

TALL AND SHORT

TWO FRIENDS—ONE A TALL WOMAN AND THE OTHER SHORT—met at the airport. The tall woman had just applied her makeup and her lips shone like ripe cherries. She smelled of flowers and citrus. The short woman had just come off the plane and was laden with bundles and bags. She smelled of ham and coffee grounds. An equally short man with closely cropped black hair peaked on top like a wave came into view behind her back, along with a young girl wearing a hat.

“Nicole,” cried the tall woman on seeing the short one. “Is it you? My dear girl! How many summers, how many winters!”

“Holy saints!” cried the short woman in amazement. “Paris! The friend of my childhood! Where have you dropped from?”

The friends kissed each other three times and gazed at each other with eyes full of tears. Both were agreeably astounded.

“My dear girl!” began the short woman after the kissing. “This is unexpected! This is a surprise! Come have a good look at me! Just as pretty as I used to be! Good gracious me! Well, and how are you? Married? I am married as you see. This is my husband, Joel, Joel Madden, though I did not take his last name. He’s from Good Charlotte, the band, do you remember their albums? And this is my daughter, Harlow. She’s a third-grader. This is the friend of my childhood, Harlow. We were girls together!”

Harlow thought a little and took off her hat.

“We were young women together,” the short woman went on. “Do you remember how they used to tease you? You were nicknamed Parasite because you seemed to feed off the attention of others, and I was nicknamed Mouse because I was tiny and squeaked when I spoke. We were children! Don’t be shy, Harlow. Go nearer to her. And this is my husband, Joel Madden, though I did not take his last name, from Good Charlotte, the band, do you remember them?”

Harlow took refuge behind her mother’s back.

“Well, how are you doing my friend?” the tall woman asked, looking enthusiastically at her friend. “How have you been doing since your last reality show? Was it a success?”

“Thank you for asking! I am not sure exactly which show you mean, since I have been in a series of them over the past few years. The ratings have not been what I expect, but that’s no great matter! My husband still reconvenes his band, and when my father passed

a few years ago, a bit of his money came to us. We didn't get a large portion of the inheritance, but even so, "Running with the Night" and "Penny Lover" helped us get along. Now I am in town to film a pilot for a new series. I'll be living in town for a few months. And what about you? I bet you are overseeing a thriving production company."

"No dear woman, go higher than that," said the tall woman. "I am in consideration to run a television studio."

The short woman turned pale and rigid all at once, but soon her face twisted in all directions in the broadest smile; it seemed as though sparks were flashing from her face and eyes. She squirmed, she doubled together, crumpled up. Her bundles and bags seemed to shrink and crumple up too. Her husband's peak of hair grew taller still; Harlow drew herself up to attention and replaced her hat upon her head.

"Paris, dear, I . . . I'm delighted! The friend, one may say, of youth, and to have turned into such a great woman!"

"Come, come!" The tall woman frowned. "What's this tone for? You and I were friends as girls, and there is no need of this official obsequiousness!"

"Merciful heavens! What are you saying . . . ?" sniggered the short woman, wriggling more than ever. "Your gracious attention is like cool water, so refreshing. This, Paris, is my daughter Harlow, and my husband Joel, from Good Charlotte."

The tall woman was about to make some protest, but the face of the short woman wore an expression of such reverence, sugarness, and mawkish respectfulness that the production-company head was sickened. She turned away from the short woman, giving her a hand at parting.

The short woman pressed three fingers, bowed her whole body, and sniggered. Her husband smiled. Harlow looked away and fingered the brim of her hat. All three were agreeably overwhelmed.