

## FIRST CLASS: GETTING STARTED

*"You've known there was something special about you for a long time, haven't you?"*

Arabella lets the question hover over the classroom for just a moment. Eleven pairs of eyes stare back at her warily. This is the first day of class, and they're not sure if she is mocking them. But she's not; she's absolutely serious.

"Ever since the third grade," she goes on, because for some reason it always is the third grade, "ever since the teacher chose your story to read aloud on Parents' Day. She was so excited by your facility with words. Facility! She even used that word in the letter she sent home to your parents inviting them to be guests of honor at the reading, although in my own particular case, my father couldn't come because he was in the hospital, and my mother didn't make it because she fainted in the school hallway and banged her head on the water fountain and had to be taken by ambulance to the Nassau County Medical Center. If my mother let me down, there was always an ambulance involved; no lame scheduling conflicts for her.

"But anyway."

Arabella pauses for a moment and surveys the class: eleven people staring down at their notebooks, terrified that if they make eye contact, she might call on them. She recognizes Conrad from last semester, and she is touched that he reenrolled even though, especially though, she never felt

as if they connected. Everything he wrote was about transsexuals—transsexual nursery school teachers, transsexual police officers, and so on. The obvious explanation was that Conrad himself was a transsexual. Not that Arabella would ever suggest such a thing; the etiquette of a writing class requires that everyone act as though what the author is writing is an absolute fiction.

“Teacher,” one woman cries out. Her face is flushed, her white hair stands up like a Q-Tip. “I have to share this. I won a contest in the third grade, and I’ve wanted to be a writer ever since. I can still remember the story; it was about plums and—”

“Actually, I won one too,” another woman breaks in, this one young and thin and glamorous. “Actually, it was in high school. First place. Five hundred dollars. End of story.” Her name tag says she is Mimi, and she shimmers with pride, and rightfully so, Arabella thinks. She’s beautiful, with that type of toasted tan skin that never ages. She is obviously bright, and she is probably a great writer. Probably better than Arabella—there’s always one in every class. Her descriptions will be incandescent, perfect little nuggets of phraseology, and there will probably be lots of sex in her writing—the clinical type of sex with labias and clitorises and tongues going everywhere.

“Good for you,” the woman with the white hair says to Mimi, and Arabella is touched. She is always touched when people are generous.