, one with a tip chiseled just so. She imagined sitting softly on the bed without disturbing him and tracing the lines on his face in black, those little creases smoothed away by sleep. Her skin prickled at the thought—how much joy it would give her.

But she could not. She stood motionless in the doorway, her shadow falling across his body the only way she would dare to touch him then.

To keep from thinking, Mandy went to her living room where the television had been left on and was showing late-night infomercials. Nearly a dozen half-crushed beer cans cluttered the coffee table and two wine bottles towered above these like hopeless parents regarding their paralytic offspring. On the arm of her faded couch was her latest discovery—an oversized desk copy of *Gray's Anatomy* which she perused at every opportunity, fascinated by the detail of the drawings inside. She sat with the book, but did not open it.

Shaun had come over at nightfall, wanting to watch a football game on her small television perched in a corner of the room on a rough wooden stand. The Tampa Bay Buccaneers had been playing the Oakland Raiders, and she'd cooked an

impromptu pot of spaghetti for their dinner. While they were eating, Mandy recalled sitting quietly beside him on the couch as he downed beer after beer. She thought it strange and somewhat amusing that he preferred to drink his beer in a glass with ice. She drank the cheap wine in her fridge in an effort to appease his offers to share the beer with her.

Instead of watching the game, she had found herself staring at the paper reproductions of her favorite paintings hung from the walls in black frames. Above the couch was one of her favorites, van Gogh's *Corridor in the Asylum*, which he painted after slicing away his ear and committing himself to the Saint Paul de Mausole Asylum. Another painting, Goya's *The Bullfight*, hung motionless over the television like some primordial ancestor of the box of glass and plastic below it. Mandy had never dared to hang her own drawings alongside the artists she admired most, choosing to keep hers only in the bedroom. While looking at the paintings, Mandy had felt something begin to stir within her like a strong current muddying the water of a river. She heard the scrape of Shaun's fork against one of her mother's ceramic plates. She noticed his feet pulled up and resting between them on the couch like an immovable barrier. The wet sound of the food in his mouth crashed like surf in her ears. Weariness crept into her thoughts, stemming from her awareness that the same thing happened every time they were together. She watched him drink from his glass of beer. His Adam's apple, which the anatomy book had informed her was nothing more than cartilage, moved up and down slowly in his throat.

When he'd drained the glass, Mandy surprised herself by asking him if he would like another beer. He only nodded, his eyes remaining on the television as he brought the glass back to his lips and then sucked one of the ice cubes into his mouth. With the ice cube clacking against his teeth, he held the glass out to her.

She'd taken it and went to the refrigerator. When she returned, she handed him the glass she'd refilled with ice and beer. The cube of ice still distorted the shape of his mouth between the bones of the cheek and the jaw. *The maxilla and the mandible*, she had remembered. He placed the drink on the carpet without looking up. From the darkness behind her closed eyelids—those tenuous skin coverings her book called *palpebrae*—Mandy listened to him move the ice around in his mouth and felt more than heard it crack under the pressure of his back teeth.

At halftime, he had drunkenly kissed her neck while she read. His lips were incredibly cold, but there was the warmth of his tongue and she suddenly craved the heated promise in his kiss and so then led him back to the placid shadows of her bedroom.

Now, sitting before the remaindered evidence of their evening together, Mandy felt as empty and hollow as all the bottles and cans before her. She began collecting them, throwing them away as fast as she could manage. When she finished she turned off the television and sat again with the anatomy book. Several hours passed before Shaun woke and left, kissing her lightly on the back of her head as he sauntered to the door. Mandy stared at the book as long as she could, knowing as she finally glanced over the top of the page that she would not hear from him again until the weekend was over. Perhaps later than that.

Often, in the first few abysmal moments after Shaun left her in such desolate silence, the vague and indefinite terrain of their relationship weighed heavily on her. She felt worn away, eroded to a shell of despair. Every time he walked downstairs from her second-floor apartment to mount his green motorcycle, and every time he called to say he was coming over she could sense the void left by the words that were never spoken. She knew that he could not love her, or even want to love her, as much

as she wanted to love him, but still she struggled to keep from doing so. Between them existed little more than the failure to satisfy some primal need.

When they first met six months earlier it seemed to have all the promise and expectation of something satisfying to her heart. They'd had a class together and he'd gravitated toward her the first day of class, sitting beside her and asking her questions until the professor interrupted his lecture to scold him. Soon after, across a candle-lit table at a restaurant in the oldest part of the city, he repeated all the questions he'd asked her in class. That night, Mandy had worn a black dress because it went well with the dark streaks dyed into her red hair and the thick black eyeliner painted around her dark eyes. He managed to keep most of her questions of him at bay with questions about herself until their food arrived.

After his first bite, he asked, rather suddenly, "What is the ideal relationship to you?" His eyes wandered over the dim restaurant, never falling directly on her for long. Somehow she had known then, with a certainty that destroyed both her anxiety and her appetite, that he was dating someone else. Following his gaze into the gloom, she thought of her father, the affluent surgeon who had never married, nor considered marrying, her mother—her father, the smooth-talker when it came to business and pleasure. She thought also of her thirteenth birthday, the day her mother was institutionalized after lighting the kitchen curtains on fire instead of the candles of Mandy's birthday cake, sitting at the table and sobbing as the kitchen burned down around her. After the fire, Mandy had lived with her grandmother for three years. Every time she visited her mother, she could not ignore the burns on her hands, the quaking desperation in her eyes.

Instead of telling Shaun these things, Mandy had answered his question with the only word that seemed to fit: "Understanding."

He had smiled at her then and the silence that followed was not as awkward as she had anticipated. She considered then how his rebelliousness fascinated her; his windblown blond hair, the tattoo of a snake eating an apple on his forearm, and the fact that he rode a motorcycle. She had never met a boy like him. And there had been something urgent in his eyes, in his touch, the first night she let him stay at her apartment, but she'd kept batting his advances away, making him wait, testing him to find out if he would remain the next day, until, finally, deflated and defeated, he slept.

That first morning, she woke to his eyes on her and when he kissed her she relented, pulling his body on top of hers.

Remembering these things, sitting alone by the lamp in her apartment while trying, failing, and trying again to read the anatomy book in her hands, she forced herself to focus on the section displaying the myology of the human face. She studied the diagrams detailing the complexity of muscles beneath the skin, seeking out the ones she used at that moment as she read: the *corrugator* muscle between her eyebrows contracting the *frontales* to form three short wrinkles along her forehead; the *orbicularis oculi* that sharply squinted her eyes; the *mentalis* gently wrinkling the skin of her chin; and the *triangularis* muscles pulling the edges of the *orbicularis oris* of her mouth, shaping the frown of her lips and the trembling at their corners.

When she woke the next morning, Mandy could still feel where Shaun had touched her skin in the night, even though she had showered after. As she dressed, she recalled her class schedule that day. Along with her backpack crammed with books, she carried a large, black canvas bag full of materials for her drawing class. Walking

to campus with the bag rasping noisily against her legs, she tried not to think of Shaun.

In Anatomy, they reviewed the osteology of the human hand, which she studied avidly. These were details important to the serious artist—the way the muscles and bones and tendons worked together to form motions and gestures; so many articulations happening unseen, just beneath the surface of the skin. However, it was the art classes, Art History and Drawing II, that gave Mandy the only solace since her mother had been institutionalized. For those few hours, she felt an inarticulate peace while practicing the techniques and applying all the knowledge she had learned in her textbooks. While drawing, the decisions she made seemed vital. Everything became imperative, from the type of drawing she should do (still-life, gesture, blind-contour, subtractive value), to how much attention she should give to fore-, middle-, and background. She could use horizontal lines to appeal to a sense of calm and firmness, verticals to provide a sense of posture and association, diagonals to create depth and action, or even various combinations of the three to enhance her work.

She had started drawing and painting at the age of eleven, when her mother bought her a small, cheap art kit for Christmas. It included a few chalky ovals of watercolor paints, a pair of drawing pencils, and her first kneadable eraser, which, to her amazement, seemed to magically cleanse itself of the black smudges lifted from the page when kneaded like dough. Not long after this, Mandy's older sister asked her to paint her portrait. This would prove to be only days before her sister would move to California with a new lover—a man claiming to be a rich thirty-eight year old music producer who drove a Maserati and wore garish Italian suits.

Being Mandy's first attempt, her sister's portrait had turned out soggy and crude. Using the thin, muddled watercolors had proven unwieldy, demanding a practice and mastery she immediately wanted to conquer. On the back of the portrait, Mandy had written her sister's name and age in black marker: *Annastasia, Seventeen.*

The art classroom was a large studio. There were no desks, only odd-shaped benches that could be straddled with a drawing pad supported at one end, or (as was often the case) they could be set on end so students could stand to draw, turning the bench into a kind of podium to be used like an easel. These were arranged in concentric circles around a dais in the center of the dusty linoleum floor. The dust was actually a thin film of charcoal soot coating everything in the room. It was in the air conditioning vents, on the various types of lighting instruments—track lights, spotlights, lamp stands, candles, etc. It even smudged the walls, which were also ornamented with fragments of masking tape, splashes of paint, patches of graffiti, and the angular silhouettes of old drawings. Footprints in the dust led to each bench-podium. Scattered about the room were cast-away props, tables, folding chairs, bowls, and cabinets. Sometimes these props were arranged on the center dais. On her first day of class that semester there had been a table covered by a small sail, the cloth thick and coarse. One end of the sail had been thrown back over itself and in the folds of it had sat a yellow apple and an old leather boot. Today, though, when Mandy entered the classroom, there sat an ornate chaise lounge on the platform. It looked Grecian—long and elegant with red cushions, like something Homer might have rested on after reciting the *Iliad*. A large, unlit spotlight had been aimed at the couch.

Mandy always arrived to class early so that she could seek out the deepest shadows the dimmed track lights created. She preferred this because it helped her develop what she had learned to call a *chiaroscuro* technique, increasing the dramatic effect of a drawing by making light and shade contrast sharply, similar to the style of Rembrandt. She drew in the gloom despite her instructor's recommendations otherwise. "It's called anchoring," the instructor had told her once. "When you only draw from a certain environment, it limits your perspective."

As students filed into the classroom, Mandy turned her wooden bench to its podium position and placed her large sketchpad on its pitted surface. When she looked up, she saw a robed man had entered the room from the back. He was near her age, with very dark and glossy hair. He approached the instructor, who wrote something on a piece of paper for him. He nodded when the instructor finished. He then walked to the chaise, disrobed and sat on the elegant couch naked and remarkably nonchalant. He moved with the casualness of slipping into a warm bath, yet held the composure of an orator preparing to deliver a well-practiced speech, as if oblivious of the roomful of strangers.

The instructor directed his positioning with only her hands. He repositioned himself as she indicated, responding to each of her gestures as though they were written instructions, moving his chin up, his eyes down, the left knee under the right calf, the right elbow up onto the arm of the chaise lounge, the other across the back of it. Mesmerized, Mandy watched the two of them, thinking of it as a kind of silent drama. His movements were so precise she thought they must have performed this intricate process thousands of times before.

When finally satisfied with his pose, the instructor turned to face the students. There were no grimaces or smirks aimed at the man lying nude and vulnerable in the center of the room. Here they were all aspiring professionals, as unashamed of his nakedness as he himself. With everyone ready, the instructor introduced the model as their subject for the next two sessions. His name was Michael. Hearing his name, Mandy found herself somehow thinking of Michelangelo's *David*, and then of a poem they had studied in Literature class—Shakespeare's "Venus and Adonis."

For their first assignment, they would create a still life drawing of the male body enhanced by the spotlight. The second day, they would do subtractive value drawings, drawn by first darkening the entire page with vine charcoal and then erasing so that the outline of the image would be surrounded by darkness. The following week, they would repeat the same two forms with a female model.

After the instructor had turned on the spotlight, eradicating most of the shadows on his body, and then dimmed the track lighting to a soft glow, Mandy finally gathered the courage to look at Michael's bare body.

It belonged in the magazines she never read and the romance novels her mother had adored. Mandy found she could not take in his whole body at once. She looked first at his feet, then to the arc of his neck, the thick bridge of his nose, his dark brown hair, the wedged chin. She ignored the urge to look below his navel. Instead, she tried to focus on the finite details about him. She was close enough to see the dimple of a hole in the lobe of his left ear, the nearly invisible box-like scar at the tip of his index finger, and the oval birthmark on his shoulder just beneath where his neckline would be were he not tanned a perfect, even bronze.

Silence filled the studio.

After a long period of time had passed, Mandy roused herself from the dreamy half-consciousness she often slipped into when she drew. She found, to her astonishment, that she had only drawn the ear with the dimple in it. In the time that had elapsed, she had recalled something her sister had told her long ago about men

with earrings, that gay men often pierced a certain ear and not the other, though she could not recall which. She had then wondered what type of earring he wore there when fully clothed and walking among mortals. She imagined meeting him, asking him all the questions she had never asked Shaun. Looking again at what she had drawn, she thought of how the external part of the ear was called an *auricle*. She liked the word. It held an archaic, mythical sound within it that seemed so much more potent than just *the ear*.

Realizing then how little time remained in the class, Mandy quickly began on his torso with short, choppy lines. Her hands raced as her eyes traveled down the rest of his body. She hastily sketched the ridged lines of his ribs and the soft, yet angular contours of his abdomen tapering at the inguinal ligament of his hips just below his abdominal muscles, forming a pronounced arrowhead leading her eyes ever downward.

Just being in Michael's presence had been exhilarating, intoxicating even, but as Mandy arrived back at her apartment, she found her fascination with the unclothed model had diminished. She felt foolish and deluded for admiring him so much.

She thought of Shaun and decided to call him and proposed that they go on a date, which they had not done in a long time. On the phone, her words sounded frail and thin to her, but she was persistent. Shaun seemed, as always, distracted, as though he were racing to stay a few steps ahead of her, trying to remember things that had already been planned or promised and somehow forgotten.

She wore a gray pencil skirt, a white blouse with thin black stripes, and a pair of black high heels. She put on her rings, mostly cheap pewter and silver without jewels, and then found her favorite pair of turquoise earrings that she had made herself. As carefully as she had drawn Michael's ear, she applied her makeup, enjoying how the shadows of her bedroom made the curves of her mouth, cheeks, and eyes softer.

She walked to the restaurant because it was only a few blocks from her apartment. They had agreed to meet at eight o'clock at a somewhat sophisticated place she had never been to, but had always heard about from work. She arrived ten minutes early and, knowing Shaun would be late, asked the waiter to go ahead and seat her at a table for two. The waiter looked too young to have so many laugh-lines around his eyes and set in the plane of his forehead. As she asked him for a glass of water, she recalled that *rhytide* was the technical term for the wrinkles in his face.

Waited, sipping her water and being careful not to smear her lipstick on the glass, Mandy decided to pass the time by observing the people in the restaurant. In a horseshoe-shaped booth sat a group of elderly couples. One man wore a tweed suit that hung loosely from his gaunt body. Often he had to lean very close to whomever spoke, straining the shoulders of the suit. Among others, she noticed a blonde woman sitting at the other end of the restaurant in a slender, silver sequined dress that reminded her of tinfoil. The woman—really no more than a girl like her dressed up as a woman—held a glass of peach-colored wine close to her lips, as if the color of them should be a secret.

When Mandy's waiter came to check on her for the third time, a sympathetic tone had crept into his voice. The rhytides of his face deepened as he said he would return in another five minutes.

To keep her eyes from wandering over the room again, Mandy took some of her hair between her fingers and examined the auburn strands. This diversion was soon disrupted by the clamor of the sequined woman's cell phone. She quickly put

the wineglass on the table to answer it. As the woman spoke into the phone, their eyes met for an instant. If Mandy had wanted to paint those lips, she could now see that they were vermilion red.

At 8:21 Shaun arrived, his hands thrust into his khakis, his chin on his polo shirt. When he found her, he walked to the table but did not sit down.

“You don’t have to explain,” Mandy said, wanting to smile, but sensed something in his off-balance demeanor.

He did not answer for a long time, but he finally looked up as they both realized the woman in the tinfoil dress now shimmered by his side, the glass of peach-colored wine still in her hand, once again covering part of her mouth.

Nothing had to be said. Mandy knew the truth could no longer be ignored. She searched for the waiter or any set of friendly eyes, but she came back to the two of them and the secret she and Shaun had done so little to keep. As though it was his only defense, Shaun said nothing. The aluminum-wrapped woman handled what little conversation was necessary.

“What’s your name?” she asked. Her eyes were ruthless and bored into hers.

“Mandy.”

“Well, *Mandy*,” she said. “You have to go.”

“I see that.”

The woman pointed her chin at her and finally brought the wine glass down to her waist. The lipstick had smeared a semicircle around the rim. “You should’ve seen sooner.” The silver dress trembled with each of her words.

As the only act of defiance she could muster, Mandy rose from the table and stepped between them before leaving the restaurant.

Walking home, the night was not as dark as she wished it to be. She found the desire to draw and paint more overwhelming than ever in her life. She wanted to draw on every surface of her apartment—on the walls, on the refrigerator, on the floors, on the shower doors and the mirror she was so afraid to face.

When she got there, she took down the paintings and drawings in her bedroom and stood before the denuded wall with a brush dripping vermilion red into the carpet. She tried to remember the shape of the girl’s lips, but her the wineglass was always in the way. She thought of the model, Michael, walking among mortals with the earring in his ear. She imagined his laughter and sighs and wanted to draw him or even just his ear, the *auricle*, again, but she could not quite recall the dimensions and shape of it in her mind. She tried to imagine his hands, his eyes, his chest, his thighs, his face, but could not. She worked anyway. By the time she had covered half of the walls in her apartment with graphite and paint, Mandy found that she had only drawn the same pair of eyes over and over again.

In Art History, she learned that Francisco de Goya and Vincent van Gogh had both suffered from severe mental illness before they were considered great at their trade. Van Gogh with his epilepsy and the venereal disease that eventually led to him cutting away his ear in a fit of passion; Goya with lead poisoning from the paints he used coupled with the syphilis that brought on a nervous breakdown, leaving him almost completely blind, permanently deaf, and suffering from temporary paralysis and hallucinations. She read that the reason Rembrandt’s paintings looked so dark and unique was likely because he suffered from stereo blindness, his brain only using the images gathered from one eye when he painted. These were her idols, her mentors. Van Gogh, Goya, Rembrandt—her mother.

Two days later in the art studio, Mandy drew with a dull ache rooted in her heart. Half-conscious and dreaming, her eyes softened every time she looked up at Michael as she traced the outline of his shadowed body with a stick of vine charcoal. He was sitting in a folding chair with the sail from the first day of class draped over it.

Today, he would be her Adonis.

Before class, she had watched him and the instructor go through the silent, orchestrated gesturing of her hands and his limbs. The moment the lights went down, it was as though she saw all of him for the first time. The lights had been lowered because their drawings were to be the subtractive value form that she loved most. The sparse light of the room played off the peaks of his muscles and hid within the dark locks of his hair, and even in the lines of his shut eyes.

It seemed only a short period of time before Mandy noticed most of the students in the room were sitting far back on their stools, appraising the work they had done. A few still added light strokes, while others nodded their self-approval. Looking then at her own, a pool of despair slid to her stomach. She found it terrible—a wretched, almost comical depiction of the god-like perfection before her. The charcoal strokes overlapped each other too much and too often; the shaded contours of his face and torso seemed to drain away the essence of his beauty.

The instructor ended class by collecting the drawings and Mandy readily turned hers in, eager to be rid of it. She watched as Michael rose, robed himself, and vanished from the room as though exiting the stage of a play, the audience still mystified by his final performance.

Quickly, she stuffed her utensils into her bag and hurried from the room, hurried down the long, bright hallways of the art building, her steps echoing in a staccato that mimicked in turn the beating of her heart until she exited the building. The sky had begun to dim, producing the early, diluted color of twilight. She sat at a nearby bench to wait, enjoying the warmth of the waning sunlight as though she had never felt it before.

She saw him emerge from the building, alone, wearing jeans and a plain dark shirt that clung to his skin. She stood as he began to walk away, but her breath held in her lungs and her tongue felt heavy. She took a few steps toward him and managed to call his name aloud. Too far away to hear, Michael did not turn to her but continued walking. Falling into step behind him, leaving her bags at the bench, she called his name again, louder, and began running to him.

She caught up to him, but he was still walking. He finally stopped as she touched his broad shoulder, the mahogany birthmark somewhere beneath where her hand had fallen. He turned and gave her a silent smile, his eyes dark like the shadow of a statue.

She told him everything. All her pain and anxiety rested in the air between them like a sagging balloon. She wanted to cry and be held and feel his breath on her, but she waited, her eyes searching his face as though she had searched for it all her life.

In the silence that followed, Michael shook his head slightly. Using the finger with the box-shaped scar on it, he pointed at his ear. She saw his earring then, a small gold hoop piercing the earlobe. Confused, Mandy once again tried to remember which ear the earring should be on if he were gay. She had already opened her mouth to ask when what he meant finally struck her. The heaviness of the knowledge settled somewhere deep behind her stinging eyes. She remembered the wordless silences with the instructor, the hand motions by which she had directed him. He was deaf. That was why he had not turned when she called his

name. He shook his head once more. The apology in his eyes made them look large and round, somehow more lifelike than she had remembered while drawing him.

He waited, watching her. Embarrassed, unsure what to do, Mandy shook her head to tell him never-mind, forget it. He smiled again and turned away, walking from her. She stared after him. The emptiness inside her seemed to now have sharp edges that cut at her. She wanted to scream after him, to make him hear what she needed him to hear.

Without knowing it, without even thinking about going back for her bags, Mandy followed him.

He walked to an apartment complex only four blocks from campus, never looking back to see her still behind him. He had a ground level unit, and she approached the door she had watched him enter. She grasped the doorknob, surprised to find that it turned freely in her hand. Opening the door slowly, she slipped inside, not closing it back all the way shut for fear of any noise it might make. She crept close along the wall leading to the kitchen where she heard a female voice say, "*Hey Sweetie.*"

Mandy was shocked. Had he lied to her about being deaf? It didn't seem possible, but she was certain of what she had heard.

Careful not to reveal too much of her body, Mandy peered into the kitchen in time to see the other girl kiss Michael on the cheek. They stood close, signing to each other with a fluidness that bespoke a longstanding familiarity.

*Yes, he is deaf, Mandy thought, but she isn't.*

The girl was cooking for him. She wore a powder blue apron with a frilly white border which Mandy thought looked cute and pretentious. The girl was pretty in an athletic kind of way with blonde hair straight as a brushstroke and blue eyes to match her sheer apron. *A girl who has never known heartache*, Mandy decided.

By the motion of his hands, Mandy discerned that Michael was telling the other girl that he was going to take a shower. The girl's hand groped his crotch as if to indicate that she would like to accompany him, but was too busy to do so. A rage kindled in Mandy's heart. Michael kissed the girl one last time before exiting through the door at the far side of the kitchen.

Mandy waited several minutes for the faint sound of the shower before stepping into the kitchen, intentionally amplifying the sound of her heels. The other girl, spinning toward the sound, uttered a startled shriek that was mercifully softened by her surprise.

Mandy tried her best to look as mortified as this other girl. "Oh... God, I am so sor—" Mandy said quickly before turning to leave, hoping the girl would recover from her shock and say something before she made it out of the kitchen doorway.

"Can I help you?" the girl asked. Her shock seemed to dissipate from her voice with each word. Her prim and kind demeanor riled Mandy's anger further.

She paused in the doorway. "I'm sorry," Mandy began, speaking more slowly than she thought possible. For once, everything she wanted to say was right there, ready and waiting for her. The awfulness in her voice thrilled her. "I didn't know you were here." She had to put her hand to her mouth to mask the smile forming there.

Puzzlement flashed across the other girl's face, followed by a look of utter dismay as some realization seemed to strike her.

Mandy leaned against the doorframe, her body half in and half out of the kitchen, a pose which she hoped would convey a mixture of both sorrow and relief. "What is your name?" Mandy asked, before the girl could say anything.

The girl's mouth moved but there was no sound. It suddenly occurred to Mandy that she had been wrong, that the girl really was deaf, too. "*Who* are you?" the girl finally said, her voice bristling.

"That doesn't matter," Mandy answered, relieved that the girl had understood. "Please don't tell him I was here. I don't have to tell you how much it would hurt him. I'm sorry." Mandy started once more toward the front door. She caught a glimpse of the girl's face crumpling like something battered.

"Wait, *who* the fuck..." she was shouting, but Mandy was already halfway down the hall, the front door still ajar, offering freedom in a vertical staff of light. She looked back once, but the girl never appeared. There was only the sound of running water somewhere else in the apartment. Before stepping outside into the darkening world, Mandy imagined the water running over Michael's body, cascading like tears.