



PAUL MANDELBAUM

ADRIANE AND THE FIBROID TUMOR

Plump and pink, three inches in diameter, and floating in a mason jar filled with preservative: Adriane's newly harvested fibroid. Her first day back at City Hall, she displayed it on her desk. This was going to cause trouble—she could have guessed as much—and before long her boss, Garrett, called her into his office.

“Why would you even want to keep that?” he asked.

“It's like shrapnel,” argued Adriane, who wanted credit for her suffering these past two weeks. She and her boss observed one another in silence.

Shaking his head, he said at last, “I'm sorry I couldn't stop by. It would have caused an argument. At home.”

He sat behind his desk, and Adriane noticed his computer had one of those new stickers that read Y2K-COMPLIANT. They were sprouting all across City Hall, as tech people made their rounds. Someone had also stuck one to her boss's desk, though why a plain piece of furniture required millennial certification was something only a government task force would consider. She glanced at the framed picture of her boss's wife and young daughter, then turned her gaze to the view from his window and the recently opened babyGap below.

Adriane had thought she was long over him, over their awkward fling from more than one, two . . . She began to count on her fingers and realized: six years had passed! But her surgery had brought up old feelings. It had been major surgery, the equivalent of a C-section. So much could have gone wrong: mistakes made, corners cut, care withheld. Hemorrhage, infection, coma, stroke; some of those things could yet happen. This had not been a lucky year-and-a-half for her, healthwise.

“When May-Annlouise had fibroids,” Garrett was saying, “she got that new treatment where they just cut off the blood supply and—”



“You told me,” Adriane interrupted. “I wanted it out. Out out out.”

“Yes, well, you’re young,” he said, blushing. “And that myo-whatever’s supposed to be more thorough. You made the right choice if you want children someday.”

“Myomectomy,” she said. To the degree she’d thought about children, Adriane had decided she didn’t want any. Children, her mother had always taught her, were whom you blamed for your own unhappiness. It could be said that Adriane’s lack of regard for kids—in having her own someday or in caring about other people’s overall—had once helped make the idea of an affair with a family man, well, thinkable. Since then she had grown up a lot and developed better impulse control, but just now was experiencing a moment of self-doubt. What if maturity were merely the thinnest veneer of socialization? She looked at her boss, his face aglow in the slatted sunshine from his office window, and felt an itch across her abdominal stubble. She was going through a second puberty down there. “I’m just glad the thing is out of me,” she insisted.

“Please don’t leave it on your desk.”

“It’s my desk.”

He sighed. “Why must you always be so difficult?”

He cast the mildly paternal scowl he would give her whenever she was acting out—a furrow in his brow that she found perversely attractive and which she usually arranged to see at least once a day. Even when she was being scolded, her conversations with Garrett, alone in his office with the door closed, marked the highlight of Adriane’s workday. She felt safe in his orbit, grateful to spend forty hours a week together, which was probably more than his family got to see him. He seemed to need Adriane as well, enjoyed the unspoken doggedness of her attention. Maybe theirs wasn’t the healthiest emotional bond between two people, but it contained a kind of deformed beauty.

The next day, her phone rang, and it was Dru Pringle in Public Relations with an absurd request. His assistant was out sick, and some fourth-grade class needed a tour of City Hall.

“Fiona’s sick?” Adriane asked. Fiona was about the only coworker, besides her boss, with whom she’d formed any kind of camaraderie.





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“She’ll be fine,” said Pringle dismissively. “I need you to show these kids around, tell them about the inner workings here.”

“Isn’t fourth grade a little young for inner workings?”

“Well, they’re gifted, from the Brandon Academy. I already cleared it with Garrett. He said I could have you.”

That had an unpleasant ring to it, a hint of pimperly, and also, the nasty insinuation: *Garrett’s done with you*. She watched her tumor floating in its jar and thought, out loud as it so happened, “Why don’t you do it yourself?”

“I’m too important,” said Dru Pringle, with no trace of irony. “They’re in the lobby now. You’d better hurry and meet them.”

“Yes, uh, okay,” Adriane said and hung up. Putting on her blazer, she felt a tug across her stitches, one of her many layers of stitches. She had stitches along the inside of her uterus, stitches along the outside of her uterus, stitches in between those stitches, and stitches across her abdomen. For the next month at least, she was under orders to avoid heavy lifting and to check frequently for unusual bleeding, and she wondered now if she should take a quick peek. Though the bathroom was located just across from her desk, she decided not to spend the time; Dru Pringle had sounded impatient. She grimly began her march down the winding marble staircase toward the lobby. What did Adriane know about children, their world, their language, their customs? Hers was the esoteric, somewhat lofty realm of municipal public affairs. She had no idea what to tell kids.

She saw, standing off to the side of the lobby, one, two, three, four . . . ten of them, chaperoned by a young teacher, younger than Adriane, but married and, by the bulbous look of her, knocked up. The woman wore a fashionable maternity dress with a cashmere sweater and pearl stud earrings, sensible but supple loafers, and carried a conspicuously large handbag. She seemed to glance disparagingly at Adriane’s blue jeans before introducing herself as Mrs. Coynes.

Adriane swallowed dryly. “Welcome to City Hall, the seat of city government,” she said, hoping not to sound like a filmstrip.

In the pause that followed, Adriane could hear whispers and footsteps from across the rotunda.



Mrs. Coynes cleared her throat and said, "We're far along into our civics and government unit. Who can tell Miss Gelki what we've been studying?"

"We're learning about the three branches of government," volunteered one myopic little girl in a plaid smock. Even though she was standing at the back of the group, the rotunda dome shuttled her small voice into Adriane's ear with startling insistence. "Executive, judicial, legislative."

"We learned about the Constitutional Convention," said a slender, doe-eyed boy.

A taller, wavy-haired lad with a 35-millimeter camera hanging over his cardigan announced, "We watched *The American President*."

Adriane asked, of no one in particular, "Is that the movie where Michael Douglas keeps trying to order roses for Annette Bening?"

"Yes," the children said in unison, their voices reverberating.

"If only life here at City Hall were so romantic," she replied wistfully. "You're going to have to set aside your preconceptions." She then asked the teacher, "How long a tour did they promise you?"

"About an hour. More or less."

Both women studied each other nervously before Adriane glanced at her watch, which seemed to be standing still. She spanked the side of her wrist until she saw the second hand move, but then it stopped again. She exhaled in frustration. The children, she noticed, were staring at her. A few of them held notepads and pencils, as though ready to ticket her.

Anxious to move the group out from the rotunda's echo chamber, she said, "I guess you all would like to see where the mayor works."

Everyone said yes, their voices caroming inside Adriane's head.

She led them along the curving marble staircase to the second floor of the north wing, and soon they entered the anteroom to the mayor's office. They gathered before his closed door, the city seal mounted upon it.

"This is it," said Adriane.

The boy who carried the 35-millimeter camera took a picture of the closed door.

The mayor's secretary had managed to step out somewhere,



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so Adriane described the woman's workspace. "As you can see, it's Y2K-compliant," she said, pointing to the stickers on the computer, the desk, and also the back of the chair. "Even though the millennium is still months away, we're making sure everything is ready so there are no rude surprises here at City Hall." Referring to the triptych picture frame next to the pencil cup, Adriane said, "These must be her grandchildren. Oh, here she comes now."

As the silver-haired woman returned, she smiled at all the kids, a little less so at Adriane.

"Is Hizzoner in, Patsy?" Adriane asked.

His secretary explained that the mayor was in the middle of a meeting with representatives of the Baltimore Archdiocese.

"What's he like?" a large-toothed girl in a snowflake sweatshirt asked Adriane.

"The mayor? He's okay, I guess."

"He's a *very* nice man," interjected the secretary. "And a *won*-derful mayor."

"I'm *sure* he is," said Mrs. Coynes, adopting Patsy's spirited inflection.

The class regarded the city seal awhile longer before Adriane said, "All right, then. Maybe we can try again later. In the meantime, let's make our way over to the Mayor's Office of Neighborhood Enhancement, where I work."

She led the troop up another flight of stairs, to the third floor, which had lower ceilings than the second or first floor and which did not even exist, she explained, until the building's renovation in the mid-1970s.

"Did you have to move your desk?" asked one of the kids behind her.

"I wasn't working here yet," she said, adding, "I was younger than you are now." Christ, how old did they think she was? "All right," she said, standing before her cubicle. "I give you the Mayor's Office of Neighborhood Enhancement. We help neighborhoods put together special projects like concert series, or maybe you remember the Painted Screen Door Slam from a couple winters ago? As a walking tour, it would have worked better in the summer when more people have their screens up; we might try it again, though. On North Avenue, which used to be a happening corridor for nightlife,



we hung streetlamp banners of Eubie Blake, who was a pioneering jazz musician born right here in Baltimore. Um, let's see. The Korean-American 'Bulgogi Nights' festival—we were very involved with that . . .”

The kids stared at her blankly, and Adriane checked her watch, still frozen, then pointed to Garrett's door. “That's my boss in there, the Director of the Mayor's Office of Neighborhood Enhancement, Garrett Hughes. Let's see what he's up to, shall we?”

She tapped on the door, and when that didn't get an answer, she rapped with the ham of her fist.

“Yes?” grumbled Garrett.

Adriane ushered the ten tourists and their teacher into the room.

Garrett put his hand over the mouthpiece of his phone. “Can I help you?”

“Yes, you can! This is Mrs. Coynes and her fourth-grade class. They're studying the Constitutional Convention, and the three branches of government, and have watched *The American President*. Could you tell them a little bit about, like, when you're not sending me roses, what you do here at City Hall?”

“Maybe you could stop by on your way back, when I'm not on the phone?”

“Please,” she whispered.

He conferred on her that mildly paternal scowl she craved, then told the person on the other end of the line he'd call back. It was probably just his wife anyway.

“Fourth grade!” he said with sudden, circus-like gusto, and began to coax information from the kids, including their names and ambitions. Beyond the usual choices like veterinarian, these included “diplomat or maybe spy” and “sitcom writer.” Maryjane, the large-toothed girl in the snowflake sweatshirt, wanted to be a physicist. The Asian kid had set his sights on architecture. The boy with the camera planned to be a thoracic surgeon like his father. There was a future investment banker in the bunch somewhere. And the doe-eyed boy named Jeremy admitted, while fiddling with the zipper of his parka, that he wanted someday to be mayor. Adriane had never heard so much raw aspiration revealed at one time, and she felt a little embarrassed by it.

“Great!” Garrett told the mayoral hopeful. “We need new blood. Otherwise, you see, government can fall into a rut





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and become just about perpetuating itself. We need to continually remind ourselves of our larger mission as stewards, helping people, and leading society toward a better future. So welcome aboard, Jeremy, you've come to the right place."

Her boss would make a good father. Was *already* a good father, no doubt. As he chatted up the students from Brandon Academy—the room's mood climbing steadily, like a funicular—Adriane let herself drift into a nostalgic reverie about their brief affair. He'd been recovering from an injury, his leg bound in a cast, his face bruised the color of Tropical Swirl sherbet, but hardest hit: his confidence and self-worth. And in her small ways, she had nursed him back to wellness. At a time when his wife remained distant and angry, Adriane had offered herself to this man she admired and even, truth be told, adored. She remembered the tapas restaurant where they'd retired for happy hour, his crutches leaning against the bar as he waited for her to return with a small plate of food. She bought him a martini and later helped him into her car. He seemed, at least for a little while, deeply appreciative of her. It was intoxicating, this personal appreciation, and with his melodious baritone now wafting in the background, she managed to conjure up the faintest trace of it—a dangerous fantasy. She'd been good for so long; what a shame to lean off the wagon now, though she couldn't help herself. In the hospital, drifting under the anesthesia, she'd supposedly called out his name.

Her eyes still closed now, she felt his fingers splay across the wing of her shoulder and was startled to notice him gently ushering her out of his office.

"Have a wonderful visit," he was telling the group. "You're in great hands with Ms. Gelki, here."

She heard his door click, and the mood, not just hers but the group's, seemed to lurch downward. Adriane tried to prop it up by evoking her boss's name. "It was Garrett's idea to create the North Avenue banners," she said, dabbing the moist corner of her lips with a tissue. "They were made from a lightweight nylon, and there was plenty of back and forth with the printer over the four-color registration, let me tell you. This is where I sit," she said, pointing a trembly finger toward her desk.

"What's that?" asked Jeremy, the aspirant mayor in the down parka, as he held up her mason jar.

"Oh, that," said Adriane. "That doesn't really have any-





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thing to do with municipal government per se. It's more of a—paperweight.”

“But what *is* it?” asked the myopic girl, peering up close against the jar.

“Just a tumor,” Adriane said with finality, knowing her boss would not approve of this conversation.

“Like cancer?” called out a child from the back.

“Kind of, but this type isn't cancerous. It's called a fibroid and it's really just a blob of cells deciding to do their own thing, which regrettably serves no biologically useful purpose.”

“Did it come out of you?”

“Yes, it was surgically removed. From my stomach. Which cost a lot of money, because I went out of network.”

“Do you mean your uterus?”

“Yes.”

“People,” said Mrs. Coynes, “our biology unit isn't until next month.”

“My mom has fibroids,” offered one kid.

“Most women who get these,” Adriane couldn't help pointing out, “are older than me.”

“How old *are* you?”

“Alan,” cautioned Mrs. Coynes.

“I'm thirty,” said Adriane, swallowing dryly. “I just turned thirty.”

“This one looks like an alien,” said the myopic girl, and immediately a couple other children agreed.

“It does look like an alien, doesn't it?” said Adriane, perking up suddenly. She was glad someone else thought so. “That small flappy part resembles a mouth, I think.”

“Let me see!” demanded the boy who wanted to be an architect. “Is it alive?”

“I think it needs a blood source to stay alive,” Adriane said. “But, hey, you never know with aliens.”

Their faces brightened as each kid got a chance to hold the mason jar. A couple of them tapped on the glass and talked to it.

“All right, Maryjane, let's put down the paperweight,” said Mrs. Coynes, trying delicately to wrest Adriane's tumor from the large-toothed girl. “Miss Gelki's been very generous with her time. We don't want to keep her from her work.”

Miss! Adriane caught that. This Coynes ingénue, Adriane could see, was suddenly in over her head. Suburban princess,





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she probably wanted to hightail it out of there, get back to Towsontown Center, where she could concentrate on picking out the right Laura Ashley wallpaper for the twins' room. She didn't know from fibroids, not to mention hemorrhage, infection, coma, stroke. And if she ever did have to wake up from a major surgery, there was that husband in the picture—some Johns Hopkins University professor or titan of industry—looking out for her.

"Keep me from my work?" Adriane locked eyes with the young teacher. "Are you kidding? This is a bloated civil bureaucracy. I've got all the time in the world. I didn't know these kids could handle the *real* tour instead of the fairy tale tour."

"Well," began Coyne, "there might be a limit to—"

"All right then, who wants to know about city government? The political machine? The pageantry and atrocity of democracy in action?" Already she was feeling better, energized.

"I want to see the machine," said a tiny voice.

"You can't actually see it," said Adriane, "and it's nowhere near as big as it used to be, but it's there in the background. Let's go look at the City Council Chambers," she said, leading them toward the south wing.

"Does anybody know what H. L. Mencken, the irascible sage of Baltimore, had to say about democracy?" No one raised a hand. "He called it 'the art of running the circus from the monkey cage.'"

A couple of students laughed, and Adriane congratulated herself for the well-chosen quote. She called over her shoulder: "Where's the kid who wants to be mayor?"

The doe-eyed boy in the parka raised his hand.

"What's your name, slim?"

"Jeremy Pierce."

"Okay, Jeremy. What stepping-stone did you have in mind? Are you going to be a state's attorney first? Or a City Council member? Let's get you elected to the Council. You're a Democrat, aren't you, Jeremy?"

"I don't know. My parents are."

"You bet you're a Democrat, because this is Baltimore." She began walking backward now as she spoke; it was easier than craning her neck. And she had to project rather loudly to be heard over the clomping of so many feet. "You need to run as a Democrat, so you need the party's support to launch



a successful campaign. Not only that, but one of the powerful incumbents in your district, Councilmember R, wants you on his slate. Fortunately, R has an opening, and he likes you, Jer; the two of you see eye-to-eye on many issues of the day, and he wants you to be elected.”

“What about voting?”

“Relax, Jeremy! This one’s pretty well sewn up. That is unless there are *two* powerful incumbents in the district and they’ve grown to hate each other’s guts and have decided to each run his own slate. Then things will get *really* interesting! Fund-raising through the roof! Sack-loads of direct mail to every voter in the district. A barrage of radio ads, maybe some cable, like during a Baltimore Blast game. Do you watch indoor soccer, Jeremy? What do you think your message might be?”

They passed Dru Pringle going the opposite way, and he gave Adriane a narrow look over his shoulder. She smiled and waved as though she were on a parade float, before refocusing her attention on Jeremy, who seemed at a loss. She looked into his doe eyes and offered, helpfully, “Crime. What’s your position on crime, Jeremy?”

“Against.”

“You’re hard on crime, but not too hard, you know what I’m saying? You probably supported amending Maryland’s three-strikes law to a four-strikes law—which shows you’re tough, but merciful—never mind that the City Council doesn’t make state law. You might consider developing a position on TASER guns and rubber bullets that’ll make sense to the public without pissing off the Fraternal Order of Police. How about the schools? Voters are always complaining about the city school system. You have no idea, right? People, raise your hand if you’ve ever gone to public school.”

A girl with braided pigtails, one of which was stuck in her mouth, raised a hand.

“Yes, blue cord dress,” Adriane called out. “What’s your name?”

“Chloe.”

“Chloe, what was your public school like?”

“Not so nice,” she seemed to say.

“Okay, Jer, what are you going to promise to do about the public schools?”

“Pay teachers more money,” he said, smiling toward Mrs. Coynes.



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“Good answer; you’ve just gotten six thousand votes from the Baltimore Teachers Union. But where’s this money going to come from? The city’s property tax rate is already twice the county’s. Most of the rich people are worried about crime and fled to the suburbs years ago. Something to ask your parents about.”

Adriane wasn’t trying to sound cynical; she just felt these kids should get the unvarnished look at city government that they couldn’t get at school. Plus she didn’t want her tour to pale in comparison to the tumor.

Jeremy furrowed his brow.

“That’s a tough one,” Adriane consoled him. “We’ll come back to it. What if you’re in a really tight race against—” She pointed to the one girl in jeans, a peace sign patched over each knee—the kid who wanted to be a sitcom writer.

“Tara Nichols.”

“What if Tara’s breathing down your neck. She’s got a perky, wholesome image that won’t quit, and she knows every Catholic in the district. It’s going to be a squeaker. How are you going to help your slate, Jer?”

“Maybe she isn’t as goody-goody as everybody says.”

Adriane’s face lit up. “I like where you’re going with this, Jer, and if you’ve got something juicy on her, you might use it. But here’s an easy way to shave two or three percentage points off her vote: a little something we in Baltimore politics call the Name Game.”

“That may be too advanced for them,” said Mrs. Coynes.

“You just get yourself a phone book, okay?” Adriane went on. “And find someone in the district named, say, *Tama* Nichols. And you pay to have her file her candidacy, plus give her a little something extra for her troubles, and voilà: Tama Nichols’s name appears right above Tara Nichols on the ballot! Ready to siphon off Tara votes, just like a parasite.”

“Hey,” said Tara Nichols. “Unfair!”

“Well, Tara, you could have found someone named Jerry Pierce, or Jerzy Price, to nominate; too bad the filing deadline has passed. By the way, that was smart, Jeremy, waiting till the last moment to register Tama. Maybe Tara will see the light now and drop out of the race. Especially if you can think of some sort of contract job or patronage position to dangle in front of her.”





“What’s a patronage position?” asked the myopic girl in the plaid smock.

The Asian architect raised his hand. “Is it like when you pick your friend for the kickball team?”

Adriane paused. “That’s . . . not bad.”

She led the group now into the empty council chambers.

“Okay, here we are,” she announced. “The Sausage Factory.”

Coynes cleared her throat. “Who can tell Miss Gelki the rules of parliamentary procedure for a roll call vote?”

“Why sausage?”

“It’s an old saying about making laws.” She proceeded to describe at length the recent passage of a zoning ordinance for a newly proposed cultural-and-shopping development, then asked the class what that had to do, if anything, with the biohazard disposal plant that had managed to attach itself to the same piece of legislation.

No one had any answers. “I don’t know,” said Chloe.

“Exactly!” said Adriane. She was getting a kick out of watching Coynes nervously click the clasp of her oversized handbag. “Let’s just say someone’s taking care of his favorite supporters.”

The children looked at her, puzzled.

Adriane turned to Coynes and asked, “Have you covered conflicts of interest? Cronyism? Corruption?”

“That’s wrong,” piped up doe-eyed Jeremy, before his teacher could answer.

“Yes, Jeremy,” said Adriane. “It is.”

She told them about Zolly Chernofsky, the once-brilliant City Council president who went to jail for taking bribes from a sludge-hauling company and who now had colon cancer, which then led quite naturally into a sober discussion about irony, which Coynes tried to interrupt several times, but Adriane managed to keep on point.

The tour continued like this for another twenty minutes. To Adriane’s surprise, the kids were an insatiable source of questions, and they seemed to look up to her as a political insider, like James Carville or Arianna Huffington. One kid even asked if she ever appeared on CNN.

Finally, the teacher proposed with almost desperate urgency: “Shall we swing by the mayor’s office once more before we have to leave?”





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“Sure,” Adriane allowed. “Couldn’t hurt.”

“What’s he *really* like?” asked Gray, the future diplomat and/or CIA agent.

“He’s complex,” Adriane answered this time, as they trooped back to the north wing. “He can be charming, but he’s not without his moods. He’s . . . I’ll give you the scoop after you meet him. I want you to form your own impressions first.”

Patsy, the mayor’s secretary, saw them coming and picked up her telephone. “Mrs. Coynes’s fourth-grade class from the Brandon Academy has dropped by again. Do you have a moment?” She hung up and looked toward the group. “The mayor will be right out.”

The tall door swung open, and the mayor, his most optimistic grin scrunching his eyes tight, strode briskly into the anteroom, extended a shirt-sleeved arm forward, and took hold of Adriane’s hand.

“Mrs. Coynes,” he said. “Thank you for coming. When I was a freshman at the University of Maryland, I thought about becoming a teacher, but I decided the workload was just too darn hard! My hat’s off to anyone who takes it on. Guiding young people. And that extends to private schools, not just the city system. Noblest profession—calling—I can think of. If only I’d had more advance notice of your visit. I’d have cleared some time.”

Throughout this little speech, he was pumping Adriane’s arm and alternately smiling at her, the children, and the wall clock, whose frame, she only half-registered, had been certified with a $\gamma 2 \kappa$ sticker. She was in such shock, such unnerved, humiliated shock, that she could only murmur, “Thank you.”

No one stepped in to correct him. Whatever brief window might have permitted that had passed. Mrs. Coynes, the architect, the large-toothed girl, Jeremy—all of them smiled stiffly. The boy with the camera seemed too stunned even to snap a photo.

The mayor’s smile, Adriane noticed now, seemed a little crinkled, as though he sensed maybe he’d screwed up, but if so, that window for repair must have seemed closed to him now as well. He asked the children, “Anybody here considering a career in government when they grow up?”

Jeremy gingerly raised his hand.

“Terrific,” said the mayor. “We need new blood.” He



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glanced one last time at Adriane and said, "I hope you'll come again soon."

"Thank you," said Adriane. "We will."

"Our future is in your hands," he said and let go of her hand. He turned to his secretary and said, "Hold my calls, Patsy," then retired to his office, the tall door closing softly behind him.

After a moment of embarrassed silence, Mrs. Coynes asked if anybody needed to use the bathroom, and most of the kids waved. The teacher looked expectantly toward Adriane, who blinked before realizing she was being asked to lead them. As they left the mayor's waiting area, she thought she saw Patsy smirk.

No one spoke as they filed through the hallways and up the spiraling stairs to the third floor. Adriane tripped against the top step, but managed to catch herself. She felt gawky, laden with the shame of adolescence. She might occupy an adult's body and move in an adult's world, but she was largely unnoticed and now it would seem, utterly without importance. On the flowchart of City Hall, truth be told, her job and the mayor's lay far, far apart; no huge surprise, really, that he wouldn't recognize her. And what about the flowchart of her life? she wondered. Would she ever be important in this world? To whom? And for what?

Most of the assistants in her section had gone to lunch, and the common area was deserted. Their desks, she noticed as she tromped past, all seemed to have been plastered with Y2K-COMPLIANT stickers since she'd last checked, but her own workspace had yet to be certified. Apparently her capacity to function in the approaching millennium was not a priority around here.

Adriane leaned a steadying hand against her desk and pointed to the bathroom doors a dozen yards away.

Coynes took charge. "Everyone meet back here in three minutes. If you don't need to go, stay with Miss Gelki." She turned to Adriane and added, "Is that all right?"

"Sure, sure," murmured Adriane. How quickly she'd been demoted from pundit to babysitter.

Most of the girls followed Mrs. Coynes into the women's room. A few of the boys explored the men's room next door. That left Adriane with Jeremy, the mayoral hopeful, and also





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the investment banker named Robert Toogood, and Chloe, who was sucking on her braid and who had not expressed any career ambitions earlier.

“This job was supposed to be temporary,” Adriane told them. “I’ve been here seven, no, almost eight years—about as long as you people have been alive.”

“We’re nine,” said Robert, but Adriane barely heard because she was staring at her desk trying to figure out what looked wrong about it, besides the lack of $\gamma 2 \kappa$ stickers, speaking of which, truth be told, she didn’t even know if she’d live to see the new millennium, and—

“Where’s my paperweight?” she demanded.

“Paper what?” Chloe mumbled over her braid.

“My tumor!” said Adriane. “Who took it?”

The three children looked at each other.

“Maybe one of the bathroom kids did,” Jeremy suggested, a little too helpfully.

Adriane swooped to a crouch in front of him and thrust her hands deep into his cargo pockets. Wide-eyed with terror, he jerked away and knocked a heavy stack of file folders off her desk. Adriane, hands still in his pockets, almost fell on him, found herself pulling back to stay upright. Felt her stitches twang, her body a harp, being plucked with a crowbar. Inside: a rupture that was to cost her another hospital visit, two weeks of bed rest, and, as her surgeon would soon nag her, the likely formation of scar tissue that could permanently damage her uterus. Meanwhile, inside Jeremy’s pockets, her hands grasped a bunched-up ski cap and a few loose coins on the one side, and an empty soda can and an embryonic blob of gum on the other.

“There it is!” said Robert Toogood, pointing to her desk. From her new angle, Adriane could see the jar, behind her pencil mug. She removed her fists from Jeremy’s pockets, pressed smooth the flaps.

“Sorry,” she groaned. “Sorry, sorry, sorry.”

He looked at the floor and fiddled with his parka zipper.

“Don’t be scared of me,” she said gently, trying to ignore the throb in her loins. “You’re going to be mayor,” she reminded him. “And then, if you’re still mad at me, you—you can have me fired.”

In her current frame of mind, Adriane considered this sce-



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nario plausible. Likely even. She hoped young Jeremy at least got some solace from it, because it sure discomfited her. And would he be a better mayor, she wondered, for having met her? Or would there come a time when he'd issue some shocking policy decision whose roots, if one but knew how to trace them, would lead back to this day. She brushed the down of his cheek with her thumb, drew a fingertip lightly across his lips, a kind of this'll-be-our-secret gesture.

To her astonishment, he seemed to relax under her touch. He smiled with something like forgiveness then put his arms around her and squeezed. Adriane found herself returning the embrace and squeezing back. Over the boy's shoulder, she saw her boss standing in his doorway, looking down at them.

"Adriane?" he asked. "Everything all right out here?"

"Fine," she said, holding on to the boy.

"You sure you don't need me for anything?"

Her boss was scowling in that paternal way she so often contrived to see, but at the moment this expression—or was it his tone of voice?—seemed patronizing to her. The idea of retiring to his office and listening to his advice or criticism or even consolation just for the pleasure of his attention felt perverse—bad perverse—not to mention fruitless and possibly the very last thing she needed right now.

"No, thanks," she told him.

Garrett raised an eyebrow, then retreated into his office and closed the door.

She hugged the boy Jeremy to her tightly, and then tighter still, which put pressure on different parts of her gut, as though she were sliding from one level of pain into another.

Children, thought Adriane, awakening to a desire already beyond her reach. *Maybe I should have some children.*