

SMITHY

By Amanda Desiree

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, organizations, places, events, and incidents are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

Copyright © 2021 by Amanda Desiree
All rights reserved.

No part of this book may be reproduced, or stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without express written permission of the publisher.

Published by Inkshares, Inc., Oakland, California
www.inkshares.com

Edited by Adam Gomolin & Avalon Radys
Cover design by <COVER ARTIST>
Interior design by Kevin G. Summers

ISBN: 9781950301218
e-ISBN: 9781950301225

First edition

Printed in the United States of America

For my cousins from England

PART ONE

EXCERPT FROM
SMITHY: A TWENTY-YEAR COMPENDIUM
BY REID BENNETT, PHD

INTRODUCTION

Are we alone in the universe? Are human beings the sole source of intelligence, the only ones capable of rational thought and self-reflection in all of existence?

These questions have dogged *Homo sapiens* since the species walked out of Africa. The search for answers has taken many forms. Some turn wondering eyes to the stars in search of alien life-forms. Others pursue worlds beyond this one, reaching into the void to connect with spirits of the afterlife. And at one time,, the quest for nonhuman intelligence focused on man's nearest neighbor in the animal kingdom.

In 1972, an ambitious psychologist from Yale University launched a revelatory study designed to bridge the gap between man and animal, proving chimpanzees could master the art of communication. Believing high-functioning primates could learn words and syntax, Dr. Piers Preis-Herald acquired a newborn chimpanzee and taught him American Sign Language hoping to establish that longed-for link with another intelligent being, and thereby unlocking the secrets of a previously unplumbed mind.

What followed has since inspired decades of speculation and embroiled psychologists, linguists, ethologists, primatologists, parapsychologists, historians, animal rights activists, teachers, attorneys, clergymen, and other curious minds around the world in controversy.

When Chimpanzee #710642 was born at the Kohlberg Center for Primate Research on an autumn morning in 1972, his destiny

was undetermined. He could have been sold to a traveling circus and taught to tap dance like Daisy, born one week earlier. He might have become a guinea pig for the cosmetics industry like Avery, born three weeks later. And if the chimp called Webster and later known to the world as Smithy had been born a mere five hours sooner, he would have spent his childhood before Hollywood cameras, as did Goofy, instead of starring in the incredible real-life drama that ensued.

The Kohlberg Center was then one of five facilities in the United States that bred chimpanzees for distribution throughout the world. Most of the offspring were designated for zoos and laboratories with a small fraction bought by the entertainment industry and a more miniscule portion ending up in the exotic pet trade. Applicants desiring a chimpanzee were placed on a lengthy waiting list; barring special requests for characteristics like sex or birth weight, orders were filled on a first-come, first-serve basis. Therefore, it was entirely by chance that Smithy entered Dr. Preis-Herald's orbit.

Considering the incredible outcome of this turn of fortune, many have questioned whether any chimpanzee in his position would have behaved the same way, or whether Smithy himself possessed unique abilities.

Historians always ask whether the man makes the situation or the situation makes the man. So it is with man's nearest relation. Did Smithy's intellect and other purported gifts trigger the unbelievable and sometimes tragic events of his young life, or was he shaped into an unlikely prophet by a potent and chaotic environment? Since it's impossible to separate Smithy from his surroundings or to engage in counterfactual thinking, what remains is to investigate the actual data.

Was Smithy a hoax? A clever mimic? A helpless animal caught in the machinations of selfish humans and nearly crushed by them? Was he the harbinger of a new era of interspecies—and possibly interdimensional—relations? Was he an illusion? A Rorschach projection of humanity's greatest hopes and fears? Or was he indeed what devotees of metaphysics have claimed for so long: a link between our world and the next?

In the following chapters, I review the most complete collection to date of primary source documents: letters, journals, interviews, video and court transcripts, and related media. Included publicly for the first time are first-hand accounts by the principals in the case and details of never-before-released film footage. In addition, I present insights gleaned from my own minor part in what came to be the greatest mystery of the modern age.

The world may never know the truth about Smithy, but as it is human nature to seek answers, we must boldly sally forth into the unknown with open eyes and open minds. Let the journey of inquiry commence!

Reid Bennett, PhD
Newport, RI
May 10, 1995

WCCT NEWS BROADCAST

Date: December 8, 1972

Location: Local News Studio

A female newscaster sits behind a desk. She smiles and says, "Now we turn to Art Delafield, who earlier today visited Yale University's Primate Studies Center to investigate a groundbreaking new experiment."

The scene cuts to a male reporter standing in a laboratory with whitewashed walls. Behind him are a sink and empty countertops. He says, "Good evening, ladies and gentlemen. My beat is usually the human-interest story, and while this particular story is sure to interest humans, it features another animal entirely. Let me show you what I mean."

Delafield walks to a workbench and sits beside a man approximately forty-five to fifty-five years old with a receding hairline, dark eyebrows, and piercing eyes. He smokes a pipe and wears a collared shirt with the top button open. A dark-haired, bearded young man in his midtwenties stands behind him. The young man is wearing a lab coat and is stirring something in a bowl.

Delafield introduces the older gentleman. "This is Dr. Piers Preis-Herald, formerly of Cambridge University, currently a professor of psychology here at Yale and the voice of radio's syndicated *Secrets of the Mind in 60 Minutes*. Dr. Preis-Herald, I understand you've long been interested in the process of language acquisition. Can you explain what that involves?"

Preis-Herald smiles. "Please, Art, call me Piers. It's so much less unwieldy. As to your question, my research deals with how humans learn novel words and acquire the rules of language or syntax. Further, how does one learn to use language in a more sophisticated manner, developing metaphors, similes, or idiomatic expressions? How does one discern shades of meaning in sarcasm or veiled threats?"

Delafield remarks, "That all sounds complex."

Preis-Herald says, "Indeed. In fact, some of my peers claim language is so complicated that only the human brain is equipped to handle it. I disagree. Higher mammals such as porpoises and primates—and even certain breeds of bird—have shown an aptitude for advanced understanding of language. I've wondered at what stage of development language can be learnt. By 'development,' I mean the development of mankind, not merely the development of a single human. For instance, can language develop in man's biological coevals? Are certain components of the brain required to perform the magic of communication? To investigate these questions, I will look closely at how an infant acquires language. The infant I've selected for my new experiment is a young chimpanzee. My wish is for this little chimp to show me if the brain is, in fact, hard-wired with a mechanism for arranging and applying words, or whether these skills can be taught."

Delafield begins, "Doctor—"

Preis-Herald interrupts. "*Piers*, I insist. My hypothesis is that language is a transmittable skill, much like cooking or tying a shoe, a consequence of culture and socialization. Chimpanzees in the wild lack a society such as we're accustomed to defining it. Although apes can communicate the presence of dangerous predators in the area or the location of a food source,

they don't use language as you and I do to share our thoughts or to bond. Chimpanzees don't debate or pour out their hearts to an analyst. But if an ape were raised from birth in a context in which communication for communication's sake was the norm, it might adopt this norm. I believe if an animal with a high intellectual capacity were immersed in language from birth and taught to use words, it would demonstrate mastery at least on par with a young human child or a retarded adult."

Preis-Herald reloads his pipe. As he speaks, he gestures to the bearded young man behind him.

"My research assistants and I have acquired an infant chimpanzee—about two months old now—that we've kept here at our lab in anticipation of placing it with a human family to be reared just like an ordinary child. You see, Art, a human infant grows up constantly absorbing language through observation and direct coaching. To better transmit language to our chimpanzee, we shall relate to him as one human being to another. He will be exposed to every milestone of a human child, including dressing, feeding, and toilet training. He will be fully embedded in every aspect of human culture to stimulate his intellectual growth."

As Piers smokes, the reporter's eyes water. Delafield averts his face to cough discreetly several times. He says, "That's amazing. Will you be raising the chimp yourself?"

Preis-Herald says, "Ah, dear me, no. The faculty housing isn't spacious enough for a youngster, and besides, a baby needs a mother. I, alas, as a bachelor, am unsuited for the role. Fortunately, I've maintained contact with a promising former graduate student who is now married and rearing her own family. She and her husband have agreed to take our little chimpanzee into their home as

a surrogate son. He will have every advantage a good American family can provide, and he'll be drilled in language every single day. I shall periodically visit the family and their protégé to observe, record, and measure his progress."

Delafield asks, "How do you plan to test this chimp for language, Doc-Piers? Do you expect it to talk to you?"

Preis-Herald answers, "To vocalize as you and I do, no. Instead, we shall use the method the Deaf use. Our chimp's host family happens to have a Deaf child, and so the family uses American Sign Language, or Ameslan, alongside spoken English. They will teach the chimp to recognize and produce these signs. To document his progress, we'll have registered Ameslan interpreters independently judge his use of sign language."

Delafield asks, "Piers, aren't you concerned some of your colleagues might accuse you of, er, simply monkeying around? This is a very unconventional study."

An amused smile creeps across Preis-Herald's face. "It's high time scientists broke out of the box created by the current paradigms in psychology and linguistics! After all, we would never have reached the moon if everyone continued to parrot Aristotle. Scientists must question and be daring. They must launch new ventures with detailed plans in place. In our language study, everything will be thoroughly documented. The data concerning the introduction of new words into the chimpanzee's vocabulary, the accuracy of their usage, and the frequency and pattern of presentation will be made available for any interested party to review. I'm confident the results will speak for themselves. Now, would you care to meet our subject?"

Delafield and the camera follow Piers as he crosses the room and stands behind a highchair in

which sits a baby chimpanzee wearing a bib. The bearded young man feeds him with a spoon.

Preis-Herald continues, "This is the young man of the hour. At the facility where he was born, he was known as Chimpanzee #710642. However, I have decided to call him 'Webster.' An affectation, or rather, an augury."

The bearded man lifts the chimpanzee out of the highchair and paces in the background of the shot, patting Webster's back to burp him as Piers speaks.

Delafield asks, "How so?"

Preis-Herald says, "We'll teach our Webster a wide vocabulary, the likes of which would impress his illustrious namesake, who demonstrated his own mastery of language by creating a dictionary. Our goal is to fashion him into a proper wordsmith."

In the background of the shot, the chimp spits. The bearded man wipes his mouth with a towel.

Delafield says, "That's a most ambitious goal, er, Piers. We look forward to learning from both you and little Webster all about the mysteries of this most precious—and up till now, most human-talent: language!"

The camera picks up the young man's words as he murmurs to Webster: "You hear that? You've got your work cut out for you, little Smithy."

LETTER FROM GAIL EHRLICH TO EHRLICH FAMILY

May 22, 1974

Dear Mom, Dad, Vanessa, and Snoopy:

I hope this letter finds you all safe and sound. I arrived in Newport three days ago and I'm having the time of my life! I sat down to write to you all about it on my first day, got distracted, started over, then the same thing happened, and here I am now. The third time is the charm!

My flight was good and got in right on time. Descending was like traveling through another world! When I looked out the window, all I could see was wispy white. It felt magical. When we came out of the cloud, I still felt like I was in some other world. I never saw so much water before! It was all silver and shiny like a mirror with little bits of green grass sprinkled over it. When I think of an island, I think of sand and beaches with palm trees. We do have beaches but no palm trees.

On the plane, I sat next to a very nice man who was going to Newport for a business meeting. He realized we were going in the same direction and offered to give me a lift in his rental car. We went over a big bridge and were so high above the water. I was a little afraid driving over it and held on to the door handle until we reached the other side, but I still couldn't take my eyes off the view. I saw sailboats, motorboats, row boats, big yatts. I waved to them when we went by even though I knew they couldn't see me and Mr. Peters laughed and patted my knee and told me I was a cute kid.

When we got back on land, I saw the cutest little cottages everywhere. They all look like little dollhouses. Mr. Peters told me there called salt boxes because the roofs look like lids. There long and steep like the flap on a box. I must of looked pretty silly pointing and squealing at everything because he laughed at me again, but he kindly drove me all through

town, even the parts that weren't on our way so I could see the shops and the warf. We drove by the big church where John and Jackie Kennedy got married! Mr. Peters said you can even go inside on certain days to see it.

Then we started up Bellevue Avenue, the major street where all the rich people built their summer houses. That's when I really felt like I was in a fantasyland. All the houses here are enormous! They look like palaces or Roman temples. Most are three and four stories tall and there covered with little statues and carvings. You won't find a salt box on Bellevue Avenue!

These houses were built by some of the richest people in America. In fact there's a house just up the road from where I am right now that belongs to a famous herress! But here's the crazy thing. They only lived in them for a couple of months at a time. Mr. Peters says people only built these houses to show off. They would have a bunch of parties in the summer and the rest of the time the houses would just be shut up with maybe a caretaker living there.

If I had a big house like that I'd want to spend my whole life there. But he said the rich families probably had other houses that were just as big and fancy in places like New York or Boston or wherever they came from. And then after the tax laws changed, it got harder to keep the big summer houses so a lot of them were left empty longer or even abandoned.

Mr. Peters drove me right to the door of Trevor Hall. When I saw the house, I thought, "It looks like a castle!" It has a big tower with a pointy roof just like the castle at Disneyland. It has some statues, too, but not as many as I saw on a house called the Breakers. Trevor Hall is a mansion that got left abandoned for a long time, so its not as fancy as it's neighbors, but its still the most glamorous house I've ever been in. Its got old tapestries on the walls and a fancy carpet in the hall and a carved banister on the stairs and lots of windows. Sure the carpet is old and stained and starting to wear out, but you can still see the original design. In some places, you can still see gold thread winking up at you. Can you imagine it? Me walking on a gold carpet! Me living in a real honest to goodness mansion!

Mr. Peters dropped me off and wished me luck. He comes to town alot and said he'd look me up on his next visit. Even though he was

practically a stranger I still felt nervous after he drove away. He was the closest thing to a friend I had in Newport.

Dr. Preis-Herald isn't here yet, but his assistant Wanda's been getting everything ready for us, and she came out to meet me. I thought Wanda would be an old teacher like Dr. Preis-Herald, but she's just a few years older than me. She's still a student, too, (a graduate student) but she looked so glamorous standing in front of the big mansion just like she was a rich herress inviting me into her palace. She has shiny dark hair that curls around her shoulders and blue eyes, and she looked like someone from TV. Maybe Marlo Thomas or Marie Osmond. She wore a dress like the one on the cover of the Vogue magazine I had on the plane. I bet she could be a model if she wanted. I was nervous until she started to speak to me. She's very nice and didn't mind answering my questions. A lot of what I wanted to know will have to wait until the big meting we'll have after everyone else has arrived.

Wanda showed me around the first floor of the mansion to the kitchen, the library, and the solarium, then she took me to my room on the second floor. Trevor Hall has three floors in all. The chimp is going to have a room on the top floor. Wanda's staying on the second floor in a part of the tower, just like a princess!

My room is the size of two rooms. The part you first walk into is huge! It has space for a couch, a desk, a bed, and a wardrobe. Wanda said we'll have to use wardrobes instead of closets because that's how it was done in the olden days. There's a bathroom attached on one side of the room, so I don't have to go down the hall in the middle of the night, and there's another smaller room connected on the other side with its own bed, a desk, an easy chair, a chest of drawers, and a lamp. Best of all, I have a balcony and a view of the back garden with roses growing close to the house and a big lawn and lots of trees all around. No one was taking care of the flowers while the house was empty, but you can tell how pretty everything once was.

I ended up in such a big room because I have a roommate! She arrived by train the same evening I did. Her name is Tammy, and she's from New York. She goes to school at Columbia and she's a graduate student in psychology so she's Wanda's age. Tammy isn't as glamorous as Wanda, but she's still cool. She dresses like a hippie in long skirts and

blouses, but she's not dirty at all. She wears glasses so she looks like she's smarter than everyone else. She talks like it, too.

Tammy asked Wanda tons of questions, mostly about the house and Newport. Wanda told us the house was built after the Civil War by a man named Curtis Trevor who made his money selling goods to the army (just like Rhett Butler!) He invested it in a gold mine and when he struck it rich, he built a house in Newport with all the other wealthy families. After he died, the house was a boarding school, but it closed after the Depression, and private families have rented it off and on ever since. And now we have it!

It was already getting late by the time Tammy arrived, so we ordered a pizza delivered to the house so we wouldn't have to cook. Can you imagine a pizza boy delivering food to a mansion? I wish we could have had a butler to open the door and pay the delivery guy. How funny would that be?

We sat at the big dining room table to eat, just the three of us. Its a beautiful room with big windows that open into the backyard and clouds painted on the ceiling with gold angel faces carved in wood smiling down on us. I said it looks like Heaven! Well, we were getting along great but when dinner was over, Wanda told Tammy she would show her to her room, and Tammy would be staying with me. Tammy started arguing that the house was so big she shouldn't have to have a roommate. I thought she was being rude not wanting to room with me. I know Vanessa complains about me sometimes, but I'm not really a slob, and I don't snore or sleepwalk or anything.

Later I found out Tammy has five sisters! Her family lives in a small apartment, and she's always had to share a room all her life. Even when she got to college. So its not anything against me, after all. I tried to make her feel better by offering her the big room with the balcony, but she said she'd rather have the little one because if she wants privacy, she can just close the door and not have to worry about me walking through to go to the bathroom. I hope she doesn't close her door too often. I think she's really neat, and I'd like to talk with her about life in the Big Apple...

LETTER FROM TAMMY COHEN TO THE COHEN FAMILY

May 23, 1974

Dear Family,

I hope this letter finds you all well. Here at Trevor Hall, we're all of us excited about becoming the vanguard of a new field and settling into our new home.

I arrived Monday night, just in time for dinner. The train was punctual, and my taxi driver brought me directly from the station. The only people at the house were Wanda Karlewicz, Dr. Preis-Herald's second-in-command, and a very young undergraduate named Gail. Wanda is capable, astute, and organized while Gail's enthusiasms—for Newport, Trevor Hall, the ocean, and Preis-Herald's reputation—outweigh her knowledge of either psychology or linguistics. Luckily, Wanda is majoring in the latter and I'm studying the former, so we've a chance to pull off some decent work together.

One hitch marred my arrival: Wanda assigned me to share a room with Gail. I was so flustered by the announcement, I'm afraid I was rather sharp with both of them. Isn't it reasonable to assume, with an entire mansion at our disposal, I might have a room all to myself for once? Gail pouted and Wanda frowned, so I realized my faux pas and backed down. I really haven't grounds for complaint; our shared room is the size of three dorms at the college, and my side has a connecting door I can close for privacy.

I'm almost tempted to hand-letter a "Keep Out" sign for it, too—not that that ever kept the little no-neck monsters out of my and Ellie's room, but after griping over the room assignment, I'm ashamed to be any more discourteous to Gail. The kid's never been away from home before; she might as well have "sheltered" stenciled across her face. Gail desperately

wants a friend here, and it looks like I'm it. Doesn't it just figure I would end up playing caregiver again?

At least I don't have to teach Gail to talk and observe basic decorum. Young master Webster has yet to materialize, though rumor has it tomorrow is the big day.

Two other researchers have arrived: Ruby Cardini is a transfer student from a community college in Pennsylvania, while Eric Kaninchen is a graduate student of education and child development at Harvard. I'm curious to see how his experience with kids translates to working with a non-human. Ruby is a pleasant surprise. When she introduced herself as a junior, I braced myself for another sorority-type like Gail, but she's much more mature. Ruby has completed some undergraduate projects in psychology and compensates for her limited hands-on experience by reading widely in the field. Moreover, she's curious. Where Gail points and exclaims, Ruby asks "who" and "why." I'm looking forward to working with her, and I think we're going to be friends.

I wish Ruby were my roommate, if I must have one. We're closer in age and temperament. But I don't want to hurt Gail's feelings by suggesting it. Nor do I think Wanda would take kindly to the idea. Though it shouldn't make any difference in the grand scheme of things, she bristles when her authority is challenged in any superficial way. Incidentally, Ruby has her own little room a few doors down. It hasn't got a balcony or a bathroom, only a tiny washstand, but it's all her own. I don't know why I couldn't have one just like it...

LETTER FROM GAIL EHRLICH

(CONTINUED)

... The next day, I went for a walk to see Newport up close. Wanda recommended I take the Cliff Walk, a scenic path that wraps around the coast. In some places you have to climb over rocks or cross the beach. You can see the ocean on one side of the path, and on the other you can see the backs of all the fancy mansions (at least the roofs and towers and chimneys). I'd love to walk into the backyard and keep going right to the ocean, but Trevor Hall is on the other side of the street and pretty far back from the water. I wish I had the room in the tower. It has windows facing all directions. I bet you could see the ocean from there.

On the way back, I went down Bellevue Avenue. Most houses have signs out front that tell you it's name and it's history. The house down the road from us is called Herbert Terrace, and it's a real Italian villa built from genuine Carrera marble! The house originally was situated in Tuscany where Jonathan Herbert spotted it while on a post-nuptial tour of Europe with his bride Leticia. The couple fell in love with the property, purchased it, and had it moved to Newport piece by piece via steamer. (I copied that from the sign.) You can peek through the gate and see the house, even though it's at the end of a long driveway. It looks just like a palace and has cupids over the windows and gold ornaments on the corners of the roof. Just now, the sun was setting, and all the walls were glowing pink. It was so beautiful!

By the time I got back, more of our team had arrived. There's a girl, Ruby, who took the bus in from Scranton and a boy, Eric, who goes to Harvard. He hitchhiked here, and his last driver took him to Herbert Terrace by mistake because he didn't know anyone was staying at Trevor Hall. I must of just missed seeing him. Eric said the guy who answered the door wasn't very happy to see him. I guess the neighbors didn't know we were moving in. Eric said he wasn't sure if the owner (Wanda says his

name is Mr. Belancourt) was more upset about living next to a bunch of college students or a chimp.

The chimp and Dr. Preis-Herald won't get here for a couple more days. Another guy is coming with them, but for now its just us five.

Ruby's very nice. She was transferring to Yale from junior college for her third year and hasn't been away from home before either. I felt better after talking with her. Even though she's older than me, its like we're in the same boat and we're both trying to find our sea legs. I told Ruby about the Cliff Walk and the mansions, and she wants to see all of it, so maybe we'll go sightseeing together soon. I think the Cowsills live around here somewhere. I'll have to look for they're house next.

I really wish you could see this place. Maybe Vanessa can come for a visit at Christmastime during school break.

LETTER FROM RUBY CARDINI
TO SARAH-BETH ANDREWS

May 23, 1974

Dear Sarah-Beth,

I'm here! I can hardly believe it, even as I sit writing to you from the desk of the library at Trevor Hall. Yes, we have a real, wood-paneled library with wingback chairs and wall sconces, though most of the books are moldering away now. I feel like I've been named Queen for a Day, every day, and I have to keep pinching myself every few minutes to prove it's not a dream. I'm really here! I know I'm in the right place, I made the right decision, and it was all worth it.

I won't pretend my rift with Dad doesn't still hurt, but I won't let it drag me down. I never could have been content to spend my days slaving over a stove or cleaning up after some meathead from the old neighborhood. I just have to put that bitterness aside for now and hope in time, he'll talk to me again.

Maybe I can win him over with my stunning findings. Can you just see me on "Johnny Carson" conversing with Webster? That's what I'll aim for now: something to make my parents take notice and want to claim me and my accomplishments. If I wasn't fully motivated before, I'll have that little dream tickling the back of my mind now.

I have so much to tell you, yet I'll try to be brief. I'll start with Trevor Hall.

I had no idea what to expect coming out here. I tried to find some information about the house in advance, but neither the school nor public libraries had any articles, photos, or etchings to prepare me. I guess our mansion (boy, I never imagined I would someday be writing those words!) is just too obscure. I saw pictures of some of the other Newport estates though, and in my head, I'd constructed a turn-of-the-century

chimera with hundreds of windows, sculptures, gables, gingerbread trim, a coat of arms over the door, a timbered roof, and a massive gate with spiked tips surrounding verdant rolling lawns—maybe even a moat and a drawbridge. I'm kidding about that last one, but I did fantasize about every other possible architectural configuration.

The real thing is both more sedate and more elegant than I envisioned. For one thing, the gate is not spiked; it just has little rusty curlicues along the top. The house itself is huge (seventy rooms!) but not exquisitely fancy. Trevor Hall has three stories. It's built of stone with cornices around the windows and the edges of the roof; tiny carvings are interspersed above or between windows. The images are mostly of angels and birds, though I saw one that looked like a dragon or gargoyle.

I was right about the many windows; some are even made of stained glass! Every room of the house has a window, although some are large and multi-paned, and others are small and round. I counted at least seven gables in total. A flat roof with a walkway wraps all around the building. A large tower makes the house look more like a castle than a lowly mansion. Maybe that drawbridge wasn't so far-fetched, after all! No herald perches above the front door, but it is crowned by a porte cochere with ivy-covered pillars.

The grounds are large, but the lawns are overgrown and interspersed with clusters of towering trees that look like willows. Immense roots twist out of the ground, just waiting for someone to trip. As I approached, I saw a weed-straggled rose garden and a cracked flagstone path with more weeds spurting up through the plaster. Between the weeds and the ivy, nature is trying to reassert its hold over the place. I started walking along that weather-beaten path and got just far enough to spot a statue of Mercury beside a chipped marble bench, a large spreading tree, and another little outbuilding, when a sharp voice yelled, "Excuse me, this is private property! No tourists allowed here!"

Oh, that made me jump! And that was my introduction to the project manager, Wanda Karlewicz.

I should have knocked on the front door and officially presented myself instead of exploring on my own, but I was nervous and wanted a few minutes to cool down. Literally. I had been cooped up in a hot, stuffy bus for hours before trekking all the way up Bellevue Avenue from the

bus depot (probably about three or four miles) carrying my backpack, so my clothes were sticky and smelling none too rosy. The jeans and blouse I had on are among the nicer things I brought, but they felt shabby in the shadow of the great estate, and especially next to Wanda's tailored pantsuit.

Meekly, I introduced myself as one of Dr. Preis-Herald's researchers, and her hostility melted. Wanda is also a Yalie. She's been Dr. Preis-Herald's graduate assistant for the past two years, helping in his classroom and even in drafting some of his "Secrets of the Mind" broadcasts. When I asked her about that, she demurred: "All I did was gather the research and arrange it into bullet points for reference. Piers speaks off the cuff. He's a natural." She's on a first name basis with him and says that's how he prefers to be addressed by his colleagues. I guess that's what I am now, but I can't imagine calling a professor by his first name, let alone anyone so well-regarded.

We didn't have that conversation standing under the porte cochere, of course. Once I established my identity, Wanda invited me inside, and I got my second eyeful. We entered a spacious foyer half-furnished with antiquated chairs and tables. I know nothing about old furniture, though now I'm inspired to learn. They could be Chippendales or Heppelwhites for all I know, but I fear they would have little value in their current condition. The marble-topped side table by the door looked like a penknife had attacked it! An old tic-tac-toe game defaced one corner and various initials were gouged up and down its legs. The chair cushions were also stained and torn. Bits of stuffing protruded from the backs.

The carpet shielding the entryway must have once been vivid with cobalt and cochineal, but now it's a faded mud-and-dun pattern through which you can glimpse the hardwood floor. The walls are pockmarked with shadows from where paintings used to hang, and the now-way-off-white paint is peeling. Chipped imitation classical statues stand in nooks and corners. When I looked up at the highest ceiling I've ever seen before, I saw a faded fresco of ethereal figures painted among the rafters. To the left of the doorway is a sweeping staircase with carved wood banisters, sadly also scuffed and graffitied and missing a newel post.

I had difficulty reconciling the grandeur of that room with the house in all its disrepair. On one hand, my excitement gave way to

disappointment over the sorry state of our accommodations. On the other, I felt I was standing in a museum, that I was only being given a tour, and there was no way I would ever actually sit in any of those grand, aging chairs, or grip that scuffed banister on my way upstairs. Either way, I felt disquieted. I thought, "This is my new home. I'm going to be living here," but I couldn't wrap my head around the idea. I just didn't see myself fitting in at the mansion or filling a role in the project. For one critical moment, I almost told Wanda, "Thank you very much for showing me around, but I think I'll be going back now." Luckily, my other housemates appeared and put a stop to that.

Wanda introduced me to the two other girls and one of the two guys with whom I'll be working. Tammy Cohen is a first-year grad student from Columbia; Eric Kenonsha (sp?) is a second-year grad student from Harvard; Gail Ehrlich is the youngest of us, a freshman who just moved from Missouri to attend U-Conn, but like me, is taking a detour through Newport. Everyone was welcoming and all shared that they, too, had initially felt overwhelmed by the scope of Trevor Hall.

Tammy and I have hit it off. I've learned she comes from a big family, so she never had a lot of money for fancy things either. Most of her clothes come from second-hand stores ("shabby chic," Tammy calls them), so I feel less self-conscious about my own wardrobe. She worked to earn enough money for college, too, but she got two scholarships. I'm not surprised. Tammy sounds brilliant when she talks. With her glasses, long hair, and confidence, she reminds me of Gloria Steinem. Tammy doesn't seem to care about not having stylish clothes and doesn't even wear make-up. I should learn to be more like her.

Before going upstairs (or into the beautiful glass-walled solarium, or the surprisingly modern kitchen, or the dining room with the carved angel faces on the ceiling, or even this comfy old library), we spent some time examining the foyer and corridors. The paintings spread onto the hall ceilings, too. They seem to depict the seasons, or maybe specific months of the year, but they've deteriorated so much I can't tell. I would love to be able to spend a week—or more likely, a month—just fixing up the house: touching up the paintings, polishing that banister, powdering the carpet with tea leaves or whatever has to be done to clean it. Maybe I can make myself useful as the maid in case the ASL-instructor/zookeeper gig doesn't work out.

Tammy also praised the beauty of Trevor Hall and denounced the vandals who'd marred it. Evidently, the house was once a boarding school, and the students abused the place. What ingrates! If I had been lucky enough to attend school in such a palace, I would have done everything I could to prove myself worthy of the privilege.

Another reason why the mansion looks forlorn is that Trevor Hall has been unoccupied for almost ten years. Tammy speculated: "From what Wanda says, the owners have had a hard time renting out the place. Given its size, I guess the living expenses are a lot for anyone to manage, even with a silver spoon in their mouths. I don't know how Preis-Herald was able to afford it, even with endowments. Maybe he got a discount on the lease."

I wanted to see the entire house, but Wanda said that was impossible. That's when I found out it has seventy rooms! "But they're small by modern standards, and not all of them are habitable," she warned. "Some sections of Trevor Hall are pretty dilapidated, so for safety reasons and in hopes of scaling down our utility bills, we've decided to close off the rear wing and most of the third floor." (With the exception of the tower, where Dr. Preis-Herald will stay when he's in residence, and Webster's quarters.) Then she walked me through the main rooms on the first floor and promised we'd get a more in-depth tour during orientation.

All of us are staying on the second floor, which is how I've always supposed a college dorm would feel. I have my own little room with a bed, a wardrobe, a built-in bookcase, a window facing the garden, and a sink so I can wash my face and brush my teeth. The toilets and showers are down the hall. There are two bathrooms: one for the guys and one for the girls. I'll only have to share with Wanda, since Tammy and Gail have their own bathroom inside their suite. That room is twice the size of mine and came with a lot of its own furniture, whereas I'm going to have to find someplace to buy a cheap nightstand and a lamp, at the very least.

To listen to Tammy, you'd think staying there was a punishment. She counted on having her own room after years of sharing with sisters and other college students. When we were checking out my new digs, she looked so longingly at the narrow space between the bare walls that I asked if she wanted to switch. I wouldn't mind having a balcony and my own shower. But, after a moment's consideration, she said she didn't

want Gail to feel abandoned. I think that was sweet. Gail's fresh out of high school, after all. For all her sighing and eye-rolling, Tammy is nurturing and protective; I think she's the perfect roommate for Gail. Maybe later on, after we're all settled in, Wanda will let us spread out and take individual rooms.

After putting away my clothes and other belongings as best I could, I decided to explore the mansion. I figured I'd just walk around the second level, the safe part, and get a feel for the layout of the house. I wanted to peek into the other rooms and see what the view looked like from different windows.

The second floor is like a maze; I can't imagine what the third floor must be like! Once you reach the end of our corridor, the hall dog-legs down a smaller hall that branches off into two other corridors. One of the corridors was short and ended in a small suite of four rooms. Sadly, they were all locked.

Many of the doors I tried in my exploration were locked (or stuck). The unlocked doors merely opened into empty, dorm-style rooms with only the occasional bedstead or cot for adornment. I spotted a little side table in one and made a mental note to ask Wanda if I could move it into my room. Of course, then I'd have to admit I'd been prowling. (Is it still prowling if you're snooping around in your own new home?)

I was lured by a nice big picture window down the left-hand branch of the corridor that would have given a lovely view of the front lawn if it hadn't been partially obscured by ivy. Also, the threshold of that corridor was carved with grape leaves, but the carvings were broken, splintered, or engraved with initials. It's a real shame! Beyond the window, the rest of that section was dark and drab. I could feel how disused it was, and that's when I really began to feel like a trespasser.

I opted to get out of the maze and found a second staircase running from the kitchen (it must have been for the servants' use) up to the top floor. Eric's head was in the fridge when I walked down the stairs behind him, and he jumped. Then we joked about my return to "civilization."

Sightseeing in Newport was more enjoyable. Gail, Tammy, and I walked down to the wharf, then decided to tour one of the grand mansions that are now open to the public as museums...

LETTER FROM TAMMY COHEN TO THE COHEN FAMILY

(CONTINUED)

...Yesterday, we explored our environs. The town is charming but very EXPENSIVE. Newport gained fame as a retreat for the wealthiest families in the country, and it has retained its power as a major tourist attraction. Unfortunately for us, we've arrived at the opening of the tourist season, just in time to encounter inflated prices in the grocery, restaurants, and museums. Wanda has advised us to shop for our daily necessities in neighboring Middletown.

Speaking of tourist attractions, I visited the vaunted Breakers, the grandest mansion in Newport, a Vanderbilt "summer cottage." It's certainly the biggest, showiest, most ostentatious, overgrown pile. Everywhere I looked, I saw luxury: three floors of marble, gold-coated walls and ceilings, carved banisters and lintels, crystal chandeliers, mosaics in the bathrooms and on the balconies. Everyone in my tour group walked around with their mouths hanging open. But while they gawped in appreciation, I gagged at the tremendous frivolity.

The "Gilded Age" was a phrase surely coined for the Breakers. Everything that could be dipped in aurum was. Did you know that family even ate with gold utensils? Who on Earth needs gold dining utensils? Also, the giant, elaborate carved chairs were formed from bronze, not wood. The tour guide said the furniture was almost too heavy for the footmen to move. Nothing was practical. It was all for show. How could anyone live comfortably amid so much decadence? The house isn't even beautiful once you look closely at the excess.

As I said to Ruby, I'm glad to be living in a house that's shabby-genteel. Next to true wealth, chipped paint and nicked fireplaces don't seem so bad. I didn't even mind when the water in the shower came out cold and brown. According to Wanda, the pipes will flush all the rust

with regular usage. In a couple of weeks, we won't notice anything amiss. I begin to think Wanda should be selling fixer-uppers to newlyweds.

But I exaggerate. She's been very accommodating. On Arrival Day, Wanda gave us a brief tour and history lesson. Trevor Hall's relative modesty is due to its founder's humble origins. No captain of industry, Curtis Trevor was a scalawag who cast his lot with the winning side in the last days of the Civil War. The lucky stiff then made money from operating a coal mine. My roommate somehow heard "gold mine" and is convinced Trevor struck the mother lode. I haven't had the heart to disillusion her.

Gail puts the most exalted spin on everything to do with Trevor Hall. On our first night, I listened to her rave about the dining room ceiling, a trompe l'oeil painted to look like the sky and interspersed with carved angels. These angels haven't quite fallen, but I wouldn't want to encounter one in a dark alley. Their halos have lost their sheen. One sad cherub is missing his chin and lips. Yet to Gail, this is the image of paradise. The poor kid deserves to look up to a better heaven than one covered in cracks and grime, populated by angels with broken noses and broken wings.

Truthfully, Trevor Hall is a lovely place. This afternoon, I stood on the front lawn, gazing at the façade of the house and mentally comparing it to the Breakers. I suddenly realized how much I could hear! The air buzzed with the sounds of insects in the grass and birds chirping in the trees. It was almost like listening to the hum of telephone wires, except these noises had rhythm and life to them. I stood on the lawn like a dummy for I don't know how long just marveling that all the little critters could make themselves heard at all. But in a world without traffic or el-trains, where the homes are farther than arm's length apart, quiet is something tangible—so much so that you can notice the slightest deviation caused by a mere cricket. This is true luxury, and I look forward to getting used to it...

LETTER FROM RUBY CARDINI TO SARAH-BETH ANDREWS

(CONTINUED)

... The admission at the Breakers was a little steep for me, so I went down the road a pace to what must have belonged to Cornelius Vanderbilt's slightly poorer cousin. Alva Vanderbilt, an early 20th century firebrand who had the gall to divorce her husband and become a suffragette, owned Marble House. What a hoot she must have been! From the outside, her home looks like a miniature White House; on the inside, precious marble in slightly different shades lines every room. It was the most beautiful house I've ever seen.

The house was powerful in other ways, too. Our guide told us vivid stories about its history that brought the home and the occupants alive in our minds. For instance, Alva had a daughter, Consuelo, whom she was determined to marry into European royalty. Back then, it was common for impoverished aristocrats from England to wed American heiresses. They could gain a fortune through the bride's dowry, and the women would acquire titles and access to a blue-blooded family. Ambitious Alva arranged to wed Consuelo to an English count, even though she already had an attachment to an American commoner. Her mother delivered the news to Consuelo in the drawing room, a funereal chapel sunk in dark reds and blues from the stained-glass windows. The gloomy room made the grim announcement feel even more dire. Our guide pointed to the sofa and told us that was where poor Consuelo Vanderbilt sat and cried after her mother had decreed her fate.

I stayed in the room, even as my tour group moved on, and looked at that sofa, imagining this woman, who would have been just a little younger than I am now but was born almost a hundred years before me, pampered and wealthy but not so different from me. She'd had her own hopes for her life. She hadn't wanted to get married and settle

down either, at least not with someone she barely knew and didn't love. I considered what I would do and how I would feel if I had no choices about my future. I imagined Consuelo curled up on the cushion with her head buried against the armrest. I felt like I could reach across the years and touch a real flesh-and-blood human being, not just a name and a date on the page of a history book. It was as though her story were unfolding again, right in the room where I stood, just on the other side of a wispy curtain. The hair on my arms began to prickle, and I exited the room, grateful to be just a working-class girl from a family of no note whatsoever living in the 1970s, with the power to seek my own destiny.

Taking that tour made me wish I had majored in history instead of psychology. As you know, I struggled to narrow my focus, and that was also a sore spot with my folks. First, Dad couldn't figure out what use a college degree would be for a woman; then he couldn't understand why I was wasting so much time exploring the humanities. Literature was tempting, and history even more so, but I figured psychology would give me the opportunity to make a mark in the world. Marble House reminded me how much I still love the sense of connecting to something older and greater than myself, something real but just beyond my reach. I want to point to photos of long-gone days and people and say, "Look, they lived! This happened! It was so!" and bring them all to life again for others. Then again, if I were getting a history degree, no way would I ever have crossed paths with Dr. Preis-Herald and Webster. Maybe living in Newport will give me a chance to get my history fix and gain fame through psychology.

After my tour, I walked around town for a bit. Newport is such a rich source of history. Many houses have little plaques on the wall testifying to when they were built. I saw 1792, 1686, 1704, and 1771. Most of the larger houses also have names: Seacliff, Mid-Cliff, Bennett House, Chateau Sur Mer. There's so much heritage everywhere you look! I can't believe this is where I'm going to be living. Am I the luckiest girl or what?

There's no telling how much more time we'll have for fun and sightseeing. I gather we'll have our hands full teaching Webster. According to Wanda, Dr. Preis-Herald and "the menagerie" (whatever that means) will be driving up two days from now. Thinking about it makes me

excited and nervous. I hope once the study is under way, I'll stop feeling like a pretender. I want to pull my weight and prove my worth. I want to show I deserve to have a position alongside scientists like Tammy, Wanda, and Eric. You'll see: in one of my letters someday, I'll enclose a journal article with my name as co-author.

At the very least, I'll be able to tell you what Webster is like and what's ahead for us...