

What We Hear of Evelyn Hover
by Dare Dukes

What do we hear of Evelyn Hover?

She's vice president now and doing well. Runs her own gargantuan department. Worked hard to get there. And during a time when the market wasn't exactly welcoming career-women with open arms. You think it's hostile now, try New York in the 50s. She's had a little rent-controlled one-bedroom just north of Gramercy Park for twenty-odd years. Of course, fashion is more woman-friendly than most industries. To a point.

Where has Evelyn been hiding herself?

Right now, we see her savoring the decision of which pair of aerobic trainers to buy, and she finally leaves the store with all three. She walks. She walks home. By the time she gets there she's thrown her carefully planned schedule out the window (aerobic step at noon, Ming Dynasty celadon at the Met at three) and follows a whim. The whim of a walk. To Central Park. To hell with the blustery wind and threatening clouds, she's got a raincoat, doesn't she? she's got an umbrella, doesn't she? Five years ago she would have worn her winter boots. Five years ago—if she wasn't stuck on the phone all day with *The Slouch*—she would have opted for a movie, a movie chosen for length as much as anything. The re-release of *Lawrence of Arabia*, the director's cut with the extra twenty-some minutes of lost footage. Today she walks and doesn't wear her boots, wears one of the new pairs of aerobic trainers (\$110 a pop), the sky-blue ones, knowing there's a good chance they'll be ruined in a downpour.

Is that the sort of thing she does for fun?

Second adolescence, we hear. She was seen at Nobu two stools down from DeNiro smoking what was probably her first cigarette in thirty years. She denies herself nothing. But

mostly she's the same recluse she's always been—and wouldn't you be if you had her day? Her life? Divorce official as of January one. Good for her. No dog. No cat. No bird. She's not a big reader. Nor a cook. Orders in most nights from Gourmet on Wheels just around the corner. Close enough that the grilled salmon and couscous (\$16.95, plus \$2 tip) is still warm, if not piping-hot, when it arrives. TV, probably, most nights. Turns off her phone and answering machine. A glass of white wine. Couldn't weigh much over a hundred even though it's a rare event when she passes on an exotic desert. One of the lucky ones. Not the sort to know what's on what channel on what night. Wanders up and down the many options of her cable Gold Service and settles on usually PBS. Not much tolerance for commercials, even though you could argue that, given her job, she'd do well to keep up on current marketing strategies. She's smart in a PBS sort of way. Would probably kill you at Trivial Pursuit. Not intuitive, god knows. Not that. Not about people. But can tell you precisely what minute of what day in what month and year the killer bees will arrive; what Lincoln had for dinner the night he was shot; could tell you without blinking who what and why exactly is the phenomenon referred to as El Niño.

What does picking the pieces for a given season's line entail—spring, for instance?

Frantic globetrotting. Exciting? To hear her tell it it's a lot of room service wolfed down and screaming queens. That designer is dead now. The company is not what it used to be. Relies mostly on a couple of copy-cat designers from somewhere in the Midwest. It's not about the garment anymore. We can blame The Gap for that. It's about estimating how much a Neo-Aryan Militia mom in Oklahoma City is willing to shell out at the mall for the hat her son is whining about, the hat he saw Snoopy Puffy Inner-City Fatty sporting on MTV, the hideous cap that came into vogue after some Uptown kid went to visiting hours at Rikers and later told his *gangstuh* buddies how he saw his dad wearing underwear on his head and wasn't that nifty, wasn't that *fly*. Once the garment is chosen, the namers work their magic. Every industry has namers—copywriters

with skills so distilled that they make absurdly lucrative careers out of naming products. The Sleek Pro 1000™. The Celestron™. Mêleé™. The Lady Finger™. Mercifully, her company tends to refer to its products as what they are: slacks, shirt, loafers, skirt. However, in the marketing department's ongoing struggle to polish the rapidly dinged colors of the rainbow, all hell has been known to break loose. For years they've employed one of these namer types, referred to as "the color guy" (she met him once but, ironically, can never remember his name). It is his job to continually reinvent the verbal correlates of the color wheel. Subjected to his word processor yellow has at different times appeared in their catalogue as "hollandaise," "duck's bill," "towhead," and "piñata;" blue as "Mediterranean," "peace," "ice," and "miracle;" red as "mischief," "Bacchus," "lava," and "bull fight;" and black as "jazz," "licorice," "Halloween," and "villain." *This raw silk blouse wears like a summer kiss and is available in your choice of miracle, bull fight, piñata, and villain.*

Does Evelyn Hover still drink after all she's been through?

With friends she orders Ketel One on the rocks. A kid-clerk at City Lights Wine turned her on to a Schrug Chardonnay so buttery she finds herself pleasantly sated after only one glass. What can you say? She's been drawn to drunks all her life but has never been one herself. Besides, what are you going to do when Calvin's toasting two feet from you, sip tonic? Please.

Do we really feel for her? How could we not feel for her?

Her childhood, a cliché. Dad drunk and abusive. Though how severely is uncertain. He had to be Catholic. (What is "Tully"? Irish?) If she talks to you about him you can count yourself among a handful of intimates, the three or four who call her Eve and sometimes Evie. Her mother was Jewish but Evelyn has, not hidden it, per se, but ignored it. Goes to, of all things, a Catholic service most Sundays at 11. That big Romanesque church on 24th Street. If not, you can find her at the gym. Her friend from California said...since the separation she's taken up with old friends in that Prozac kind of way. Out of the cave into the sun, sorry about not calling for thirty years but

can't we pick up right where we left off? Since the separation this college friend from California has taken Evelyn under her wing. She and another woman in Illinois who runs a dude ranch of all things. Gone to California for most of the major holidays, but this past Thanksgiving this woman and her brutish husband come here. At a gathering, not knowing who she's talking to—whether this person she's talking to is Jewish or Italian or octoroon—the Californian says—are we ready for this?: Evie has always taken great pains to disassociate herself from all those pushy Jews in the fashion industry. All those. Pushy. Jews. How does Evelyn disassociate herself from all these pushy Jews who infest the industry, plaguelike? Poise. Poise and more specifically lowering that quote piercing, nasally voice unquote inherited from the Jewish mother. Granted, we've never heard Evelyn disparage so much as a coffee stain on her Donna Karan linen trousers, much less an entire ethnic community, but this from the charming college chum.

What is the name of that church on 24th?

St. Johns. St. Peters? We might surmise she likes that church not for its denomination but for the exquisite Art Nouveauish fresco behind the alter. You've seen it. You've gone on tours with out-of-towners. St. Andrews! St. Andrews. The crucifix notable for its asymmetry and the over-sized hand. The one with—who's that New York City saint, the black one? Or is he not canonized yet? Are they still working on him? The story goes—one of his miracles being scrutinized no doubt—that the black saint saw that hand tremble. Shake. Accusingly. Hard to say, hard to remember the details of the story, but the sort of thing that would strike a would-be saint blind, a point of conversion. Anyway, it shook.

When will the killer bees arrive?

In Texas as we speak.

Where did The Slouch go after the separation?

You bet we sympathize. Reason enough in her thirty years plus with The Slouch. *Trentes*
Ans. Thirty years dropped like a gold nugget into a waterless, bottomless well. Never even to have the satisfaction of hearing the echo of its plop. Thirty years. From New Orleans where she was raised (accent erased), to school in St. Louis with that never-look-back feeling of absolute emancipation, to an enviable position for a woman her age at Saks Fifth Avenue in San Francisco. Evelyn reserves these details for her intimates, but we know that it was only a couple of years before she was a buyer. A single woman. A buyer for Saks. San Francisco. The Fifties. What would you imagine a woman like that was capable of if you could time-travel back and martini with her? You would want to know where you'd gone wrong. What was the exact nature of your mistakes that put you in a secretarial pool or behind a cosmetics counter and put all your hope for the thinnest shadow of a real life in that date you were going to have Saturday night with that lanky, nervous, and already-starting-to-bald salesman. Those of us who—and be honest now, there weren't many—who could envision, and not only envision but pursue a life that did not include the lanky salesman, saw that life beginning at a place almost unattainable for all but the privileged or the pathologically fearless. But there was Evelyn. To prove it could be done by an unassuming young woman from a Midwestern college by way of a nightmarish Southern Gothic father (anyone ever heard her give the slightest mention of a mother beyond the Jewishness?). There was Evelyn. Not yet twenty-six. City By The Bay. Salaried. Fog rolling in. Creamy turtleneck abutting the chin. Salt breeze. Cracked crab from a red and white paper box. Hello Evelyn. Sit down with us for a while and rub off. Leave out, please, the part about The Slouch.

Will the house in Carmel be sold?

One does not abandon to the whims of the California real estate market a house on Pebble Beach's 17-Mile Drive, particularly when that house has only two houses between it and a multi-

million-dollar view of the Pacific. Of course, when the house is two small rooms, neglected due to lack of use, with a chimney too plugged for a fire, neither does one fly out for a summer weekend and throw barbecues at which a kackied and flannel-shirted former Mayor Eastwood is just one of many distinguished guests. What one does do, apparently, is drop it down the well, it being acquired during those lost thirty years, meaning: Add it to The Slouch's fat settlement so that he will have a pleasant environment in which to fortify the recovery he started, post-separation, in a white room overlooking the Monterey Bay in the Betty Ford-type facility (fundraising courtesy of Mrs. Eastwood). Armed with daily meditations, the monthly six-thousand-and-some-dollar alimony payments, and the support of that widow quote friend with whom he flung the last five years of the past thirty (God help that confused lady), he will, we can be sure, be able to exorcise from the cottage all the haunting residue of bimbos, bambis, boom-booms, and boingers (those he admitted to, those he didn't) that collected there during the aforementioned thirty-year romp. A new paint job can really liven a place up.

Is it true that the alimony is a drop in the bucket for Evelyn?

Not a bucket but an automatic transfer. As if by magic on the first of every month, six-thousand-and-some dollars disappear from her account. But no magic—a press of the ENTER key is all. Not even that probably. Probably no human oversees it (except for her accountant's indication of the quarterly sum with a sharp lead check-mark). Probably it's one of many tasks in some gigantic mainframe's routine. A cold electric thought. From JPMorgan Chase to Golden State Federal without a glitch thanks to the age we live in. Given time it will never be missed. Enough time and she will stop catching herself distractedly tallying the losses in the form of trips (extravagant), cozy homes with views of peopleless landscapes (to which she won't retire), anniversary presents (not given to friends), graduation presents (not given to the children of friends). It has long been observed that the awareness of such losses is itself eventually lost. They

grow to become dead facts, like the lines on an aging face that for a period caused such anxiety. Something that can be let go to an accountant—let him lose his hair over it, that’s what he’s paid for. Thank god, in this respect, for automation. We can take solace in knowing that she will never again have to endure the pinch of a pen scratching on a check the lines of the date, the sum (first verbal, then numeric), his name, then hers. Leaving blank the memo blank (her memory would not need jogging). Then just the sight of it, month after month. The joint-checking account is closed so his name wouldn’t be printed there, his name and that absurd background: the photo of the pink and orange ocean sunset, the kind of sunset his in-patient counselor would have prodded him to notice every evening out the window of his white room. The luxury of lying on a bed waiting for the dinner bell, recovering in a white room painted pink and orange every evening like the allowance checks she sent him for years, from one career change to another, from insurance to a car dealership to an upscale cookware franchise in White Plains, through all the periods of quote unquote soul-searching, the separate apartments (Upper West Side, Upper East, West Village, Miami, San Francisco), through her discovery of the fling which at the time he promised was over but which to this day continues, through even his misadventures—even that—in the proud profession of hand modeling. Was Evelyn laughing? One shudders to recall the one-liners that went round. And round. Not looking for a handout, just a hand. Poor guy, can’t even get a handjob. And when he finally, miraculously, got one, a job, that is—the first paid position in the new career of a man who had accomplished little else but convince his wife that accomplishing nothing was something worthy of her continual investment—he fails to accomplish under close scrutiny of the camera the one thing in his life he can admit (if only to himself) he is capable of doing: nothing. An agency rep said, You grasp the bar of soap. Turn thrice in the hand, lather ensues. Luxuriate but don’t dawdle. Remember: molten rock. You: a working man, a handler of chain saws, digger of post holes. Now rinse. Towel off. All this he could do. What he could not

do was the do-nothing part. After drying his hands he could not then rest his hand on the pile of brushed cotton and leave it there. Just leave it there, please. Hold, please. Still. The director wanted absolute stillness, a clean, masculine, peaceful repose. Twenty-some takes later it became clear that whether it was nerves or caffeine or delirium tremens nothing they said or promised could keep that hand from trembling just enough to be picked up by the camera.

How did Evelyn endure?

She met him in San Francisco when her career was blossoming. We imagine that at such a time in your life you're likely to believe that the world and everything in it is blossoming with you. We know they met at a party. You can almost see it: the house of a successful young architect. Sausalito with a view of the Golden Gate and a Japanese garden the architect had designed himself. Silly now maybe but at the time very exotic. A little pagoda and a tinkling rock waterfall under a plum tree. They were both there with dates. He was training in insurance. Probably he was a good liar. Probably her career progressed so rapidly that she was able to leave part of herself back there with him under the plum tree. So that even after ten, twenty, twenty-five years, she felt that the beginning of her life with him was only a stroke of luck away.

And yet she survived her company's down-sizing?

More than survived it. Some will tell you spearheaded it. At least in her now-slightly-less-than-gargantuan department. She walks like a whisper but don't let that fool you. She's no sentimentalist.

What did Abraham Lincoln have for supper on the night he was shot?

Mrs. Lincoln, for shock, could not recall. The autopsy reported an uncharacteristically large meal for the President, consisting mostly of potatoes and a prodigious portion of an unidentifiable cut of beef.

How practical is Mrs. Evelyn Hover?

She knows that changing her name back to Tully is a symbol not worth the price of new business cards and stationary, not worth the effort of informing her small circle of friends, large circle of acquaintances, and unwieldy network of business associates. Though she wouldn't describe it as a paradox, she senses at this point in her life the practicality of experimenting with impracticality. Late February is not the season for sky-blue. A blustery afternoon, even an unseasonably warm one, is not an afternoon for sneakers. Would those shoe engineers have gone to all the trouble of researching and developing the precise bounce of the aerobic trainers had they known Evelyn Hover would wear them for a stroll on city streets? She ignores what she knows in all her expertise to be true about appropriate attire and protects herself against the threatening elements with only a light windbreaker and a scarf. Hello Evelyn. You'd think she could predict that she'll end up with the flu during fall-line crunch week. She curls the *Sunday Times Magazine* in her hand so she can continue reading that very interesting article in the park. (The president has appointed a committee to mediate negotiations between the three governments of the former Yugoslavia and to investigate a rumor that the Bosnian government is maintaining a massive underground prison camp.) She touches the doorknob and her cell phone rings. It's her assistant, begging her to come in and make a decision on the latest samples (more wool trousers from a young Milanese designer). She fends him off. Again she puts her hand on the doorknob, again the phone rings. It's her friend in California. Evelyn exits her apartment with her phone pressed to her cheek. A brief conversation, as most of them are these days given their renewed commitment to frequent calls and keeping each other informed of the goings-on. The friend tells her again that she should give her youngest daughter, the estranged painter, a call. As usual Evelyn protests that the daughter, who's thirty, would not be interested in hanging out with an old lady. Don't be ridiculous, give her a call, take her to dinner, she admires you, she'd love to see you, the friend says.

They hang up, and Evelyn finally gets out the door. She walks west on 22nd Street. As she turns north on Broadway, she thinks, Love to see me? The girl (a *woman* now, but a girl of fifteen the last time Evelyn saw her) has been, since her adolescence, a constant source of grief and anxiety for Evelyn's friend. The friend, like Evelyn, is not one to dwell on sad topics, but Evelyn, having developed, during her years of successfully forecasting the seasonal desires of the consumer public, an uncanny facility for mining the most superficial social phenomena for telling facts, has picked up on a few details (the daughter is rarely home for the holidays, had what the friend called a period of illness in her late teens and early twenties, is a frequent traveler to risky locales, dresses disheveledly, will not accept financial assistance from her parents) from which she has unwittingly constructed the following theory: Radical Lesbian Feminist definitely, Recovering Addict possibly. Hm, Evelyn thinks, Love to see me? Doubtful.

Does Evelyn worry about growing old in New York City?

The city enchants her. She's always admired Broadway for cutting diagonally across Manhattan's grid. What was the city planner thinking when he conceived of it. Was it really just a cow path as somebody once suggested to her. Or was the planner flying in the face of the city fathers, maybe, a dash of calculated sloppiness in an otherwise perfect design. Garish gestures, however much an exaggeration, frequently adumbrate the only truth you may ever perceive about a person. The accidents of personality that occur when people reach beyond themselves. The wrong accessory can be made right if in its hilarity it sparks a little sadness. Yes, on occasion, she worries.

Does she sometimes think of the world as a big outfit?

She thinks of certain types of people: the showoff, the loudmouth, the clown, the deluded yet sanguine failure, the radical-lesbian-feminist-painter-recovering-addict; then revises the thought. These do not make up types of people. They are anti-types, though you can see patterns. If the world is a big outfit then these anti-types are the mismatched accessories, and staring at them can

teach you things about...what?...God? Ha ha. God in Milanese wool trousers and a herringbone coat. A girl catches Evelyn laughing at the corner of 28th Street. At a breach in the cross traffic, the girl, no more than fifteen, throws down her skateboard and pushes away across the flow of cars. Dreadlocks (*dreadfullocks*, Evelyn has been known to call them). The girl's pushing leg dangles forward, reaches up in a right angle, then thrusts itself hammerlike against the ground. Watching those matted tresses and that dangling leg Evelyn thinks of the episode of *Frontline* about the AIDS drug developed from the (defensive) poison of the Portuguese man-of-war, the jellyfish, and how that fish (*fish?* really?) expands and contracts, a cellophane Easter bonnet, both hideous and beautiful. She watches her two brightly new aerobic trainers advancing forward and wonders if Bob Ridder, Alan Goldman, Margaret Simone, and Denise Myers (all of whom made up the uppermost managerial tier of the twenty-three people she laid-off after that grueling eight-hour meeting with the corporate heads) thought of her now in a similar way: the silent killer. To Evelyn's credit, she doesn't take much stock in other people's opinions (of *her*, that is; the consumers' opinion of the fall line is another matter entirely). And, being mildly tickled by the idea of herself as a silent killer, she predicts that, before sitting down in the petulant wind to finish the article on the president's committee, she will succumb to a sudden carnivorous craving, will transgress her diet of chicken and fish by buying and devouring a Hebrew National hot sausage (\$1.25, still steaming from the stainless-steel box) topped with mustard and raw onions.

Does Evelyn find it ironic that she, having successfully cloaked her half-Jewishness, would suddenly and for the first time in years crave a kosher frank?

Yes. Again, she is amused, amusement being a recurring emotion on this day's stroll.

Does she think herself a fraud?

Not in the least. We imagine she does not consider herself a religious woman. Her spirituality is another matter, a private matter. She would take umbrage at the word "cloaked."

There is, after all, another half to her, a Christian half. If it appears she has aligned herself more closely to the intemperate and bellicose Catholic father than to the protective Jewish mother, Evelyn would point out that you, not knowing the first thing about what makes her tick, have made basic assumptions about her spirituality that are all wrong. The debate that for centuries has sent entire nations to war (carpenter from Nazareth: messiah or prophet?) is beside the point. What draws her into a given house of worship are not the ways in which that house promises to regulate her contact with the omniscient. She comes quite simply for the pictures. The pictures of people and animals and marvelous events. Nothing more. Well, the pictures and the responses they elicit. The austere white walls of the Puritan church make her feel abandoned. The ornate, abstract patterns of the interior of a Lower East Side synagogue, though admittedly rendered with precision, leave her with ideas only. Years ago in Istanbul, while The Slouch was off somewhere arranging the particulars of shipping a rug, she toured Hagia Sophia and, after regaining her breath amid all that vaulted grandeur, found herself mourning the vanquished pictures imprisoned beneath the paint. Conversely, at the church of Bon Temps outside Rio de Janeiro (The Slouch was, at the very moment Evelyn searched her purse for a tissue, tanning amid many girls from Ipanema) she was deeply moved by the inexpert images painted by the colonial artisans. Her guide led her into a little side chapel whose purpose was to receive the devout entreaties for the sick and infirm. People from throughout Brazil made pilgrimages to this little room to say a prayer and hang on the ceiling and walls a material representation (usually plastic; sometimes plaster, porcelain, and stone) of the diseased or damaged body part. Every inch of walls and ceiling was crammed with them: legs, arms, hands, heads, hair, eye balls, breasts, penises, toes, hearts, torsos with bullet holes, necks with boils, lungs half-eaten with cancer. Impossible to clean, they were caked with years of grime, over a century's worth for some of them, so that they seemed to smell of the actual parts and diseases that they were meant to represent. Evelyn sneezed, searched her purse for a tissue, wiped

her nose, then brought the tissue to the eye that, short of short-sightedness, was functioning as it should, and was grateful for the touch of grace that all her life had preserved her arm's ability to raise and her hand's to grasp. She had a comparable experience in a Hindu temple (temple?) in Queens once, during which, without getting too specific, she was made to feel faint by animistic statuary that appeared to writhe. And in her church of choice, in April and May when the sun hits the eastern stained-glass window just right, many times she has been forced to look away from the fresco behind the alter as a beam of light illuminates the pink of the crucified carpenter's impaled, larger hand in such a way as to make it seem to shudder and blush.

How often does Evelyn lose her cool?

She's weathered many an adverse situation with dignity and cheerfulness. Stoicism, at least. Often emerges stronger for it. In addition to the occasional revelatory experience and the myriad calculatedly private outbursts inspired by the tragedy of her marriage, she has a tendency toward clumsiness, particularly, she's noticed, when it comes to food. There was that broiled scallop she inadvertently flicked on Anne Baxter's five-hundred-dollar Prada blouse on New Years Eve. And there is the mustard-slathered raw onion, which at this moment she watches fall earthward, or, more precisely, *shoeward*. El Niño ("The Child," named for the baby Jesus due to the fact that the warming Pacific currents are most active in December) is wreaking bi-coastal havoc. North of Los Angeles, it has entombed an entire family in mud. In Florida, bloodhounds specially trained to sniff out the dead are still searching for a man whose trailer home was last seen twirling heavenward sucked up by a silvery flume. On the other hand, the mid- and northern-Atlantic states are, by and large, experiencing a mild winter. These days "mostly sunny" are the words Evelyn expects to see on the weather-forecast billboard when she stares out her office window on the thirty-ninth floor. While The Child's tantrum has so far left a total of forty-three dead and twelve missing in California and the southeastern states combined, the violent shifting of the earth's currents has left

a pocket of calm and unseasonable warmth in New York City. Just the other day Evelyn was astonished to see buds tricked awake on the branches of a tree outside her building. Now sitting on a bench in Central Park, she laughs inwardly at how the accumulation of sunny days tricked her into a sleeplike ignorance of the particular warnings of this day's weather. She stares at the accidental dollop of mustardy onion whipped by a blast of wind from the tip of her hot sausage and resting now on the toe of her sky-blue aerobic trainer and thinks: No matter, no matter. She can see the namer of colors scoffing at the "mustard" and "sky" of her besmirched aerobic trainers. If he keeps a record of tired words (at his salary Evelyn is sure he does) then "mustard" and "sky" must top the list. This is just one more example of many Evelyn has lately noticed of how the market's demands can turn a simple, pleasurable moment into something ambivalent and embarrassing. Holding her hot sausage out to her side at arm's length, she bends over her crossed knee intending to carefully pinch the glob from her toe. But before she can she's frozen by a thought: The painterly part of the radical-lesbian-feminist-painter-recovering-addict would be content at the mere vision of this accident, would need no word for it probably, would just as soon call mustard "brown" or blue "green" as long as it worked compositionally in the larger picture. She might even prefer to misname the colors as part of some agenda of undermining the steel-fisted authority of a language that has for centuries been the primary weapon of the masculine will to power. Evelyn thinks, Love to see me? Not likely.

Has Evelyn ever considered the possibility that she is not attracted to men?

Certainly, but you must consider, as she has, that the two men with whom she spent the greater part of her life were her father and you-know-who. So, if, on occasion, the thought occurs to her that she is one of the rare breed not cut out for marriage, she reminds herself that not all the fish in the sea are man-of-wars. Most men aren't evil or necessarily nasty. They are, in her experience—to use the descriptive terminology of her earthy friend in Illinois who inherited a dude

ranch from her husband (dead going on ten years now)—lunkheads, selfish chunkheads, dopes, dummies, testosterone-drunk turtles, and booger-farts. Oversized kids is what they are. Big babies who throw tantrums at a shift in the breeze, are blind to the destruction they cause, and can't apologize for it when it's pointed out to them. Like that war in the former Yugoslavia, the Bosnian conflict, whatever you call it. A perfect example. A real boy-contest. A board game in which casualties are handled like a stack of cards. Like the game she gave for Christmas to the nine-year-old grandson of her California friend. *Mêlée*™. Ages eight and up. Look, she said to the six-year-old brother, it says it right there on the box. (She wipes the mustard from her toe.) She was trying to dissuade the six-year-old from playing with the nine-year-old. It had taken her days to get used to and finally start enjoying the six-year-old's tendency to plunk himself in her lap, and once she had she couldn't bear the thought of his precious sense of invincibility being sacrificed for the nine-year-old's fleeting thrill at an easy kill. Come on, Aunt Evelyn, the nine-year-old said, if he wants to play, let him play—and no fair you helping him.

What, if anything, does Evelyn regret?

It is Evelyn's conviction that there are no referees in the game of life. The game itself is improvisational and not infrequently rained-out. Bullies take advantage of the meek and the meek get more pity than they deserve. Those lucky enough to be born with four functioning limbs would do well to be grateful for those limbs and leave the dreams of greater things to children. In her darker, stormier moods she can look around and say: How could I have wanted children when I am surrounded daily by adult versions of them and have been all my life. Their sniveling tactics, their promises, the lies they tell while sitting in your lap—that you are their one and only and will be forever and ever as long as you keep the monthly lollipops coming. In her darker, stormier moods she might see a child and compare it to the faded hope she used to have for one of her own and think the first lesson a kid should learn is this: The greater your hopes, the greater your potential for

despair. Know that and get on with it. These moods are rare and brief and well-hidden from the outside world. No one but she knows she has them, though some of us have our theories. Most people would say (most sincerely, some sarcastically): Oh, yes, Evelyn Hover, the woman with the sunny disposition. It was in an attempt to maintain a sunny disposition that she deferred to the two brothers, so mismatched in age, in their desire to play a round of *Mélée*[™]. The inevitable kill, though quick, was anything but silent. On the nine-year-old's side it was punctuated by unsportsmanlike whoops, hollers, and a general tactic of intimidating his opponent through demoralizing commentary. From the six-year-old there was the repetitive note of protest, predictable in pitch but endlessly variable in tempo and attack, first heard as a wordless peep while Evelyn read the card that described how his entire line of tanks (she'd tried to warn him to not lump them all in a single country) had been hijacked by leftwing rebels in the Brazilian rainforest, and grew with each defeat until the final crescendo that wailed out of him upon the realization that, with his last regiment fatally bushwhacked in Southeast Asia, the game was over. With the child screaming in her lap she felt her mood threaten to erupt into a storm. I told you so, the nine-year-old kept repeating. I told you so. For a moment Evelyn wanted to concur, wanted to squeeze the little whiner's face in her hand and say, What did you expect? What did you expect? Instead she surprised herself by swooping him up in her arms and saying Let's go for a drive, shall we go for a drive? She half-jogged him out to the slate-gray pod of her rental sedan and, as she buckled him in (thank God for seat belts), she said, Do you know why they call this a Celestron[™]? Because what most people don't know is that it's more of a space ship than a car, and, if my rocket boosters weren't broken, we could go to any star you wanted, lickety-split.

Is there any other place Evelyn would rather be right now?

She's of two minds. Part of her longs to be home in a hot bath, or, at the very least, blowing her auburn hair dry with that old dependable warhorse (they don't make them like that

anymore), the Sleek Pro 1000™—any place warm and dry and out of the rain that is beginning to fall hard enough now to be heard. Another part of her, however, wants to stay right where she is, on a bench in an urban park intoxicatingly (dangerously) empty of people, holding over her head a newspaper whose ink is fast running beyond readability. Sunny moods, particularly the inexplicably spontaneous ones, must be appreciated. Too often one has to will oneself into such a mind set, and in such cases, there is a sense that something destructive has been left temporarily behind and will eventually, ominously, raise up its ugly head again. Other times one can be wrenched from dark places by external, violent forces. Disasters can be serendipitous. Like the woman she once heard describe how liberated from material possessions she felt after losing all of hers in a fire. Like the fender-bender (just a tap really, but hundreds of dollars worth of damage) she got into in the Celestron™ near the artichoke farm with the sniffing six-year-old in the passenger seat. It seemed that nothing could stop the black thoughts from pouring down that day, certainly not a Christmas-day drive along the sun-drenched California coast. She thought she was driving to nowhere in particular—somewhere, anywhere with a bright view of the ocean was all—until she recognized the winding stretch of highway she was on as the one she and she-knew-who used to drive from the San Francisco airport to their summer house in Carmel. Carmel is called Carmel because it's caramel-coated, she said more to cheer herself up than the boy. How absurd, she then thought to herself, that she had bought a vacation house on the opposite coast, so far away that renting it out was a pain in the tush, much less using it themselves. Far enough away, she thought, that I could believe it held some kind of untapped loveliness between us. Close enough on that day that within forty-five minutes (not including pee-stops) she could have been on the doorstep, had her dark mood's intention—to pound on the door till it opened, to wait on the stoop till he showed up, to...to...—not been thwarted by the short old man with the inch-thick glasses and the tin-can miniature pickup truck. Why the hell don't you look where you're going? she said to him in a voice

that to her sounded too pleasant under the circumstances. She had wrapped her fingers around the old man's arm and was appalled to discover that she was squeezing it with all her might. Worse, the old man's head had fallen to his chest and he was bearing her outburst like a guilty, frightened child. The six-year-old, watching her, wasn't frightened but stunned and pale with mouth in a silly pink O. Oh my goodness, Evelyn whispered with the rush of traffic. By way of an apology, as they waited for the police to write up the report, Evelyn crossed the highway to a farm stand and purchased for the old man a half-dozen of Gilroy's finest artichokes. She drove back the long way along the coastal road, and, as the afternoon fog rolled itself like pink and orange taffy around the falling sun, she thought neither of the discarded checkbooks from the old joint account nor of the vacation home that, come January 1, would legally no longer be hers. She thought mostly of what word came next in the song the six-year-old was teaching her, a song ("See Ya Later") from his favorite TV show hosted by, from what she could gather, a fat red alligator named Roy. It wasn't until she was back in New York two days later that she marveled at how an old, half-blind migrant worker had rear-ended the dark thoughts out of her, and with such a jolt that for hours her fingertips tingled and two days later her joints still ached.

Does Evelyn have latent masochistic tendencies?

Please. Pain is the body's very useful alarm system, this Evelyn knows (*Nova*). We worry that she might err on the side of happiness in an attempt to avoid pain, and that such strenuous avoidance will ultimately be the cause of a pain far more intense than the pain she is attempting to avoid. But we also know that she's no fruitcake. We know, for instance, that, come Thursday, when she will be forced to make million-dollar decisions about the fall line while in the full throws of the flu, she will chide herself for having ignored the warning signs, for having left the apartment with nothing to protect her from the inclement weather but the *Sunday Times*. No, Evelyn Hover does not enjoy pain. She did not enjoy being accidentally elbowed in the eye by the six-year-old as

he grabbed for the plastic bat. Despite brief, inspired moments when she will be tempted by the potential of having an acquaintance with the credentials of her California friend's daughter, we know she will be too pained to actually pick up the phone, dial it, and offer to take the woman to dinner. She wasn't particularly enthralled by the phone conversation she had two days after Christmas with her earthy dude-ranch friend. While pressing her fingers in little circles around the knots in her aching and possibly whiplashed neck, she walked the conversation in circles trying to find a way to bring up (hoping her friend would spare her the anxiety by bringing it up for her) the topic of the gift her friend had sent her for Hanukah. It sat on the couch beside her, still nestled in the wrapping paper, while Evelyn searched her recounting of her life's only auto wreck for a way of entry into expressing her gratitude for the—whatever you called it—and found it (thank God) by saying, What I could really use is a good, strong battery-powered neck massage—ha ha—which brings me to the topic of your present. It's a beginners model, the friend tactfully broke in. Mail order from a catalogue run by and for women in San Francisco. Women, Evelyn now thinks as she watches her ink-speckled aerobic trainers sloshing southward through the park, probably a lot like the circle of friends the radical-lesbian-feminist-painter-recovering-addict hangs out with. Artists, writers, intellectuals, motorcycle enthusiasts, all hell-bent on reclaiming that which has been denied their kind for centuries. Women who long ago graduated from the slim, nondescript, peach-colored form of the The Lady Finger™ (comes complete with brown velvet carrying-case; batteries not included) to models more unabashedly literal or fantastical, available in a rainbow of colors derived from the palettes of ethnicity and dreams. Animistic totems kept almost on display, ready for action, so to speak, in sock-drawers or next to moisturizers on a rack above the toilet, not in the kitchen cabinet behind the juicer on a spot of shelf reserved for rarely-used hand-held appliances. Why is The Lady Finger™ thought of as a trainer model? Why must pleasure be taken to the extreme, worn like a horse-hair shirt, to be considered valid? Call her old-fashioned, but she will

never understand the impulse to skewer one's face with surgical steel. It is possible, she thinks, to accessorize yourself beyond the outfit, to lose your grounding, to take your appearance so far outside a sense of the whole that everyone who looks at you is confused, dizzied. Is this freedom: eliciting in others a sense that you are so unfettered as to be almost not there at all? Is this pleasure? Is this freedom? To be wrinkled and stained and cluttered and clashing? No outfit at all, but to have one's entire get-up be bangles and bobbles and jangling things; mineral-tinted makeup, squirrel tails, and wild pigeon feathers, like the tribes the Puritans encountered (*National Geographic Special: Our Ancestors' Bones*). No wonder, Evelyn thinks, stopped in mid-stride, no wonder the early settlers were wary of them. She drops the newspaper, heavy with rain, into a trash basket. Christopher Columbus is in front of her now, six stories up on top of a column, ducking his head into the ceiling of mist. Behind her is the entrance to the park. The stoplights on Broadway and 8th Avenue have turned red and no cars come from 59th Street. No cars come and in this weird stoppage she hears the rain clapping perfunctorily around her. The Met (right up the street) remounts the same old productions in cycles; some operas she has seen three or four times, finds it impossible to be moved by the spectacle, but, in the end, still applauds. Wet even under the windbreaker, she feels her body as if it were something else, as if she were a hanger and it had been draped there to shiver and drip dry. And her ruined aerobic trainers, well, if she can get the mildew smell out she'll find a use for them, worse comes to worse wear them in her apartment like slippers. The cars start up again and Columbus Circle turns again, and she searches the traffic for a spot of mustard and thinks: I'll take a cab. (Her arm raises gracefully.) I'll take a cab and get out of these wet clothes and into a hot bath. Big week next week. Chicago, Toronto, Los Angeles, in four days. Good to stay busy but busier next week than I want to be. Glass of Chardonnay and the tuna with Swiss chard. Answering machine off. *The News Hour*—no, wait: this is Sunday, so *Frontline*. Maybe a phone call. If I feel up to it, a phone call, maybe. Too busy next week but we can make plans in

advance. The following week, maybe. Or maybe the week after that, when things have calmed down a bit. Love to see me? I'll say, Hello there Gretchen, remember me? I'll say, Your mother tells me you're a starving artist. No, best not to mention the mother. No mention of starving. This: I'll say, Hello Gretchen, remember me? We'll talk about the terrible weather today, and then I'll say, I'm very interested in art, I've seen too little of it in my time, too busy, too busy. Just today I had plans for the Met but those went out the window with the rain. Terrible rain we had. But I'm very interested in art and would love to see yours. I'll take you to dinner. I'd love to see yours and love to see *you*. I'd love to take you to dinner. I'd love to see you.