

**THE
FIFTH
REFLECTION**

Also by Ellen Kirschman

Fiction: Dot Meyerhoff Series

The Right Wrong Thing
Burying Ben

Nonfiction:

Counseling Cops: What Clinicians Need to Know
(with Mark Kamena and Joel Fay)

I Love a Cop: What Police Families Need to Know

I Love a Fire Fighter: What The Family Needs to Know

**THE
FIFTH
REFLECTION**

A DOT MEYERHOFF MYSTERY

ELLEN KIRSCHMAN

OCEANVIEW  PUBLISHING
LONGBOAT KEY, FLORIDA

Copyright © 2017 Ellen Kirschman

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means, including information storage and retrieval systems, without permission in writing from the publisher, except by a reviewer who may quote brief passages in a review.

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, businesses, organizations, places, and incidents either are the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, businesses, locales, or persons living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

ISBN 978-1-60809-250-5

Published in the United States of America by Oceanview Publishing
Longboat Key, Florida
www.oceanviewpub.com

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

To ICAC investigators and their families everywhere

I am the owner of my actions, heir of my actions. Whatever actions I do, good or evil, of these I shall become heir.

—Buddha's Fifth Reflection

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

AS A POLICE psychologist, I've always understood that investigating crimes involving children is one of the most emotionally difficult assignments law enforcement professionals can undertake. Fortunately, there are programs such as Shift Wellness (shiftwellness.org) that support investigators with resources and training.

What I didn't know until I started researching this book was the magnitude of Internet crimes against children. Our cherished electronic gadgets, computers, webcams, smartphones, and tablets are playgrounds for pedophiles. Purveyors and collectors of child pornography, often one in the same, need not leave the privacy of their own homes to support a worldwide industry that trades in the suffering of children. I wrote this book to entertain. Still, I ask my readers not to forget the real human suffering that inspired me to write it.

I am the luckiest of mystery writers to have the support and help of so many law enforcement professionals, mental health colleagues, and subject matter experts. Thank you all for sharing your experiences and responding to my questions. If I've left anyone out, forgive me: John Averitt, PhD, Lisa Barrett, MD, Nancy Bohl-Penrod, PhD, Michael L. Bourke, PhD, Peter Collins, MD, Michael

Comer, PhD, Dan Dworkin, PhD, Joel Fay PsyD, Lt. Neal Griffin, Sherry Harden, PsyD, Chaplain Jan Heglund, Agent Anjanette Holler, Paula Kamena, Esq., Sgt. Daniel Ischige, D. P. Lyle, MD, Jon Moss, PhD, Lt. Zach Perron, Sgt. Adam Plantinga, Lt. James Reifschneider, Jane Stevenson, RN, Casey Stewart, PsyD, and coroner's investigator Andrea Whelan.

My apologies to Paul Ekman, PhD for taking liberties with his decades-long study of deception and micro facial expressions. For a serious look at his work, go to www.paulekman.com.

Special thanks to Gil Fronsdal, PhD, Buddhist scholar and co-teacher at the Insight Meditation Center in Redwood City; writer Ann Gelder who helped in the early days; my editor and beloved sister-in-law, Doris Ober; my calm yet stalwart agent, Cynthia Zigmund; and all the staff at Oceanview Publishing. Last, but never least, my husband, Steve Johnson, who is everything to me.

PROLOGUE

IOWA IN NOVEMBER is cold. The sky is as gray as the stubble in the fields, obliterating the horizon. Without a line to show where earth and sky meet, I feel as though I'm floating in space.

"You okay?"

My fiancé, Frank, and I are stumbling across a frost-tinged cornfield. Today is Thanksgiving. We've been out walking in the frigid air. Trying to move our food-besotted bodies after breakfast the size of a ceremonial banquet. It's below freezing and the air is so cold it hurts to breathe. There's a storm predicted, and we can see enormous black clouds boiling in the sky, illuminated by sudden snaps of lightning.

"If we don't move faster, we're gonna get wet." He grabs my hand and pulls me forward. I can see the back of his sister Daisy's house where we're staying, and behind it the houses belonging to his other sisters, Violet, Rose, and Lily. "Next time," he says, "we'll come in the summer in time for the corn and tomatoes. Did you know you can hear corn as it's growing?"

I know what he's doing. He's trying to take my mind off the cold and away from my sore feet. I should have brought hiking boots, but who wears hiking boots in Iowa? The place is as flat as a pancake. The highest point in Pick City is a 700-hundred-foot bump called The Knob. His sisters, all four of them, took me to see it the day after we arrived. Then we went to see the second most popular

tourist attraction, The Bridge of Mystery, a railroad bridge built in the 1800s that spans a wide river. Its name derives from the death of a supposedly happy young girl who shocked everyone by jumping off the bridge to her death. Her story provoked a slew of questions about what psychologists, like me, know about people who commit suicide. Why do they do it and what could be done to stop them? My first thought was that the young girl probably jumped out of boredom, but their questions were so earnest I bit my tongue.

Frank's sisters, their husbands, their children, and his mother have all been bending over backwards to be nice to me. It's just that I'm not used to so much conversation or having someone jump up and ask me if I need anything every time I move. I'm an oddity to them. I can feel it. Forget being Jewish—what's strangest about me is that I have no children and I don't cook, bake, sew, or can vegetables. Therefore, I don't have much to talk about. They seem mildly interested in the books I've written and happy to talk about the books they're planning to read come winter when they can't work on the farm. Any time I compliment their cooking, I get a recipe to try at home, many with Jell-O as the main ingredient. I had no idea Jell-O could be prepared in so many ways and for so many different uses. Add cucumbers, it's a salad. Add marshmallows, you have dessert. My mother used to make Jell-O for me when I was a kid. Her idea of getting fancy was to add a dollop of whipped cream from an atomized can. I learned everything I know about cooking from her.

Daisy's expecting almost thirty for Thanksgiving Dinner. If I was feeding a crowd that size, I'd be curled up in a fetal position under my dining room table. Not Frank's sisters. Cooking for family is what they love. I can hear them laughing and talking before we even open the back door and step inside.

The house is in chaos. Tables and chairs squeezed into every available space. Linens, glasses, silverware, and handmade table

decorations from four different households laid out on each table. Nothing matches and no one seems to care. Everyone remembers who made which napkins and used them on what occasions, the meals they served and the time Frank, the baby of the family, ate so much sweet corn he was covered in melted butter and had to take a bath.

Lily asks me to help with the salad; I'm glad to have something to do. She hands me two heads of iceberg lettuce, a tomato, a cucumber, and a bottle of salad dressing for each table. This would be heresy where I live. The only acceptable salad in Silicon Valley is locally sourced, organic kale tossed with hand-pressed olive oil from a boutique orchard in the Napa Valley and imported vinegar that costs forty dollars a bottle. Thanksgiving is the season my friends run themselves ragged cooking gourmet versions of traditional dishes that need no improvement.

Forty-five minutes before the guests arrive, Rose realizes she forgot to make the seven-layer bean dip. Violet goes to the store and returns home with four cans of beans, a bag of grated cheese, and a tub of sour cream that she layers into a casserole and puts in the oven before going home to get dressed for dinner. She's a stout woman with short, blunt-cut gray hair. When she returns, she's wearing clean jeans and a different sweatshirt hand decorated with dancing turkeys. I decide not to wear the silk top and crepe pants I bought for the occasion and go for something more casual.

The guests arrive. More friends. More family. More food. There are so many I give up trying to remember anyone's name or how they are related to Frank, who is seated across the table from me grinning so hard his lips might be permanently stretched out of shape. Dinner is noisy, disorganized. There are mounds of food plated in the kitchen, please-help-yourself-to-seconds. Frank hardly gets a chance to swallow before someone slaps him on the back and

peppers him with questions about his life in California as though it were a foreign country.

We never had Thanksgiving when I was a kid. My mother, social as she is, still thinks holidays are corporate tricks designed to get people to eat too much and spend money they can't afford. My long-dead father—ever the student radical—considered Thanksgiving and Columbus Day to be monuments to the genocide perpetrated by white settlers against Native Americans.

Frank's sister Rose, sitting next to me, asks me for the third time if I need anything more before they serve dessert. As soon as she stands to go to the kitchen, Frank's mother takes her place. She's a tiny woman. Probably doesn't weigh more than a hundred pounds. Her apple doll face wrinkled with age and cigarette smoke.

"Having a good time?"

I nod "yes" because, despite my fears about fitting in and the elitist West Coast attitudes I hate to admit I have, I'm enjoying myself a lot.

"I'm glad to finally meet you. I've been worried about Frank, living alone. He's so much happier now that he found you. Wish my husband was still alive. You'd like him. He'd like you." She puts her hand on mine. Her skin is soft as chamois. "I'm getting on. I feel good, but who knows? It makes me happy to see him settled. I can tell, you're good for him." She blushes. "Listen to me yammering. This is a party. Let's go get us some dessert."

Sometime between the apple pie, the Jell-O ambrosia, and the pumpkin cheesecake, Daisy tells Frank she heard his cell phone go off in the bedroom. He excuses himself and wedges out from the table making jokes about how much more room he had to move around in before he ate dinner.

"Dot's the police psychologist. She's usually the one who gets called in the middle of a party. Not me." There's a chorus of jests

from the table about screws coming loose and other construction-related calamities befalling one of Frank's clients. This leads to a long, funny story involving lug nuts and tires. So funny I don't realize Frank has been gone for nearly ten minutes until he comes back into the room, paler than I have ever seen him. Instead of sitting down again, he stands in the arch separating the living room from the dining room, picks up a water glass, and hits it with a spoon.

"Sorry, everyone. Hate to interrupt. That call was from my friend JJ in California. Something terrible has happened. She put her daughter to bed last night and when she went to wake her up this morning, she was gone. She's been missing now for hours. Nobody knows where she is."

There's a chorus of "for cat's sake" and "great snakes."

"Maybe she ran away," Lily says. "I did that once, didn't I, Mom? Scared the poop outta you."

"Chrissy's only a toddler."

There's a collective intake of breath. Including mine.

"I hate to cut our visit short, but we need to leave." He looks at me. "I called the airlines and got a flight out of Des Moines. Leaves in three hours. We'll make it if we get going. It's been great to see everybody."

I don't move.

"Come on, Dot, we have to pack."

Frank's eyes bore into me for a second too long before he walks back into the bedroom. Then all the eyes and all the questions are on me.

"Who's JJ?"

"Her real name is JoAnn Juliette. She's a well-known photographer and Frank's teacher. Actually, she's his mentor. He's been studying with her for nearly a year. He was planning to show you his photos tomorrow. He's very good."

“His teacher? Not his friend?” Rose’s perpetually pink cheeks redden with the audacity of asking a personal question. “I never had a teacher call me in an emergency.”

“They’re close.”

“How close exactly?” Now her cheeks are scarlet.

It’s the question I’ve been asking myself from the day I first met JJ last April.

“She’s taken a special interest in Frank; thinks he has a lot of talent. She’s very charismatic. Enthusiastic.” I stumble over my words. Irritated that I’m the one trying to explain Frank and JJ’s relationship to his family when I don’t fully understand it myself.

Frank leans into the room and taps the face of his watch with his finger.

I walk into our bedroom. Frank’s throwing clothes on the bed. My bag lays open and empty next to his. He balls up a shirt and jams it in his suitcase. I’ve never seen him agitated like this.

“Can we talk about this for a minute?” I say. “I can see you’re upset. JJ must be in a panic.”

I know what it’s like to have to listen to another person’s pain. It’s what I do for a living. Frank’s an action person. When something breaks, he gets out his tools and fixes it.

“You can’t fix this, Frank. A missing child is police business. I’m sorry. It must be terrible for you to stand by and do nothing.”

“That’s why I said I’d go back. She didn’t ask. I volunteered. It’s the only thing I could think to do.” His eyes well with tears.

“Doesn’t she have anyone else to call? Somebody closer maybe? What about the child’s father?” I feel like a grinch just asking the question.

“So far as I know they aren’t together. I don’t think she has many friends. She spends most of her time working or with her daughter.”

He closes the lid to his suitcase and zips it shut.

“I just wish you would have discussed this with me first—privately. You’ve been asking me to come to Iowa with you almost since the day we met. Now that I’m finally here, I hate to leave early.”

“Why aren’t you dying to get home to help your cops? You’ve always said the worst cases cops have to deal with involve children.”

“They’re not going to need me in the middle of an active investigation. Nobody’s even called me to tell me what’s going on.”

He puts his hands on my shoulders. “I’m sorry we have to cut this short. It’s just something I feel I have to do. JJ’s more to me than a teacher.”

I stop myself from asking what that might mean.

“She tried to talk me out of coming home early, but I could tell she was relieved when I insisted. I’m flattered that she called me and happy to be able to give something back. Stay longer if you like, but I’m going to go.”

“Well then. There’s no more to say. Let’s pack, say our goodbyes, and get out of here.” A whopping sadness fills my chest. It hardly compares to losing a child, although nothing in the comparing makes the feeling go away.

Frank sets his suitcase on the floor and straightens up, his eyes on me. His face fixed and somber.

“I know what you’re thinking, Dot. I hope you don’t say it.”

“Say what?”

“I told you so.’ Because that’s what you think, isn’t it? That if anything ever happened to Chrissy, it would be JJ’s fault.”

CHAPTER ONE

I DIDN'T BECOME a psychologist like some of my colleagues who went from BA to PhD on Mommy and Daddy's credit cards. My parents didn't have credit cards. Didn't believe in them. My father thought bankers were Shylocks who cheated the poor with exorbitant interest rates and balloon payments buried in the small print. My mother was for simplicity and against needless consumerism.

I worked my way through college and grad school waiting tables, serving cocktails, and pleading for scholarships. Turns out I am better at reading people than serving them food. I acquired this skill trying to anticipate when the sins of the rich and powerful would send my father on a rant, barging around the house for twenty-four hours, spewing letters to the editor. While my mother, for whom all life's challenges contain lessons to be learned, regarded my father's tantrums as an opportunity to practice patience and understanding. With righteous indignation for the underdog combined with the ability to normalize bizarre behavior as my parental legacy, how could I have not become a psychologist?

Currently, I work as a paid consultant for the Kenilworth Police Department. It's a moderate-sized agency, seventy-five sworn, located in the heart of Silicon Valley. I didn't intend to be a police psychologist. I was aiming to be an academic, dazzling graduate students and writing acclaimed books. That was until I got a taste of graduate school, which was only slightly less treacherous than

swimming in a shark tank. I fell in love with my advisor, Mark Edison, while I was helping him write a book. We married, wrote two more books together, and when I got my PhD, I joined his forensic practice. Kenilworth PD was his biggest client. Years later, I wrote a book on my own. Mark was happy for my independent success. Or so I thought until he left me for Melinda, his psych intern and twenty years his junior. We divorced. He got the forensic practice. I got Kenilworth PD.

Police officers are not eager consumers of therapy. They think it makes them weak to have problems. I think it makes them human. Almost every cop at Kenilworth PD regards me with skepticism, worried that I'm reading their minds and getting ready to report them to the chief as unfit for duty. They are not as standoffish as they were when I started three years ago, but it's still an uphill battle to win their trust, let alone put a dent in the male-dominated culture of rugged individualism. My biggest skeptic is Chief Pence. Maybe he doesn't like psychologists. Maybe he doesn't like me. All I know is that we've been in a push-pull battle since before he was promoted to chief. He can't live with me and he can't live without me. He wants my advice when I least expect it and when I have something to offer, he avoids me.

I'm not saying that Pence is to blame for what happened. He couldn't have predicted the future and he didn't mean to offer anyone a convenient narrative. But, in retrospect—pardon me for dredging up that tired saying about hindsight having 20/20 vision—his blundering ego may have started the ball rolling last spring, the day I met JJ for the first time.

* * *

It is springtime, seven months before Frank and I go to Iowa for Thanksgiving. Pence has called a special session of the city council.

He's invited the public and the press. All members of the Kenilworth Police Department, including me, are encouraged to attend. In Pence-speak, "encouraged" means show up because he'll be taking names. He cloaked the subject of his announcement in secrecy, responding with a Cheshire Cat smile to any questions that "all will be revealed." Pence likes drama and will do anything to get his name in the paper, provided the press is positive. If it isn't, then he is as tight lipped as a double agent. I sit in back of the council chambers looking at my watch. I'm supposed to meet Frank at an opening reception for his photography teacher's new exhibition.

I've been hearing about this woman for months. He's described her as an extraordinary photographer and a wonderful teacher. Innovative, daring, inspiring, and—I took note—exceptionally beautiful. Frank is passionate about his photography. I'm relieved that he has something absorbing in his life besides his remodeling business and me. We're quarreling less about the hours I spend at work and how often I change plans at the last minute because police departments are open 24/7. He's known this from the time we met. I think he hopes that when we get married, my priorities will change. They won't. Police psychologists don't have nine-to-five jobs. When cops work, we work.

This is a red-carpet affair. The mayor is here, as is the city council. Chief Pence greets them one by one, his silver hair gleaming in the overhead lights. He's a handsome man if you like your men looking like they stepped off the cover of *GQ*. I don't know much about men's clothes, but if I totaled up what Pence spent on his outfit, it would equal the down payment on a small car. I prefer shaggy men like Frank, who orders his jeans and work shirts online by the half dozen. He can look spiffy when he wants to, but mostly he just looks touchable. There's nothing touchable about Pence or his wife, Jean, who is sitting in the front row, coiffed, buffed, and color-coordinated from head to toe. Not a hair out of place. They are a matched pair, age-adjusted versions of Ken and Barbie.

Cops, dispatchers, and records clerks file into the chambers, some in uniform, some in jeans and t-shirts. No one looks happy with this mandated show of support for the chief when they could be at home with their families, catching up on their sleep, or out catching crooks. I see Manny and his wife, Lupe, sitting in the front row. He's wearing a suit and tie. Lupe is wearing a dress and high heels, her tiny figure snapped back into shape after having a baby. I'm very fond of Manny and take pleasure in watching him mature on the job. He's always been a quiet, serious young man, who kept his own counsel, even when it meant standing up to popular opinion or to the chief. He was never one of those rookies who tried too hard to fit in and be one of the boys. He's well liked and served a term as president of the Kenilworth Police Association. I haven't seen much of him recently and I wonder why he isn't sitting with his buddies.

The mayor taps the microphone, asks everyone to take their seats, thanks us for coming in at the last minute, and promises that we will be rewarded for our efforts by being the first to hear about an innovative new police program. He hands the microphone to Chief Pence who's been smiling and nodding at people in the audience. As soon as he takes the mike, Pence's smile disappears. He sucks in his cheeks, furrows his brow, and takes a deep breath.

"The announcement I have to make this evening concerns crimes that are perpetrated against our most vulnerable citizens. Our children. Day after day, the citizens of Kenilworth go about their daily activities feeling safe, thanks to the dedicated employees of my police department." There is a smattering of applause. "Silicon Valley is the birthplace of a technological innovation, so profound that it has changed the world. It was here, in our backyard, that the microcomputer revolution began." He looks at his notes. "Hardware, software, data storage, networking, data sharing and

delivery—I have to ask my ten-year-old neighbor what these things mean.” He waits for a laugh that doesn’t come. “Our lives have been significantly and positively affected by technology. We’ve all come to depend upon our electronic gadgets.” He waves his cell phone in the air so everyone can see it.

“But there is a dark side, too. One that is difficult to understand and impossible to tolerate. These same technological advances that enrich our lives have enabled pedophiles to distribute child pornography around the world with the click of a mouse. Pedophiles trade images the way you and I used to trade baseball cards. They use chat rooms to lure unsuspecting children away from the safety of their homes. Every month, sixty thousand new images are added to these websites. Sixty thousand. Think of it.” He looks at the audience, gauging his effect.

“In 1998, the United States Department of Justice initiated a task force to provide state and local law enforcement with the tools to catch distributors of child pornography and stop sexual predators who solicit child victims through the Internet.”

“Has something happened to a Kenilworth child?” someone in the audience shouts. Everyone looks around to see who is talking out of turn.

“No. And I am determined it will never happen here. Not on my watch.” His wife starts to applaud and stops when she realizes no one else is joining her. “But, forewarned is forearmed. Therefore, ten months ago, in a trial run, I committed staff from KPD to join the county Internet Crimes Against Children task force, part-time. Something my predecessors were unable or unwilling to do. Officer Ochoa, would you stand please and face the audience.” Manny stands up and turns toward us. A red blotch seeps up his neck. He waves once, turns around, and sits down. “That moving blur was Officer Manuel Ochoa. Known to most of us as Manny. He is a

dedicated young officer, who in his three years on the department has shown himself to be a hardworking, effective professional. When I asked for a volunteer to join the task force, he was the first to respond.”

No wonder I haven't seen much of him.

“Today I am making this trial effort public and official and I am increasing Officer Ochoa's hours to full-time.” There is another smattering of applause. “This will be a major commitment for Officer Ochoa and for his wife, Lupe, as well.” He smiles at Lupe and bows slightly in a mock show of gratitude. “Even being assigned part-time to the task force, his hours have been long and irregular. Pedophiles peddle their wares in all time zones. Assigning Manny to work full-time on the task force means other officers will have to work harder and longer to fill in. No doubt this will increase the overtime budget. But I believe, with all my heart, that it's a small price to pay for keeping our children safe.” He pauses to let this sink in. “Now, are there any questions?”

Hands fly in the air. There is a lot of shouting. I don't have time to stay for the answers although I have plenty of questions of my own. The first one being, why all the secrecy around the task force? Money's tight. If no crime has been committed, how is Pence going to justify an increase in overtime? And most irritating of all, why didn't Pence consult me before appointing Manny? Investigating child pornography is one of the most stressful assignments in law enforcement. No one should be placed in a stressful specialty without first being screened. Manny has a small child of his own. That brings everything closer. Makes him vulnerable to over-identifying with the victims, losing whatever emotional Kevlar he needs to investigate these horrendous crimes. Had I known what was going on, had Pence told me, I could have helped inoculate Manny, prepared him to deal with the stress. Strategized with him and Lupe

both about how best to minimize the emotional contagion that comes with such an assignment.

My cell phone vibrates with a reminder that the reception for Frank's teacher starts in twenty minutes. I want to stick around and talk to Manny and Lupe. Before I'm even out of my seat, it vibrates again courtesy of the damn calendar app Frank installed after telling me my Day Runner was so retro it made me look out of touch.

"We need to keep up," he had said. "We live in Silicon Valley."

* * *

Frank is waiting for me at the front door of the gallery. He's leaning against the wall like a cowboy. All he needs are boots and a ten-gallon hat. His eyes flicker back and forth, looking for me, anticipating that I'll be late. The minute he sees me, he breaks into a grin. He's a truly good guy. I'm lucky to have found him. Pickings are slim for women in their fifties. After Mark and I divorced, I figured I'd be single the rest of my life. A more appealing alternative than pairing up with the men my girlfriends were meeting online, most of whom were depressed widowers with bad teeth and a penchant for golf clothes with contrast stitching. I debated signing up for an online dating program but couldn't think of how to describe myself in five sentences. I got as far as "thick in the waist, not in the head" before I gave up. That was when my colleague Gary introduced me to Frank who was remodeling his house.

"Right on time. Thanks." Frank bends down to kiss me. He's at least a foot taller than I am. "JJ's photos will blow your mind. They are amazing. You've never seen anything like them before." I wonder if anyone says "blow your mind" anymore, but decide not to ask. "Controversial. Cutting edge." He takes me by the elbow and steers me into the gallery.

In an instant I move from the warm summer air and the dimly lit night into an air-conditioned cavern with refrigerator white walls and ceilings. It's so bright my eyes water. A woman with neon red hair and a Celtic chain tattooed on her arm offers me a glass of champagne. I take it. Then a skinny young man with a partially shaved head holds a tray of stuffed mushrooms and kale chips under my nose. I refuse.

"This way." Frank has to yell at me to be heard over the din. We move through the crowd to a wide doorway leading to a large room filled with a veritable rainbow of people. Once again California's lure of bottomless opportunity and fortune has sucked people from around the globe. Spilled them out in a place once covered in apricot, plum, cherry, and almond orchards, now covered with condominiums and sprawling corporate campuses. More than half of all Silicon Valley start-ups have a founder who was born outside the United States and more than half of the people who work for them in science and engineering were born in another country. A large percentage of whom are standing in front of me munching on kale chips.

I shoulder my way to the back of the big room where the lighting is softer. My eyes adjust again. People are walking around, talking in whispers, heads together, eyes gauging each other's reactions. I move to the nearest image. Three children with pouting, sultry faces cling together in a wilting triangle. They are naked.

I move to another. A single child, perhaps a prepubescent girl with an amorphous sexuality, lies facedown on a bed of wet leaves. Some are randomly stuck to her body. She could be dead; she could be sleeping. Next to her is a waist-up portrait of a stick-thin boy. He looks directly at the camera, his eyes blazing with the angry intensity of a powerful secret self. He appears furious with the photographer. She has interrupted a private moment. Exposed his puny little

body to the world. The photos are gorgeous, evocative, drawing me in and repelling me at the same moment.

“What do you think?” Franks whispers.

“I don’t know what to think.”

“Do you like them?”

“I honestly don’t know. They’re erotic. Bordering on pornographic.”

“Sensual,” he says. “Not sexual. These are works of art, carefully composed. The lighting is fabulous. The images are crisp. Look at the photo of the boy. Look at how she blurs the background so your eye is drawn to his face. Masterful. Or this one.” He takes my hand and walks me across the room to a photo of a young girl, perhaps three years old. She is sitting on a log in the middle of a stream, her knees pulled up to her chest, looking down at the water swirling in circles under her. “If this was a painting, it would be hanging in the Met.”

“She’s naked.”

“So is Venus rising out of that clam shell. And all those naked cherubs in the Italian masterpieces. And the Odalisque. I’ve gotten interested in art since I’ve been studying photography with JJ. Now I see the naked form everywhere. Imogen Cunningham, Georgia O’Keefe, they all photographed naked women.”

“Women, not children.”

“How are these images any different from what you see every day on television? Victoria Secret’s ads, *Sports Illustrated* swimwear edition . . .”

“Those are adults. They can give informed consent to being photographed.”

“Do you think she forced these kids to pose?”

“I have no idea. Kids are pliable. Under the right circumstances they’ll do anything. Whose children are they?”

“My brother’s.” JoAnn Juliette’s voice is soft and smoky. Her presence so light I never sensed her standing behind us until she spoke. She is as described, breathtakingly beautiful, tall and willowy with high cheek bones and a wide mouth. Her long dark brown hair, parted off-center, hangs over her shoulder in a thick braid. She is wearing wide black pants, a kimono top hand-painted with birds and butterflies, and long earrings that swing when she moves.

“JJ. This is my friend, Dot.” I notice he doesn’t say ‘fiancée.’

“Dot. This is JJ.”

We shake hands. Hers is warm and firm.

She loops her arm over Frank’s shoulder. “He’s my favorite student. Came late to the game, but he works very hard and shows considerable talent.” I wonder if she’d feel as positive about him if he weren’t so positive about her.

“Your brother’s children?” I say.

“I wouldn’t presume to take pictures of children I didn’t know. I lived with my brother, his wife, and their kids on the family farm where we both grew up. We ran around unsupervised and usually unclothed when we were children. His kids are lucky to do the same. Most children today can’t walk to the bus without a parental escort.” She shudders and shakes her head. It’s a small movement. Nothing dramatic. “His kids were like my own. Until I had one of my own.”

“Is your child in this exhibit?”

“Chrissy? Of course.” She loops her left arm through mine and steers me across the room. Walking next to her, her perfect form emulating the unreal ideal foisted on us less-than-perfect women, I am suddenly self-conscious, wondering if Frank, walking behind us, is making comparisons.

Chrissy’s photo is hanging by itself. She looks to be about two years old. Her arms are at her sides and she’s dangling a toy dog by

the leg—it's head drags on the ground. She is naked, wearing only a white headband with a large floppy bow. Her face is turned and she looks over one shoulder into the camera as though asking, *Who am I? What am I? Am I a child or a woman or the woman in a child?* Her eyes are huge and her skin flawless. I have no children of my own, but the image is so powerful I can literally feel the sensual appeal of Chrissy's smooth skin, imagine how it would be to cover her plump, pillowing body with kisses.

"I wanted her to wear something else, but she wouldn't have it." JJ's voice shakes me from my reverie.

"And the pose?" I ask.

"She posed herself. I took about fifty shots. This is the one she chose."

"Isn't she self-conscious?"

"About her nakedness? Not at all. It's a natural state. She's quite comfortable with her body."

Frank leans in. "Dot's a psychologist. She likes to analyze things."

Something shifts in JJ's eyes. "Really? Wish I had known. I spoke to several psychologists before I mounted this show. And I had the children meet with a child therapist. I wanted to be sure that I wasn't doing any harm. None of the psychologists I consulted were concerned. They felt the older children understood the project and were cooperating of their own free will with the full understanding that they had veto power over any images."

A small group of people press in on us, eager for JJ's attention. She seems not to notice.

"I even consulted a world-famous expert on pedophilia, Dr. Charles M. Randall."

"Did you? I studied with Dr. Randall when I was in graduate school. He was one of my favorite professors. I haven't seen him in years."

“He thought a few of my photos might be of interest to pedophiles. At the same time, he said some people, given their predilections, are aroused by anything. The only way to avoid them was to stop taking pictures altogether. I loved his attitude. He warned me not to be put off by law enforcement types or right-wing zealots, religious or otherwise, because my photos were gorgeous. Rather than charge me his usual consulting fee, he asked for a photo instead.”

That’s the Dr. Randall I remember. Warm, kind, and avuncular. The stereotypical absentminded professor, bumbling and rumped. An iconoclast who valued common sense and decency over small-mindedness. He had a cynical view of his fellow psychologists as fussy, self-inflated busybodies who touted psychology as the answer to the world’s problems. In particular, he disdained people like me, clinical psychologists, who charged money for what he said used to be given freely and known as friendship. He urged us to work with people who had real problems or caused real trouble, like pedophiles. I could recite his rant by heart. Clinicians were Freudian wannabes with whining, sniveling clients for whom the best therapy would be the admonition to grow up and get a life, followed by a kick in the butt. A point he once gleefully illustrated in class by hoisting his leg in the air, dislodging a disk in his back that sent him to the hospital for a week.

“Might the children feel differently about these pictures in the future?” I ask. Frank gives me a look.

“They might. I worry about that sometimes. Don’t we all hate it when our parents pull out baby photos of us lying naked on a bearskin rug? But it’s a chance I’m willing to take. My nieces and nephews love me. These images are hardly the sum total of our relationship. I bathed them, fed them, stayed up with them when they were sick, went to their recitals and soccer games. They know I’m a photographer and that these images are how Aunt JJ makes art. To me, these images are not real children in the same sense that a

map is not the territory it depicts. That distinction is lost on some people, particularly my critics. I shouldn't be surprised about that, but I am." She looks around at the gathering crowd. "I should move on, say hello to some other people." She shakes my hand with both of hers. "Nice to meet you, Dot. I hope our paths cross again sometime soon."

"Now what do you think?" Frank asks after JJ is absorbed by the crowd.

"I think her 'map is not the territory' comment is an intellectual rationale for taking the pictures she wants to take, damn the consequences. Or maybe she has exactly the consequences she wants. The gallery is full, the program catalogue is flying off the shelves, and there is a line of people waiting to buy her photos."

"That's pretty cynical."

"You asked."

"Frank." JJ's voice drifts back through the murmur. "Come over here for a minute, there are some photographers I'd like you to meet." He turns away from me without a word.

"Thank you, thank you, thank you. I overheard what you just said and I couldn't agree with you more." The woman talking to me in a whisper is about the only other person in the room my age and one of a select minority without tattoos, piercings, or Technicolor hair. "If this is art, I'll eat my hat." She laughs. "Sorry. That's an old-fashioned saying, isn't it? I feel pretty old-fashioned in this crowd." She looks at me for some affirmation. She's a tall, trim woman with a pleasant face hardened by a bit too much makeup that reveals, rather than conceals, small spidery lines around her mouth and eyes. "So, how are you connected to JoAnn Juliette?"

"My fiancé is her student."

Her face shifts slightly. "Does he take portraits of children, too?"

"I don't know, to tell the truth. He's new at this. He hasn't shown me any of his work yet. What's your connection to JJ?"

She points to Chrissy's pictures. "I'm Chrissy's stepmother." She musses her hair with a manicured hand and then pats it back into shape. "Sorry," she says. "I get nervous when I see these pictures. All these people. You just don't know who's here or why." She shakes her head and apologizes again. "My husband thinks I'm overreacting. Maybe I am." She expels a long sigh and extends her hand. A diamond the size of a sugar cube glints in the overhead lights. "I'm sorry, my name is Kathryn Blazek. And yours?"

"I'm Dot Meyerhoff."

"Are you a photographer, too?"

I hesitate. The minute anybody finds out what I do for a living, I get asked for my professional opinion about somebody's miserable marriage or their drunken nephew. Sometimes I say I'm a ceramist who fixes crack pots for a living and wait to see if they get the joke. Kathryn Blazek doesn't look like she's in a joking mood.

"I'm a psychologist," I say. Her eyebrows tilt.

"Really? Do you mind if I ask your opinion?" I don't answer because I know from experience it won't make a bit of difference if I do or don't. "Do you think these are wholesome pictures? Is it good for children, safe for them, to be posing like this?" The same question I asked JJ. Only more direct.

"I couldn't say. I don't see children in my practice. I'm a police psychologist." I take a sip of champagne and wait for the inevitable questions. *Remember that cop who shot that girl? Why didn't she shoot her in the leg instead of killing her? I got a speeding ticket when I was only five miles over the limit and there was no one else on the road. Why aren't the police out looking for the real criminals?*

"How interesting. Police officers have such difficult jobs. Your work must be very challenging." She looks around the room again. "Could I ask one more question? If these were your children, would you be concerned?"

This is not a question I should answer. She's asking for my professional opinion. I don't know her, her stepdaughter, her husband, or her husband's ex-wife.

"I'm sorry. I've put you on the spot. I'm not asking for your professional opinion, just your general reaction. As a mature woman."

"Yes," I say. "If these were my children, I think I would be concerned."

"Thank you," she says. "Thank you so very much."

* * *

Frank is quiet over dinner. He gets that way when he's irritated. "Are you angry with me?" I ask.

"Why should I be angry with you?"

"Because I didn't react to JJ's work the way you were hoping I would."

"Your reaction is your reaction. I didn't have any expectations."

I want to hit him with the Vietnamese pancake we're sharing. He doesn't have trouble sharing his opinion about what he calls the important things of life, religion and politics, but the closer we get, the harder it is talk about our differences because we have so much more to lose. Confrontational partners make for a loud, rowdy marriage. One confrontational type paired with a risk-averse partner and you have a seesaw relationship where one side never gets off the ground. Put two risk-averse people together and problems can go unresolved for years until one tiny unimportant thing—a favorite sweater that should not have been put in the dryer, a toilet seat left up or down—unleashes a torrent of suppressed feelings. That was how it was in my first marriage. Two psychologists who couldn't talk to each other about unpleasant stuff. I'm determined not to repeat the pattern.

“Come on, Frank. I can tell when you’re upset.”

“JJ is important to me. She gets what I’m trying to do with my photos.”

“How important?”

“She’s encouraging. Generous with her time. Her critiques are spot on. I’m learning a lot from her.”

“I’m happy for you.”

“You insulted her with your questions.”

“I did not.”

“You implied that she is an irresponsible mother. That she put these children in harm’s way.”

“Apparently, I’m not the only one.” I haven’t told him about Kathryn Blazek and I don’t intend to. It was a brief moment that will amount to nothing.

“She gets hate mail, threats, nasty reviews every time she has an exhibit.”

“You said so yourself, her work is edgy. She has to expect that kind of reaction.”

“Not from her friends.”

“I’m not her friend. You are. I just met her.” I pour tea to fill the silence. “She’s a serious artist. No question. And there’s something very appealing about her. But I think she’s defensive about her work and in denial about the consequences of what’s she’s doing. She’s sexualizing children.”

“And you’re pathologizing her art. Sometimes, Dr. Meyerhoff, to quote one of your heroes, ‘a cigar is just a cigar.’”