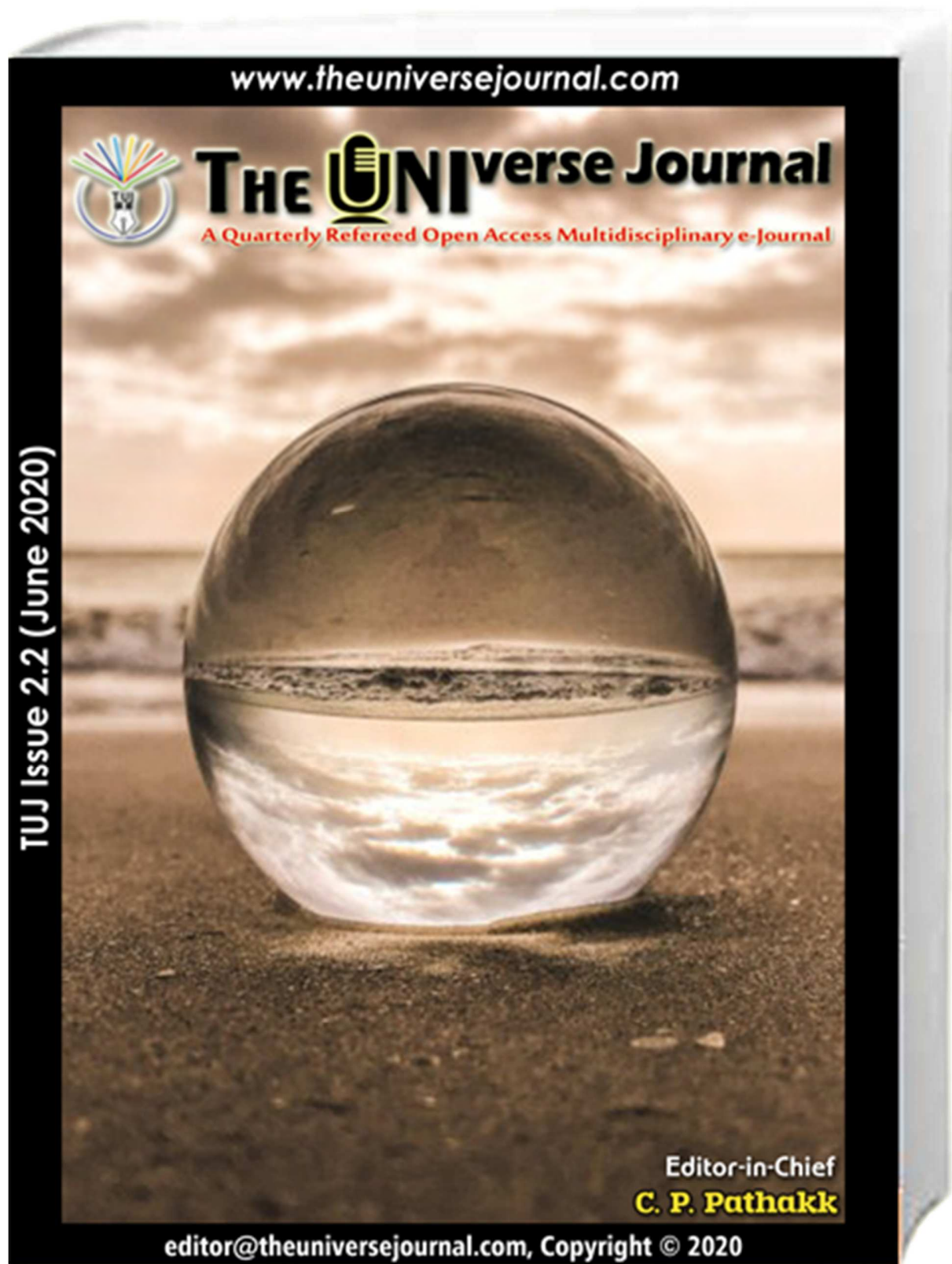


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### “Someplace Without Washrooms”

Alfredo Salvatore Arcilesi

It was clear to Cynth that the cute girl and handsome boy didn't want to kiss. Not with her sitting three benches away. Not with their pushy friend egging them on, cameraphone framed and ready.

The typical scene was written and directed by genetics. The girl was indeed cute, petite, armed with perfected feminine mannerisms, all packaged in a Fall outfit that teased of Summer treats; in a word, she was desirable. The boy was indeed handsome, a model without a magazine cover, the world ready for the taking, but waiting for testosterone to fill his head with the notion; in a word, he was desirable. Their pushy friend? In several words: fat, ugly, awkward, desperate, undesirable.

She was Cynth.

Which was why the urge to walk over to them, and tell the pushy friend to leave the possible couple alone propelled her to stand up.

But a thought weighed her back down: *Who the hell am I to say anything?*

And one resounding, troublesome question cemented her to the bench: *What if they recognize me?*

There had been a terrible snippet of her sorry life filled with judging stares and words of condemnation. Three years had dwindled, and though the eyes gradually passed blindly over her constantly-changing appearance without a second glance, she still felt the permanent pressures of temporary infamy.

*Nobody recognizes me*, Cynth tried to assure herself in that soothing, albeit unsteady, therapeutic voice she had worked so long and hard to construct, desperately trying to sound anything other than her trademark, albeit notorious, professional vocal fry. Of the three kids before her, no more than thirteen-years-old apiece, she guessed, she reasoned: *They're too young to recognize me. Too young to know what I've done.*

She smiled inwardly. *Nobody recognizes me.*

The thought used to haunt her, sprinting alongside morbid worries of living and dying alone and unknown, inside of a pathetic body people couldn't *help* but recognize, both for the comic relief and disgust it had provided.

Selfishly, she was grateful for the events of three years prior, for it had supplied her with ample motivation to lop off and straighten a lifetime's growth of untamed auburn curls, add bleach, pierce body parts of her body she had grown up to believe were virginal, and, along with the cocktail of depression, anxiety, and guilt that felt intravenously fed to her via every available vein, dissolved nearly two-hundred of her three-hundred-and-twenty pounds. Her skin, however, remained an open canvas, and on the days when the cocktail's alcohol content was too unbearable, she strongly considered decorating some part of herself with a memorial.

*And what would the tattooist say when I show the portrait I'd want?* she challenged herself. *Wouldn't they recognize me, then?*

*Nobody recognizes-*

*A child's laugh.*

Cynth looked at the boy and two girls. The pushy friend lowered her cameraphone, laughing at something the photogenic pair's faces deemed unfunny.

*Just go over there, and tell her to leave them alone,* Cynth coached herself. *Just go, and- And what do I say?*

*Tell them about Jaley.*

*They don't know Jaley.*

*Neither do you.*

The truth splintered that familiar place within her that had never fully healed.

Having visited the park on a near-religious basis for the last three years, listening to the radio program her obsessive memory played, Cynth rarely had any suitable players to perform the needy voices in her head. Some visits, she allowed the voices to speak through unaware mothers and their playing children. Other visits, she allowed the voices to speak through passing squirrels, pigeons, and dogs. Most visits, the park was empty, forcing her to replay the conversation solely in her mind.

Today, however, there was the cute girl, the handsome boy, and the pushy friend.

*How perfect,* she thought, and let the eager, three-year-old memory roll:

"We've got Jaley on the air," the pushy friend said. Her mouth was moving, but her lips were issuing different words, like a poorly dubbed film. Still, Cynth made due, hearing her own voice—the trademark vocal fry—inside her head, leaving the pushy friend's mouth. "You there, Jaley?"

A gust of wind passed through the park.

Static crackled over the radio in her head.

"Hellooo? Jaley?" Cynth/the pushy friend coaxed.

*Jaley? Typical. Sounds skinny,* Cynth, three years away from chiseling at her own skeleton, had thought then. As if the conversation wasn't punishing enough to remember verbatim, she painstakingly recalled nearly every thought she had conjured during the long-ago exchange.

The wind settled.

The static cleared.

"-ere, here, here, I'm here," the cheery, instantly loveable voice in her head said. To Cynth's eyes, the cute girl on the bench opened her mouth to respond to the pushy friend.

"Thought I lost you there," Cynth/the pushy friend said.

"No, it's my stupid phone," Jaley/the cute girl said. "Hi."

*Probably don't even know how to use it, except for a shit-ton of selfies.*

"Hi, back," was Cynth's/the pushy friend's equally cheery response. "So, Jaley, how old are you?"

“Just turned twenty-one last week.”

*That's a lot of math for you, isn't it?*

“Awww, Happy Birthday.”

Cynth could still hear the annoyingly loud noisemaker she had activated at the touch of a studio console button.

“Thank you,” Jaley/the cute girl giggled.

“Now... you called 'cause you had a pretty weird date last week.”

“Yeah.”

*Good.*

“Care to share with everyone?”

“K, ' so, like... I went out with this guy, and-”

“What's his name?”

“Guy.”

“Guy?”

“Yeah.”

“Creative.”

*Parents probably would've named his sister 'Girl.'*

“Yeah, I know, right?” Jaley/the cute girl agreed.

“Okay,” Cynth/the pushy friend said, “so, actually... before you get to the date, tell everyone where you met.”

“Online.” The undertone reeked of *Duh!* “We messaged for, like, a couple hours, and I guess we decided to meet.”

*Oh, a couple of hours is way more than enough time for him to see you're twenty-one, skinny, and fuckable.*

“So, then what happened?” Cynth/the pushy friend probed.

“K, ' so, we met at a cafe downtown, 'cause, you know, I'm not stupid.”

*Just twenty-one, skinny, and fuckable.*

“I just *met* this guy,” Jaley/the cute girl continued. “I don't know if he's crazy, or if he's gonna look all weird, you know?” A slight chuckle.

“A girl can't be too careful, totally,” Cynth/the pushy friend agreed.

*Idiot.*

“So, yeah, we met at the cafe,” Jaley/the cute girl continued, “and he looked just like his pictures, so bonus.”

“He cute?”

“Uh, yeah.” Another dose of *Duh!*

*What was I thinking? Someone named Jaley, twenty-one, skinny, and fuckable doesn't do ugly.*

“So, you're at the cafe,” Cynth/the pushy friend reviewed, “he looks like his pics—so he's who he says he is, which is cute. But not too cute about what he did next.”

*Glad he did it.*

"I know, right?" Jaley/the cute girl proceeded: "So, he says he needs to use the washroom. So he leaves. And I'm sitting there, waiting and waiting, and I'm like, 'Don't guys just go in, do their thing, and come back out?'"

"You heard it here, guys," Cynth/the pushy friend broke in. "It's that simple. Unless you got long lines like us femme fatales, all you guys need to do is 'go in, do your thing, and come back out' to your date." Cynth/the pushy friend laughed, and then abruptly stopped for dramatic effect. "But what did *he* do?"

"He didn't come back out." Jaley/the cute girl sounded shocked.

*Awww, poor skinny, fuckable you.*

"You mean he ditched you?" Cynth/the pushy friend enforced.

*Hope it hurts.*

"He totally did," Jaley/the cute girl said, pouting cutely.

*Good.*

"And you called 'cause you wanna know why," Cynth/the pushy friend seethed, getting down to exciting business.

"Yeah, like, we were having a good time and all, and he seemed to like me."

*'Cause you're twenty-one, skinny, and fuckable.*

"You tried calling him?"

"Yeah." More *Duh!* "For, like, three days."

"Girl, that's three days too many."

*Fuckin' moron.*

"Yeah."

"Well, let's see if he picks up when your gal-pal Cynth calls."

*You would never be my gal-pal. Nobody who looks like you would ever want to be seen with someone who looks like me. And I wouldn't want to, either.*

The simple hip-hop beat looping quietly in the background was punctuated by dialled digits, followed by a ringtone.

"Least his phone works," Cynth/the pushy friend quipped, the latter lifting her cellphone, readying another attempt to snap a photo or capture a video of the cute girl and handsome boy.

A second ring.

A third.

"Maybe he's in the washroom," Cynth/the pushy friend jested.

Jaley/the cute girl issued a brittle laugh, cut short by: "Hi, you've reached Guy..."

"Guess you've heard this part before," Cynth/the pushy friend said over the standard voicemail greeting. With barely contained enthusiasm: "Let's leave a message."

"No," Jaley/the cute girl blurted, the former worried Cynth might keep her word, the latter swatting the pushy friend's cameraphone away.

Cynth cut the call before the tone Guy had promised ended. "Wow," she/the pushy friend said. "This what you been dealing with?"

*Poor skinny, fuckable you.*

“It's okay,” Jaley/the cute girl said with playful disappointment.

*Wasn't like it was love. There'll be plenty more, anyway.*

“Let's try one more time,” Cynth/the pushy friend urged.

A rapid succession of dial tones made Jaley's decision.

One ring.

“What if he doesn't like me?” Jaley/the cute girl offered weakly.

Two rings.

“Well, we're gonna find out,” Cynth/the pushy friend said.

*You don't sound so fuckable now, do you?*

Three-

“Hello?”

*He's sounds fuckin' hot* was Cynth's immediate thought.

“Hi. Is this Guy?” Cynth/the pushy friend inquired.

“Speaking.” Caution coated his otherwise sultry voice.

If the handsome boy sitting on the bench with the cute girl and their pushy friend had been contributing to their private back-and-forth all along, Cynth hadn't noticed; she had been transfixed on the girls, the live mimes representing the female voices in her head. With the introduction of Guy in this familiar script, Cynth now fixed upon the handsome boy, and saw that he was speaking Guy's words.

“You're a hard guy to reach,” Cynth/the pushy friend said. “Do you listen to the Cynthetic Cynth Morning Show?”

“Um... not really,” Guy/the handsome boy said.

*Didn't think so.*

“Awww... that's too bad.”

“Wait...” His voice peaked, hinting his forgotten pubescent years. “Is this... Am I on the show?”

“Smart cookie,” Cynth/the pushy friend beamed, thinking Jaley's *Duh!* “You're speaking with Cynth, *on-air.*”

“Okay, cool. Did I, like, win something?” Guy sounded more excited than the increasingly frustrated handsome boy appeared.

“In a way,” Cynth/the pushy friend said. “I'm calling 'cause I heard you went on a date last week.”

“Ookay.” A dip back into caution.

“You *do* remember being on a date last week, don't you, Guy?”

“I do, yeah.”

“You remember the *name* of your date, Guy?”

The looped background track filled his end of the conversation.

“Uh-oh. You're looking worse and worse here, Guy. Don't tell me you don't remember the name-”

“Are you there, Jaley?”

Cynth hadn't heard it then, during the live recording, but when she had listened back to the segment, she could tell his uncanny inquiry, spoken in that sexy voice of his, had taken her breath away. Even the looped background track seemed to break at the precise moment of his question.

*Nobody ever said my name that way.*

Jaley was silent. For a moment, Cynth thought she had lost her caller, and, therefore, the entire gimmick—and Jaley's punishment for being twenty-one, skinny, and fuckable—but she could see the line was still live.

“What makes you think Jaley's here?” Cynth/the pushy friend teased.

“Ah, she is, isn't she?” Guy chuckled, while the handsome boy scowled at the pushy friend. “I've heard shows like this before. Ah, man.” More chuckling.

“So, you know what's up?” Cynth/the pushy friend asked.

“Yeah. Yeah, I do.” He exhaled. “I'm an ass. Wait—can I say 'ass' on the radio?”

“I'll make an exception in your case.”

More of that appetizing laugh.

*I'm not twenty-one, skinny, or fuckable, but if I was, I'd be all over you. Even if you didn't look like your pictures.*

“Why do you think you're an ass, Guy?”

“Cause I ditched. “His breath rustled the phone, as if his sheepishness had rapidly produced an abundance of scraping wool.

“So, what's going on, Guy? Why'd you ditch Jaley?” Before he could respond: “*And ignore her calls for the last three days?*”

“I'm an ass,” he maintained, matter-of-factly. “I'm an ass, Jaley.”

She was live, but remained silent, as did the cute girl on the bench.

“Jaley, you still with me?” Cynth/the pushy friend asked.

“Yeah,” a mouse on the other line said.

“Wanna ask Guy here what his deal is?”

A silence too long for radio.

“Trust me, Jaley wants to know what your deal is,” Cynth/the pushy friend intervened. “*Everyone wants to kn-*”

The handsome boy abruptly stood, disrupting Cynth's mental program. She could hear his voice—a fight between current boy and eventual man for the vocal cords—but not specific words. His reddening face clearly had more to do with the pushy friend than the cold air. Cynth watched as he turned to grab the cute girl's hand, pulled her to attention, and flashed a middle finger in the pushy friend's face. The cute girl looked back at the pushy friend as she was whisked away, but said nothing. They were heading for Cynth, who busied herself with bird-less birdwatching. As they breezed by, she thought she heard the handsome boy say something reminiscent of “...none of her fuckin' business what we...” With that, they penetrated the woods, where Cynth dared not go.

*Maybe one day, she told herself. Maybe today.*

*Maybe.*

Cynth ignored an actual bird that had deserted the forest beyond, turning her attention to the pushy friend. The sulking mass sat on the bench, a forest of one, abandoned by lovebirds. She fiddled with her phone for a while, then stood, and walked without purpose to the still swings, giving each a heartless push before leaving.

Cynth waited until the swings settled before reevaluating her surroundings. Confirming her solitude, she moved to the bench recently occupied by the trio. The worn, paint-chipped wood was cold, though she believed she could feel their warm ghosts wafting through the seat of her pants. She looked at each of the benches she had sat upon—*Experienced*, she liked to think of it—prior to the kids' appearance. There was the one with the loose plank, the one with the missing plank, the one half-sunk into the loose earth, the graffito's masterpiece, and the pigeon's toilet.

There was also the one closest to the forest.

*Which one are you?* she mused, as always.

They hadn't sat on the swings, toes and heels gently digging shallow grooves in the sand in romantic synchronicity. They hadn't roosted on the top or bottom of the slide. "We were sitting on a bench." Guy's words in print and on screen, unimportant, almost trivial, but paramount to Cynth.

*But which one?* she willed to Guy.

As part of the ritual, she closed her eyes, and tried to visualize a day she had never lived.

The entire scene unfolded in choppy edits: in one instance, she could see Jaley and Guy, sitting together on a bench comprised of sampled details of all seven benches, their faces pixelated, the way she remembered them on screen and in print; in another instance, she could see Guy *as* Jaley; she could hear his tantalizing voice—*never* Jaley's—not in the park's open, clean air, but as she had heard him on her morning radio show: filtered, human-like:

"We sat on a bench," Guy said, his acorn eyes piercing whatever colour Jaley's had been.

"I need to know which one," Cynth said, the trademark vocal fry some critics and listeners alike complained about and mocked substituting Jaley's cutesy cadence.

"We talked about how we were on that old, fat, ugly, unfuckable, meddling bitch's show," Guy said, ignoring her. He took her hands into his own. So strong. So masculine. So desirable.

"And then everyone recognized me," Cynth said, letting his thumbs massage the tender meat between her thumbs and index fingers. "Everybody wanted to skewer and roast the old..."

"...but thirty's not old..." Guy teased, caressing her hair now.

"...fat..." Cynth said.

"...you're not fat anymore..."

"...ugly..."

"...you're not ugly anymore..."

"...unfuckable..."

"...mmm, I'd definitely fuck you..."



“...meddling bitch,” Cynth ended.

“Don't feel so bad,” Guy cooed. “Jaley and I talked about how we should thank you for bringing us together.”

Cynth tried to break his hold. “It's not my fault.”

He held on, his luscious, kissable lips formed a seductive smile. “Thank you.”

“It was just a show,” Cynth rebelled, tugging harder, but not succeeding. “It was entertainment. Stupid entertainment for stupid people.”

“Thank you.” His lips drew closer to her.

“It's not my fault.”

Closer. “Thank you.”

“It's not my fault.”

“Thank you.”

She felt his breathy syllables as his lips pressed against her own. “It's not my fault,” she heard herself scream, the words devoured by his exploring mouth.

“Thank you,” she heard him say in spite of their entangled tongues.

She closed her eyes, and received everything she wanted. And when she had had her fill, she opened her eyes, and saw what she had come to expect:

The six other benches, each with their own personality and history.

No kids.

No Guy.

No Jaley.

Just her.

And the bench she always saved for last.

She dreaded her self-imposed regimen, but knew her daily diet needed feeding.

*Is that where they sat?* Cynth pondered, inwardly cringing at the oddly pristine bench partially enveloped by the treeline.

*Maybe.*

*Maybe it's the one I'm sitting on.*

*Maybe it's the one with all the bird shit on it.*

*Maybe it's none of them at all.*

*Maybe Guy was lying.*

*Guy had lied about a lot of things.*

*Guy had lied on my stupid show for stupid people.*

She recalled the latter portion of the long-ago segment:

“Trust me, Jaley wants to know what your deal is,” Cynth had said. “*Everyone* wants to know.”

After a brief hesitation—staged, she knew now—Guy gave in: “Basically, I didn't think I was good enough for Jaley, so I said I needed to use the washroom. I saw myself in the mirror, which didn't help, and I guess I decided to just leave.”

*You chickened-out, she mended. But not the next time.*

Cynth fast-forwarded through the remaining garb, skipping her relentless teasing of both parties, Jaley's shock and relief, and ending where she had spoken the words that had set her upon an endless string of park therapy sessions. "Just one recommendation, okay, you guys? When you guys go on your second first date, make sure you guys go someplace without washrooms, okay?"

"Someplace without washrooms," Cynth whispered to the park, where Jaley and Guy allegedly met.

The park was someplace without washrooms.

The forest hugging the park was someplace without washrooms.

Deep within the forest, the hidden clearing at the foot of a hill, lined with a pitiful stream, where Jaley's white, nibbled, lifeless fingers dabbled, was someplace without washrooms.

The other places, where other "Jaley's" had been found, were places without washrooms.

*It could've been this bench*, Cynth ruminated.

She sat in silence, allowing no certain amount of time to pass.

Feeling she had paid enough—for now—homage to the current bench for one sitting, she confirmed her isolation, stood, and proceeded to the final bench. As always, a pang of guilt, lighter than the heavier ambience, resonated throughout her body as her bottom covered the names of lovers come and gone, their etched initials smothered under what others, herself included, had used to call her "fat ass." She looked for "J+A," "A+J," their full names—*anything*—but knew they weren't there.

*It doesn't mean they didn't sit here before he led her into the woods*, she reminded herself.

Without a cast to play the roles of the enduring voices in her overcrowded head, she heard a vocal-fried, old, fat, ugly, unfuckable, meddling bitch say: "We've got Jaley on the air."

A gust of wind passed through the park.

"You there, Jaley?"

Static crackled over the radio in her head.