



an excerpt from

THE PROGRAM

a novel by Charlie Lovett

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Karen Sumner stood naked in front of her bathroom mirror contemplating her breasts. On the countertop lay an open copy of *Perfect Woman* magazine sporting a pouting portrait of Celinda, the sexiest woman in the world. Karen looked back and forth between the glossy image in the magazine and her own reflection in the mirror. There could hardly have been a greater contrast.

Celinda leaned in a doorway, clutching a sheer piece of fabric that barely kept her decent. Her form was all about straight lines. A straight line from her ankle to her armpit—undisturbed by bulging hips or thighs, a straight line across her shoulders, and a straight line down each arm. Her torso, from belly to breasts, was as flat and smooth as the prairies of western Kansas where Karen had grown up, the plane interrupted only by the ridges of her ribs rippling across the surface like summer wheat in the breeze. Celinda was a perfect geometric figure of a woman—even her face was square.

Karen was all curves and roundness. Her thighs sprouted from her knees like giant tree trunks that spread into the mighty width of her hips. Just when this line seemed to be going somewhere it curved tightly back into her waist. But the roller coaster ride of flesh was not over. Crowning her trunk were her breasts. They were—well, they were big. She had been a 36-C since ninth grade, and lately her cup had been running over. She cringed at the thought of reaching to the back of the rack searching for the elusive D-cup. Perched above Karen's curving body, above her sloping shoulders, was her round head with cheeks not like the beautiful pale hollows of Celinda, but full and florid. *God*, she thought, *even my cheeks are fat*.

Of all the places where her body deviated from the model of perfection in the magazine, Karen was most annoyed by her breasts. When she was fourteen they had just grown there—cropped up unbidden and unwanted, these escarpments of roundness, flouting straight line perfection and mortifying her with embarrassment until she learned how to hide them. Hold books in front of you, lean forward with your shoulders, wear loose blouses and armature bras—she had done all this for ten years now, as if through sheer willpower she could banish them. But there they still stood, already starting to sag, but massive as ever.

Her left breast was slightly larger than her right. Its nipple no longer pointed straight forward but a few degrees down, as if indicating some sight far off on the horizon. Her right

breast, perhaps because of its smaller size, still rode closer to its original position. Two dark hairs, which she plucked religiously every Monday morning, sprouted where her skin changed color from pasty white to faded pink. Her right nipple had always been the more sensitive. Even now, in the cool air of the bathroom, it stood erect—a rigid button of nearly half an inch that her bras were chosen to conceal.

She didn't need to see a picture of Celinda naked to know what *her* breasts looked like. Nothing interfered with her lines, and the line across her chest was as straight as any. Celinda never wore a bra, had never gone through the humiliation of trying on a size too small in a department store fitting room. True, her nipples were always visible, pressing through the sheer fabric of her high fashion gowns, but those buds were enough to assert her femininity. She had no need for mountains of flesh. Celinda was perfect.

Below her picture, in large gold type set off by the plush blue carpet under her feet, were the words "Get With The Program."

The Program. According to the television ads, over half a million women had attained bodily perfection through The Program, with more signing up every day, anteing up the \$5,000 fee and disappearing behind the blue and gold doors that had appeared in every major American city in the past few months. No one knew what went on behind those doors, but the bodies that came out were Celinda-perfect—not a curve in sight.

Five thousand dollars. This morning Karen's bank balance was \$428.45, her unpaid bills amounted to about \$300, the refrigerator was empty, and *Ear to the Ground*, the alternative paper for which she wrote feature articles, was skating on thin financial ice. Karen couldn't afford the perfect body.

But I can dream, thought Karen, and for a moment she flicked her eyes back and forth between her reflection and Celinda's picture so fast that the two images became one, and for a moment she saw the angular version of herself trapped beneath the curves. It was a daily ritual, this exercise in persistence of vision, a way of tricking herself into believing that another Karen existed, a Karen of lines and angles, a perfect Karen.

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