

always been, in addition to "difficult," easily "overwrought.") All of this is because she loves me. It really is.

A new campaign—or the renewal of an old one—is about to replace seat belts. Recently my relationship of several years changed from romance to friendship and I became partnerless, a fact that did not escape my ever-vigilant mother. When I went to a conference run by an old friend, Mom was on the job immediately. Did I go to this workshop alone? Yes. Mmmmm, she replied. And did I get together with my "old friend"? Yes. I see, she said. And were you staying at the same hotel? Yes, everyone was in the same hotel. And is he married? Yes. And was his wife with him at this conference? No. Mother came out with it. Had there been any hanky-panky between us? No, Mother, of course not, he's an old friend. Literally. He's almost seventy. She is also gearing up for the upcoming visit of another friend, recently divorced. Am I aware that Tom could have been with *anyone at all* since his divorce? Mom, he's got a girlfriend, they're buying a house. House, schmouse, am I aware that there are diseases out there? Yes, Mother, I've actually heard that.

A few days after this talk, the phone rang again. On my end, you'd have heard, "Thanks so much, Mom. Cereal? Cereal what? What kind of cereal?" On her end, it went like this: "Now I'm not *saying* you're actually *promiscuous*, dear. What you do isn't that, it's, it's that thing that's got serial in it. You know—serial—serial—what is it? Monogamy, that's right, it's monogamy of a sort. Don't you think it's unfortunate that you can't seem to make a relationship last?" Indeed. I tell my adult daughter Kris. *You slut*, she says. *We love that word*. I sprinkle monogamy on my cereal. We're going to create a cereal for promiscuous middle-aged divorcees. We'll call it Slutty Charms.

KIMBERLY GORALL

The End of Summer

It was one of those sticky August days. Supper was over, and I'd hurried through the dishes to pursue my backyard passion. During those long school-free months, my father, brother, and I played baseball with the neighbor boys every evening till the sun slipped behind our willow tree.

I was in the outfield when my father called out that my mother wanted me in the house. I felt a pang of apprehension. In our family, you could be in trouble and not even know it.

I walked cautiously into the kitchen. As usual, my mother sat cross-legged at the table, a booklet of prayers and a mug of instant coffee in front of her, a tendrill of cigarette smoke ascending from her hand. My older sister Donna was there too.

"Sit down. I want to talk to you," my mother said, not looking up.

I sat.

"You're almost in the fifth grade," she began. "You can't walk around like that without a shirt any more."

"But it's *hot* outside," I protested. "I'm dyin'!"

"Girls have to wear shirts."

"But boys don't!"

"That's boys. You're a girl."

"But it's not fair!" I argued, feeling the familiar sting of a double standard. Girls couldn't have footballs, slingshots or pitcher's mitts. Boys didn't have to cook or baby-sit or do the dishes. Girls couldn't wear pants to school, even in the winter. Boys could be secret agents and astronauts. Girls had children. Boys had fun.

"You have to wear a shirt, and I don't want any arguments."

"All the time?"

"That's right."

My mother shifted uncomfortably in her chair. I sensed there was more.

"Pretty soon you'll become a woman," she said, sounding cheerful, rehearsed.

Who cares, I thought, cringing. What was her point? I was missing the game.

I stared at her impatiently.

Finally she said weakly, "You'll bleed in here," pointing down to her lap.

Horrified, I began to cry.

"Good one, Mom," my sister chided, rolling her eyes.

"Oh . . ." my mother moaned, her voice trailing off. Then she, too, started crying.

I stood up, grabbed my glove, and headed for the door.

"You'll be a *woman*," she called after me.

"I don't wanna be a woman," I said through tears, letting the door slam behind me.

DAWN MARANO

Fallout

My father started digging a bomb shelter in our backyard one Saturday when I was six. Our landscaping was rudimentary at best, and I see this working in my father's favor as he tried to convince my mother that his undertaking wasn't impetuous at all. *Hell, Glendora, there's hardly anything but dirt out there anyway. might as well put the thing in now.* I doubt my mother agreed to the plan—surrendered to it is probably closer—but in whatever manner she acquiesced, I imagine my father feeling ennobled somehow as he took our safety and well-being right into his own two, soon-to-be-calloused, hands.

On weeknights after work, he'd eat dinner then shovel until it was too dark to see. It wasn't long before the kids next door started asking questions, and I was told to say we were building a swimming pool. We lived, like everyone else, in a very modest suburban tract home, so this was an egregious lie,