

Donald Friedman

GROWING UP

She stood inside the doorway in a black tank suit spattered with small globs of mud. A green garden hose dangled from her right hand. Water flowed gently from the hose splashing on the slatted boards by her feet. I remembered happily showering sand from my childhood body on just such slats outside a rented beach house.

"You'll have to take off your clothes," she observed gratuitously, smiling, but with evident consternation. I inferred that I was either her first male client or the first in a long time.

For my part I had anticipated, if not a man, an androgynous or old or at least unattractive female, and she fell utterly short of my expectations. She was no kid, but her breasts bulleted at me as I attempted to return her gaze, stretched the black fabric, and made highlights appear. Against her hair--wildly unconstrained, brown, a shade off the damp spots of mud--her skin was pale and childishly smooth. But when she shifted I noticed fibers of muscle that twitched athletically in her thighs and arms and where her neck and shoulders joined.

"Here?" I asked. I glanced around the small paneled reception area, at the doors labeled "Loofa," "Reflexology," "Aromatherapy," and, of course, "Dead Sea Mud," the only open one. As I watched my clothes pile up on the couch I wondered how I would retrieve them in the presence of the next, presumably female, client.

Pulling the door closed behind me I felt the wet boards, cold underfoot. Mercifully her back was turned; I had not felt that naked since I'd been caught pantless in a coal bin by my friend's mother, while playing doctor forty years earlier.

The plastic covered table was high and I flexed onto my toes. "Face up or down?" I asked.

"Whichever."

The mud was warm and black, about the consistency of yogurt or tapioca. She scooped handfuls from a bucket and let it run through her fingers as she glopped and spread it on my legs. I remembered discovering my infant son one day, reeking but blissful when he had got into his diaper and besmeared himself. She slathered the black mud over every inch of skin, leaving only my face and a pallid triangle of white flesh precisely where convention demands concealment. This perverse exposure prompted in me--when I stopped counting ceiling tiles long enough to glance down--an amplified sense of my nudity and inspired a gush of small talk.

"Does the mud really come from the Holy Land?" I asked. I didn't say "Israel," I think, not because she was not Jewish, but because I felt we were dealing with the spiritual rather than the mineral properties of this rejuvenating dirt. She interrupted a stroke to raise the bucket to the light and read the confirming label aloud. "How long do you leave it on?"

"Fifteen minutes, to draw the toxins," she replied and set a timer.

"It must be fun," I ventured, "going to work in a bathing suit."

"It's for you, actually. I usually work without it."

"Oh."

The timer ticked inexorably onward. I recalled a recent visit to the Dead Sea--the baking heat; the chemical extracting plants on the shore down the road from the resorts; the hotels overrun with Germans, those archvillains of my youth; the blond children digging in the sand, floating amid the salt icebergs; topless frauleins smacking Kadima balls--and I wondered aloud whether the healing powers of the holy mud were more mystical than chemical. At last we connected.

"The cure is in the touch," she explained, "not the mud." If I could see who she sees: the fragile, the broken-spirited, widows and discarded wives, the old and the surgically

maimed, those who have not felt another's touch for years. . . Did I recall the newborns taken from their mothers in prison who, otherwise nurtured, died nonetheless? The neurotic monkeys reared with a light bulb-and-wire mother?

"Only last week I had a woman who removed a prosthesis that replaced her breast, shoulder and half her side. She tried to prepare me, said she'd understand if I couldn't continue. Fortunately, I was behind her, because I almost collapsed. She broke down sobbing when she felt the first tracing of my fingers on her scars."

The bell rang and she helped me slide off the plastic and stand to be hosed off. "Turn," she said, and "Lift your leg," and "How's the temperature?"

"Perfect," I said, raising my arms and pirouetting in the warm stream.

When I lay back down for a rub and the application of unguents, we speculated about when our own doomed parts would be taken from us, ultimately unsaveable despite prayer, colonics, meditation, laughter, peach pits, diet, drugs and exercise. At my request she removed her suit and I covered her in mud. Then she covered me again and we giggled and hosed each other off.

"More," I said.

"I'd love to, but our time is up."

"No, really. I want to. Please." I was amazed at the whine in my voice.

She put an arm around my shoulders, our wet skins sticking where they touched, and I stared pouting at my feet.

"I know," she said, "there just isn't time."