

## *Alicia Erian*

### ALMONDS AND CHERRIES

Brigitte was a non-traditional student—a polite way of saying she was thirty and not twenty-one, like the rest of the kids in her Florida film program. She was also single, childless, and possibly a lesbian, though she wasn't completely sure yet. She had unique feelings for her Intermediate Film Production professor, Shirley Mayer, who was openly gay and struck Brigitte as a sort of absent-minded type who needed looking after. Mostly Brigitte thought things like it would be nice to do Shirley Mayer's laundry, or help her with her taxes. Occasionally she imagined kissing Shirley Mayer, but only occasionally, for it was a little overwhelming to feel so pleased by something so unfamiliar.

It was Brigitte's idea to explore her burgeoning sexuality on film that autumn. A recent bra shopping trip had inspired her to write a sensual short script about a customer and the sales associate helping her, all of which would take place in a dressing room. (A minimal number of locations, Shirley Mayer had instructed the class, would be cheaper and less strenuous in terms of moving equipment.) Brigitte turned in the requisite treatment for 36C only to get it back from Shirley Mayer unmarked and with a note at the top saying to please see her.

"What is this?" Shirley Mayer asked Brigitte during office hours that afternoon. She was sitting at her desk holding Brigitte's treatment, which she had quickly re-read before posing the question. Shirley Mayer was a pink-faced blond in a stylish gray suit with black buttons, who never, ever removed her jacket.

"It's my script," Brigitte said. She shifted in her seat and recrossed her legs, feeling suddenly underdressed in jeans.

"Jesus," Shirley Mayer said. "You too."

"Me too?"

Shirley Mayer handed Brigitte back her treatment. "The whole class is writing about being gay," she said. "We'll screen these films for the parents at the end of the year, and I'll get fired for converting you all."

"I'm not converted," Brigitte said, immediately wishing she could take it back.

"Well, that's a relief," Shirley Mayer snapped.

“What if the films were all good?” Brigitte asked quickly. “I mean, festival quality?”

Shirley Mayer shook her head. “They’re not,” she said. “Yours is the best one.”

Brigitte smiled. “Thank you.”

“It’s flattering, you know? All this gay pride. But it’s going to get me fired.”

“I could make a different film,” Brigitte offered.

Shirley Mayer waved this away. “No, no,” she said, laughing. “Make your film. I really only called you in here to tell you I liked your treatment.”

“You probably won’t get fired,” Brigitte said.

“Probably not,” Shirley Mayer said.

“I’m a non-traditional student,” Brigitte blurted out.

“Yes,” Shirley Mayer said, smiling. “That’s admirable.”

On the drive home, Brigitte thought about how she didn’t want Shirley Mayer to get fired, but how if it did happen, it would be Shirley Mayer’s own fault. She was pretty and charismatic and had seduced them all with her practical knowledge, thought-provoking exercises, and unfriendly demeanor.

On the first day of class, for example, she had offered a third of them chocolates from a huge See’s Candies assortment. She offered a second third of them chocolates as well, but this time from a somewhat less varied assortment containing only dark fruit creams. The students in the last third were offered a choice between marshmallow creams and toffees. Afterward, when Shirley Mayer asked them what they thought the exercise meant, they responded—mouths full—that they didn’t know. “You,” she said then, pointing to Ely Gimble, who had been in the first third. “You took forever to decide.”

Ely nodded. “Are there any fruit creams left?” he asked, and Shirley Mayer absently handed him the box.

“And you,” she said, pointing to Brigitte, who had been in the last third. “What was your experience?”

“I chose faster,” Brigitte said immediately, desperate even then to make an impression.

“That’s right,” Shirley Mayer said, nodding. “And so my point is?” she asked, looking first to Brigitte, then to the rest of the class. Nobody said anything. “What about you?” she asked Paige Cox, who had been in the middle group. “State your name and describe your experience, please.”

“Paige. I don’t like chocolate.”

“But you picked one,” Shirley Mayer said.

“I’m going to give it to someone else,” Paige said. Then she added, “To my girlfriend.”

Two boys in the back of the room giggled.

“What’s funny, guys?” Shirley Mayer asked them.

They sat up straight in their chairs and turned instantly, mockingly solemn. “Um,” Davis Bonaire said, “that she’s a lesbian?”

Everyone looked at Shirley Mayer, who they already knew to be gay. She paused briefly before saying, “Take out a sheet of paper, please.”

“Who, me?” Davis asked.

“Yes, you,” Shirley said. “And your friend. What’s your name?”

“Jojo,” Jojo Mankowski said.

“And you, Jojo. Take out a sheet of paper.”

The two boys shuffled their notebooks and came up with some paper. When they were ready, Shirley Mayer said, “Now, please write a hateful letter to Paige.”

“Excuse me?” Davis said.

“This isn’t high school, you know,” Jojo said. “We’re paying for this class. If we want to be taught a lesson, we’ll call our mothers.”

“Lesson?” Shirley Mayer said. “What lesson? I would like you both to write a hateful letter to Paige, please, so I can get on with this lecture.”

Paige turned around then and looked at the two of them. “Yeah,” she said. “Write me a hateful letter.”

Davis and Jojo looked at each other. “I ain’t doing that,” Davis said, laying his pen on the desk.

“Me neither,” Jojo said, copying Davis.

Shirley Mayer shrugged. “Suit yourselves,” she said. “Just trying to be accommodating.”

Paige turned back around then and smiled at Shirley Mayer, who ignored her. “Now,” Shirley Mayer said, “getting back to the chocolate. What was the purpose?”

Jojo Mankowski raised his hand. “Yes?” Shirley Mayer said, pointing to him.

“It’s easier to choose when you’ve got less to choose from,” he said.

“Good man!” Shirley Mayer said. “I want you all to remember that now as I pass out my list of creative limitations. They’re designed to help you, not make your lives harder.”

The list was called the “Mayer Memorandum” and consisted of six guidelines, all beginning with the letter M: no machine guns, no monkeys, no mission impossibles, no mafia, no murder, no madness.

“You got something against action movies?” a guy named Benny Parisi asked her.

“Yes,” Shirley Mayer said. “Any other questions?”

Brigitte raised her hand then. “Is the monkey literal or figurative?”

“Let’s not overanalyze,” Shirley Mayer told her. When no one else raised their hand she asked, “Everyone unhappy now?” They all nodded except Brigitte and Paige. “Good!” Shirley Mayer said. “Then things can only get better.”

“Damn!” Davis Bonaire said and, quite unexpectedly, he began to laugh, followed by the rest of the class, and finally Shirley Mayer.

Brigitte’s movie was about a young woman who goes bra shopping and finds she likes the way the sales associate touches her skin. The sales associate fastens the young woman’s bras even though the young woman has been fastening her own bras all her life, then smooths her hand across the young woman’s shoulder. At the sales associate’s suggestion, the young woman tries on more bras than she’d intended—some violet, some lacy, some push-up—but only buys a couple of plain white ones in the end. As she pays for them, a young man approaches the sales associate and kisses her. The young woman looks questioningly at the sales associate, who looks away. “Come back and see us,” the sales associate says meaningfully when she hands the young woman her receipt.

This had happened to Brigitte in real life, and when she’d described the event to Raoul, her stocky French roommate, he had suggested she write it all down and submit it to *Penthouse Forum*. “Just forget about the guy at the end and make the women get it on in the dressing room,” he’d added.

Now, on a warm Saturday in September, Brigitte and Raoul sat together at their pink Formica kitchen table, watching the smoke from Raoul’s cigarette mix with the morning sunlight. Raoul wore boxer shorts and extremely short, dyed blond hair, while Brigitte was in dirty Levi’s, with no bra underneath her t-shirt. “I wonder sometimes,” Raoul said, watching the swirly, smoking air, “if this type of effect would register on film.”

“You probably wouldn’t want it to,” Brigitte said. “It’s kind of prosaic.”

“Prosaic?” Raoul said.

“*Prosaïque*,” Brigitte said, translating.

Raoul, understanding now, was dismissive. “You Americans,” he said. “Always trying to invent something new. The trick is to learn to live with the banal.”

“You French,” Brigitte said. “Always bugging the shit out of me.”

Raoul laughed and kissed Brigitte on both cheeks before heading for the garden shed in the backyard, where he lifted weights every morning. He had graduated from the film program the year before and now spent most of his time bodybuilding and bartending. Occasionally a local band would ask him to shoot a music video for them and Raoul would do it in return for beer or pot. Sometimes he did it for free. Film school, he liked to say, had taught him more about how to watch films than how to make them, and so this was his main focus at the moment.

Brigitte and Raoul had moved in together as lovers, but when that didn’t work out, they were loath to separate since they were such compatible roommates. So she took the second bedroom in the small house they rented, while Raoul relocated his weight-lifting apparatus to the tin shed from Sears. They were only slightly jealous of one another when a third party entered the equation, and occasionally fell into bed together under extenuating circumstances, like when Brigitte told Raoul about her bra shopping trip. “Shit, man,” he had complained to her. He called everybody “man.” “You got me horny.”

Afterward, in bed, Brigitte asked him if he would shoot *36C* for her. “Two girls getting it on?” he said, lighting a cigarette. “No problem.” It had taken Brigitte a long time to figure out that even though everything that came out of Raoul’s mouth was sexist, he himself was not. This was confusing, though, and his attitude had lost him several female friends over the years. “You don’t understand, man,” he would say in his own defense. “I love women!” Something must have gotten lost in the translation was all Brigitte could think. As she understood it, Raoul’s suggestion that she publish in *Penthouse Forum* was really a testament to her storytelling abilities; his agreeing to film two girls getting it on meant lesbians were okay with him.

Still, Raoul had a hard time believing that Brigitte herself might be gay. “Everybody loves Shirley Mayer,” he once told her. “Don’t take it so personally. Besides, you fuck like a maniac!”

“Maybe I’m bi,” Brigitte said.

“Everybody’s bi.”

“You’re bi?”

He shrugged then. “Maybe. If I thought about it. I just don’t think about it. I prefer women, man. It’s easier that way.”

Which pretty much summed up the problem with Raoul for Brigitte. He did whatever was easiest, no matter how much harder it might make things for him in the future. Not that he really was gay, or even bisexual. He wasn’t. But he was a halfway decent cinematographer who wasted his time serving beer for a living; a fitness freak who could not see the harm in a little pot.

For Brigitte it was better to know the truth up front. If she was gay, so be it. If she wasn’t, she would sort her way through that mess, too. But she hoped she was. She hoped beyond hope that her problems were at last about to become interesting.

Brigitte received an inordinate amount of help on her film from Jojo Mankowski. He worked part-time in a department store and lobbied one of his managers to let Brigitte shoot *36C* in the lingerie department. “Just so you know, I told him it was about shoplifting,” Jojo informed her before the shoot. “I didn’t think he’d go in for all that homo shit.”

Brigitte nodded. Now that she knew the entire class was making gay-themed films she felt safer with them—even people like Jojo and Davis Bonaire, who himself had offered to record sound for her, one of the least popular jobs on a film set. The two of them still had a tendency to sound foul when they spoke on sensitive topics, but Brigitte decided they probably suffered from an affliction similar to Raoul’s—one in which their mouths did not accurately represent their beliefs.

They shot on two consecutive Sunday mornings, before the department store opened at noon. Paige Cox played the role of the young woman buying the bras, while her girlfriend, Andie Rivette, played the sales associate. Benny Parisi played the boyfriend who comes in and kisses the sales associate at the end, but would only agree to do so after Brigitte assured him Andie wasn’t butch. “It’s gotta look like I’m really kissing a girl,” he warned. “My parents are gonna see this.” And everyone enjoyed working with Raoul who, though no longer in the program, remained famous for a film about a nude woman who enlists a detective agency to help her find her clothes. It was shot almost entirely from the actors’ necks up, so there was no on-screen nudity—just heads bobbing along the bottom of the frame and crazy scenery filling the space above them.

In the end Raoul proclaimed Brigitte's shoot a success because Paige and Andie had been *hot* together. "They're the real thing, man," he said, grabbing his crotch. "You can feel it right here!" He and Brigitte had loaded the last of the school's camera equipment into the bed of his truck and were headed home now, exhausted. Mercifully the temperature had dropped out of the nineties and they were enjoying the breeze, as opposed to Raoul's air conditioner.

"Yeah, but some of that's directing," Brigitte protested, dangling her arm outside her open window.

"But of course it is! You did a great job, man. I'm just complimenting you on the casting, too."

Brigitte was dissatisfied. "What I'm saying is," she said, turning to face him as he drove, "how could I possibly have made a good lesbian film if I wasn't a lesbian?"

Raoul laughed and kept his eyes on the road. "Oh, honey," he said, which he only called her when he was about to deliver bad news, "because you're talented."

Shirley Mayer gave Brigitte an A+ on the film. In her comments she called it sexy, funny, sad, and true to life. Her favorite part was a close shot of the sales associate's index finger passing over a raised mole on the young woman's back. *Great texture*, Shirley Mayer wrote. At the bottom of the paper she added, *Please see me*.

Brigitte arrived at Shirley Mayer's office thinking Shirley Mayer was going to pronounce her a lesbian, or at least ask her if she was one, then maybe try to help her come out. Instead she seemed irritated, as if she hadn't remembered it was she who had asked Brigitte to come in the first place. For a few moments neither of them spoke beyond initial pleasantries, which reminded Brigitte of therapy and how she could never think of an appropriate opening remark. Often she just burst out crying, or else said something garish like, "I've been tightening up during intercourse." Today with Shirley Mayer, she suddenly found herself saying, "If you saw my film and didn't know me, would you think I was gay?"

Shirley Mayer pounced on this. "What's the matter? You afraid of being pigeonholed?"

"Of course not," Brigitte began, but Shirley Mayer cut her off.

“You live with that French guy, don’t you? Just make sure you say that in all your interviews, right up front: ‘I live with a man!’ You should be fine then.”

“But I wouldn’t mind being pigeonholed,” Brigitte said.

Shirley Mayer picked up a paper clip from her desk blotter and threw it at a bookcase across the room. “Oh, hell,” she said. “I know you wouldn’t.”

Brigitte paused for a moment before asking, “Is something wrong?”

Shirley Mayer sighed. “It was a plot. All those gay scripts. Jojo Mankowski devised a plot whereby everyone would write a gay script and say I made them do it.”

“No, he didn’t,” Brigitte said, only because she considered herself to be somewhat inside the loop and had heard no such thing.

“In fact he did,” Shirley Mayer said.

Brigitte didn’t say anything.

“I have to assume that neither you nor Paige were in on it.”

“Of course not,” Brigitte said.

“Then why did you write that movie? About the bras? That’s what I’d like to know.”

“It’s based on a true story,” Brigitte said.

“Yes,” Shirley Mayer said. “Most things are. I’m asking, why did you pick that particular story? You want me to know it’s okay with you that I’m gay?”

“No,” Brigitte said. She shifted in her seat.

“Trying to make me feel at home in a room full of right-wing southerners?”

“No!”

“Oh, hell,” Shirley Mayer said again, and she threw another paper clip across the room. “I know why you wrote it.”

*Why?* Brigitte wanted to ask, but instead she said, “Are you going to get fired?”

“God no!” Shirley Mayer said. “I have proof. A falsified ‘Mayer Memorandum’ that begins with *No men and women together*. No, being persecuted at a state institution is probably the best thing that could have happened to me. You can’t do much better than that.”

Brigitte cleared her throat. “Would you like to have dinner with me sometime?”

Shirley Mayer didn’t respond immediately. She repositioned her desk blotter first, then sharpened a brand-new pencil. At last she did something Brigitte had never seen her do, which was to unbutton her suit coat. It fell open to



reveal that she wore no bra beneath her off-white silky blouse, and that her breasts were small and round, with pale nipples. “Your movie fascinated me, Brigitte,” she said. “I burned my bras in 1972 and never bought new ones. Now I just wear these stupid coats. It’s all the same, though, isn’t it?”

Brigitte didn’t know what to say.

“Making ourselves presentable,” Shirley Mayer added.

Brigitte nodded then. “Yes. I see.”

“But now women like wearing bras, right?”

“I guess if you have a large chest it might be more comfortable,” Brigitte said, trying not to be obvious about appreciating Shirley Mayer’s breasts.

“Oh really?” Shirley Mayer asked. “Is that how you find it?”

Brigitte resituated herself in her chair. “Well, yes.”

Shirley Mayer nodded. “My point,” she said finally, “is that it’s a fashion.”

“Oh,” Brigitte said.

“A passing fancy.”

“I see.”

“Which brings me back to your movie.”

“It does?”

Shirley Mayer began buttoning her coat back up. “Your movie deals with something I like to call the temporary lesbian.”

Brigitte watched as the last of Shirley Mayer’s breasts disappeared.

She continued: “The temporary—or environmental—lesbian feels attracted to other women only in specialized, often isolated situations, where she doesn’t run the risk of condemnation from the general public. I mean, she’s not the sort of person who finds herself getting into trouble over her sexuality. She simply isn’t that committed.”

“Oh,” Brigitte said. “I guess that wasn’t really what I had in mind.”

“Nevertheless,” said Shirley Mayer, “the film succeeds brilliantly at that level. In fact, I know several people who I’m sure would be very interested in seeing it.”

Brigitte nodded weakly. “I’ll make you a copy.”

Shirley Mayer smiled. “Thank you,” she said. “And thank you for the dinner invitation. Really. I accept. Just give me a rain check until the end of the semester, after I turn my grades in. Then you, the French guy, and I will all go out and have dinner.”

“Shirley Mayer thinks I’m a fake,” Brigitte told Raoul that night. She had gone to see him at work, a sunken bar in an old bowling alley behind a shopping center.

“How so?” Raoul asked, handing her a glass of beer. He had showered and was sharply dressed in a mod-looking black t-shirt, which usually meant he hoped to go home with one of his patrons after work. Brigitte could tell she was cramping his style from the way he kept glancing down the bar at two giggling brunettes, but she didn’t care. She had no one else to talk to.

“She thinks I’m in a phase.”

“A gay phase?” Raoul asked.

“I think so.”

He shrugged. “Maybe you should listen to her.”

“Why?” Brigitte asked, indignant.

“Because, man, she’s probably right.”

Brigitte sighed. “But I’m proposing that my heterosexuality is the phase.”

“This is too long to be a phase! The phase must be the shorter period of the two. You’ve only been gay for three months, so this must be the phase.”

The two brunettes got up and left. “Shit, man,” Raoul grumbled.

“Sorry,” Brigitte said.

He leaned on the bar then and lowered his eyelids in a way he knew she found sexy. “Want to make it up to me?”

“No.”

“Shit, man,” he said again, opening his eyes back up and straightening out his spine. “Why don’t you go bowl or something? You’re too good-looking. You scare away my piece of ass!”

He left to make drinks for a middle-aged couple who had taken the brunettes’ stools and were still outfitted in bowling shoes. Brigitte finished her beer and rented a pair of shoes herself. She got a lane and bowled three games alone, each time increasing her score by roughly twenty points. She had just started bowling a fourth when one of the brunettes approached her, an amber beer bottle in her left hand. “Hi,” the woman said.

Brigitte had been standing over the ball return, trying to decide between an elegantly marbled green ball and a plain black one that was easier to carry. “Hi,” she said now, thinking she had an idea of what was about to come. It had happened before—women interested in Raoul wanting to know first if Brigitte was his girlfriend and, if not, would she mind introducing them?

Instead the brunette asked, "How're the bras?"

"The bras?" Brigitte said.

"I sold you some bras a few months ago. At Dillard's."

Brigitte stopped and took a closer look at the woman. She would have to take her word for it, she decided, for it suddenly occurred to Brigitte that she had spent most of that afternoon in the dressing room with her eyes closed. As much as she had enjoyed their sensual experience, the sight of the two of them in the mirror had made her somewhat uncomfortable. "Oh, right," she said after a moment. "Right."

"Is it Brigitte?" the woman asked.

"Yes," Brigitte said, trying desperately to conjure up a name other than Tammy, the one she had given the sales associate character in *36C*.

"I'm Hazel," the brunette said, helping out.

"Sorry," Brigitte said. "I knew there was a z in it."

Hazel smiled. "Anyway, I thought that was you at the bar."

"That was me," Brigitte said. "I was talking to my roommate," she added quickly.

Hazel nodded and took a seat at the electronic scoring table facing the lanes. Meanwhile, Brigitte picked up the green bowling ball and tried to act as if it were very light. After a few seconds she put it back down again, then proceeded to dry her hands over the air blower.

"So how are those bras working out for you?" Hazel asked.

"Great," Brigitte said. "They're great."

Hazel smiled again. "I'm glad." The lane next to Brigitte's was unoccupied and so Hazel stood up and walked over to the other side of the ball return, facing Brigitte now. She took a swig of beer and covered her mouth to veil a small burp. Brigitte thought she must have been about twenty-five, and noticed that her pelvic bones protruded slightly from her snug, faded jeans.

"Maybe you'd better get off the bowling floor," Brigitte said, noticing Hazel's clogs. "They're kind of strict about shoes here."

Hazel followed Brigitte's eyes down to her feet and said, "Oops." She stepped down from the wooden platform and returned to the scoring bench.

"You could rent some shoes," Brigitte said. "I mean, I didn't mean to kick you out or anything." No matter how long she dried them, her hands seemed to keep sweating.

"It's okay," Hazel said. "I'm really just here for my friend. She likes your roommate."

Brigitte nodded.

Suddenly Hazel looked concerned. "I can tell her to lay off if you want. I mean, if the two of you are more than roommates."

"Oh, no," Brigitte said. "He's just a friend."

Hazel nodded.

"He's just French," Brigitte said.

Hazel stood up again. She looked at the scoring monitor overhead, which had been indicating it was Brigitte's turn to bowl for several minutes now. "Do you think my friend has a chance with him?" she asked Brigitte.

"Oh, sure," Brigitte said. She hit the reset button next to the hand dryer and the eight pins she had once hoped to convert into a spare got knocked down. She sensed her options in terms of activity on the bowling floor diminishing rapidly, and yet she felt uncertain about stepping off it.

"Maybe we could hang out while my friend talks to your roommate," Hazel suggested.

"Sure."

"I don't really want to bowl," she said.

"That's okay."

"I could watch you bowl."

"Oh."

"I was watching you before so I could just keep watching you."

"I see," Brigitte said.

Hazel laughed a little. "I was spying on you," she said.

Brigitte laughed, too. "Well," she said. "Hmm."

Hazel set her beer down on the scoring table. She said, "Your bra strap is showing," and stepped up onto the bowling floor to fix it. Though Brigitte kept her eyes open this time, she remembered Hazel better from the soft pads of her fingertips, the smell of almonds and cherries that came off her face.

They all ended up back at Brigitte and Raoul's place. Almost immediately Raoul and Mary Louise, Hazel's friend, disappeared inside the tin shed in the backyard. After hearing that this was where Raoul kept his weights, Mary Louise—whose biceps were minute but bulgy—had insisted she be given the opportunity to prove she could bench-press a hundred pounds.

That left Brigitte and Hazel in the living room, a square space with a wooden floor, a futon, and two red director's chairs. "Matching chairs," Hazel commented as she settled herself into the one bearing Brigitte's name.

“How romantic.”

Brigitte took a seat on the futon. “They’re old,” she said. “We’ve had them for, like, three years.”

Hazel nodded.

“We paid for them ourselves. They weren’t gifts to each other or anything.”

“I like the color,” Hazel said.

“If we ever actually used them on a student shoot people would probably laugh at us.”

Hazel looked blankly at Brigitte, who was desperately trying to stop talking about the chairs. “Here,” Brigitte said suddenly, hopping up from the futon. She walked over to the TV and popped in a video cassette of *36C*. “Here’s something,” she said.

They watched the movie in silence. Brigitte failed to return to her seat, instead standing next to the TV for the duration of the film, ready to shut it off should Hazel experience any discomfort.

But she seemed to like it, clapping and saying “Bravo” when it was over.

“Really?” Brigitte asked her. She hit rewind on the VCR.

Hazel nodded. “I’m flattered.”

Brigitte ejected the tape and carried it back to the futon with her. “Wow,” she said.

“Assuming that’s me, of course. I mean, us.”

Brigitte nodded. “Raoul shot it.”

“Raoul seems interesting,” Hazel said, which Brigitte took to mean she didn’t like him, a fairly common occurrence among thinking women.

“He’s French,” Brigitte said.

“You mentioned that.”

“I was wondering,” Brigitte said, “do you think I’m gay?”

Hazel laughed. “I hope so,” she said.

“Are you?” Brigitte asked.

“Uh-huh.”

“Who was that guy who kissed you in the department store?”

Hazel sighed. “My ex-boyfriend. He’s having a hard time making the transition.”

“Hmm,” Brigitte said.

“I’m not,” Hazel assured her.

“Oh,” Brigitte said. “That’s good.”

Hazel smiled. She looked out the window at the tin shed, whose silver sides were reflecting moonlight. “Is Mary Louise safe with him?” she asked.

“Absolutely,” Brigitte said.

“You know him from the film program?”

Brigitte nodded. “He introduced me to Shirley Mayer.”

“Who’s she?” Hazel asked, and Brigitte told her about how Shirley Mayer wore jackets instead of bras, how she had been persecuted and would now get to keep her job forever.

“But she shouldn’t have done that,” Hazel said.

“Done what?” Brigitte asked.

“Shown you her breasts.”

“Why not?”

Hazel shrugged. She said, “I shouldn’t have touched your shoulders that day in the department store, either.”

“Oh,” Brigitte said, gravely disappointed.

“Or maybe I should have,” Hazel said. “I don’t know.”

“It seemed fine to me,” Brigitte said.

“You’re supposed to feel safe in a dressing room.”

“I did feel safe.”

“You kept closing your eyes.”

“I was safe,” Brigitte insisted.

“It’s just that you seem sort of impressionable.”

“I’m thirty, for godsakes,” Brigitte told her. “I’m a non-traditional student.”

Hazel nodded. “I’m sorry.”

“Shirley Mayer taught me who I am.”

“So you’re in love with her?”

“I want to take care of her,” Brigitte corrected.

“I see,” Hazel said. She stood up then and stretched her arms.

Brigitte stood up, too. “Don’t leave yet,” she said.

Hazel laughed. She moved toward Brigitte, tugged on the waistband of her jeans, and asked for a tour of the house.

In the bedroom they kissed for a long time, first softly, politely—as if they were related—then more invasively. They were still standing after twenty minutes or so when Hazel complained of the heat and took off Brigitte’s shirt.

Underneath was the plain white bra she had sold Brigitte a couple of months earlier, which she quickly pushed up instead of removing, pleasing Brigitte with her urgency.

“Do you like it like this?” Hazel asked, taking off her own shirt now. “Without the dressing room?” She wore one of the violet lace bras from the department store, the kind that lifted little breasts. She took that off, too, and reached down to unbutton her jeans. “Do you like it without Shirley Mayer?” she whispered.

“Yes,” Brigitte said. She moved closer to Hazel now—much, much closer—and suddenly found herself possessed of a profound appreciation for moisture and fragrance, a refined sense of geography as it applied to those areas of the body women shared. And she felt, from Hazel’s reactions, that she had a knack for this sort of thing. For the first time in her life the generosity aspect of sex had ceased to feel like work to her. She thought she might go on forever.

When at last Hazel insisted it was her turn to be generous, Brigitte lay back tentatively, but then asked Hazel to stop. It wasn’t because what Hazel was doing felt like nothing, she tried to explain, but rather, it was too much of something. The right thing. That which would have to be worked slowly into her system so as to trick her into thinking it had been there all along, as opposed to overwhelming her with the torrid fact of its long, unwarranted absence.

In the morning, Brigitte and Hazel were sitting at the kitchen table, drinking coffee and occasionally reaching inside each other’s shirts, when Raoul wandered in from the backyard. “Where’s Mary Louise?” Hazel asked him. He wore no shoes and was opening and closing kitchen cupboards in search of something.

“In the shack, man,” he said. Then he added, “Shit, Brigitte, where’s my aloe vera?”

Brigitte got up from the table and helped him look. “What do you need aloe vera for?” Hazel said. “Is Mary Louise okay?”

Raoul laughed. “Mary Louise is fine. She cut me with her nails, man. You want to see my back?”

“No, thanks,” Hazel said.

“Here,” Brigitte said, handing Raoul the tube of salve. “It was in the junk drawer.”

Raoul nodded. “Thanks, man,” he said. Then he kissed her on both cheeks, as he had done every other morning of their life together.

Hazel looked away and, seeing this, Raoul shrugged. “Hey, man,” he said to her. “I’m French.”

“Man?” Hazel said.

“Okay,” Raoul said, “I’m French, ‘*A-zel*. This is how we say ‘ello, good morning, whatever.”

“Kiss Hazel,” Brigitte said.

“I think she doesn’t want me to,” Raoul protested, shoving his hands in his pockets.

“As long as Mary Louise is all right, it would be okay,” Hazel said.

Raoul was momentarily still, then took his hands out of his pockets and leaned down to kiss Hazel’s cheeks. As he did, his shirt pulled up a bit at the back, and Brigitte could see some of the red welts Mary Louise’s nails had left on his skin. Not scratches or scrapes, but bitter little half-moons outlined in dried blood. Imprints. At first Brigitte was appalled at Mary Louise, then fleetingly jealous of her, then, oddly, gratified. She must have been as strong as she had claimed, Brigitte decided at last. Raoul should have believed her.