

Rems-a-palooza! The Collected Works of Emily Rems

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Absolution Bake Shop

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As the family neared the compound, they caught their first glimpse of The Bakers. A dozen girls in long floral dresses with golden hair in elaborate braids were walking along the side of the road. Each was carrying a woven basket covered with checked cloth, like the one Little Red Riding Hood brought to her grandma. Lydia looked at their homemade dresses and lace-up boots, then down at her own skinny jeans, halter top, and Adidas, and felt both jealous and sad for them at the same time.

The allure of the Bakers' treats was that they were all handmade by virgins. The girls baked all day at home, carried each batch up the hill to the store while they were still warm, and then their parents sold whatever was on hand to whomever was next on the endless line that stretched day and night from their cabin's front door down to the parking lot.

Lydia's brother Mitchell took his iPhone out of his jacket pocket and aimed it at the virgins, but their mother reached across the van seat and yanked it out of his hand. "No pictures!" she warned. "If you take their picture they won't serve us."

Obviously that rule didn't apply to the food. At rustic wooden picnic tables under shady blossoming trees around the compound, tourists were aiming their phones at generously domed muffins, golden apple fritters, and cookies the size of dinner plates. There was also a good amount of trading going on. A piece of this for a taste of that. Everyone wanted to try everything.

The line to get in was about a hundred people long, and quite a few tourists toward the back were snacking on previous purchases while waiting for their next turn at the service counter. As the family inched gradually forward, music started drifting down the hill from inside the cabin. The melody sounded like a variation on the gospel children's song "This Little Light of Mine," but the lyrics had been changed, and the tone was much more pointed. "Jeeeeeeeeeee-sus is gonna drop a dime on you," a chorus of women sang. "Jeeeeeeeeeee-sus is gonna drop a dime on you. Jesus is gonna drop a dime on you, a dime on you, a dime on you, a dime on you."

"What does that mean?" Mitchell asked his parents. He was nervously fiddling with his phone, but he didn't take it out of his pocket.

"It's old-time slang from the time before cell phones," his father replied. "Pay phones used to cost a dime to make a call. So if you wanted to rat someone out to the cops, you'd use a pay phone and 'Drop a dime on them.'"

"But why would Jesus call the cops on you?" Mitchell asked.

“Maybe Jesus is gonna tell on you to God instead,” Lydia suggested. They were all quiet after that until they reached the front of the line.

“Whoever has the money step to the register, the rest of your party can step to the side,” came a booming voice up ahead. Lydia and Mitchell flattened their bodies against a wall of preserves in the entryway while their father stepped up to the counter.

Behind the cashier in a little food-prep area, five round, sturdy women in aprons were decorating fresh-from-the-fryer doughnuts with glossy chocolate ganache, peanut-butter chips, and marshmallow fluff—each round morsel was an individual work of art. “Jeeeeeeeeee-sus, is gonna drop a dime on you,” the women sang as they worked.

“Forty dollars,” the register woman said to their father.

“Forty dollars for what?” he asked, handing the money over anyway. His family certainly hadn’t waited on that long line for nothing.

“Forty dollars for absolution,” she replied, and thrust a wicker basket into his arms. “Next!”

Mitchell and Lydia didn’t even wait to see what they’d gotten. They just turned around and raced each other back down the hill to the end of the line. Their parents peeked under the dishcloth on their way to join them, but their faces registered nothing.

“What did we get?” Mitchell shouted when his parents came within earshot. Their father handed their mother the basket.

“Pretzels!” she announced. Lydia and Mitchell stared at her in stunned silence. Lydia thought Mitchell might cry. Nobody reached for the basket.

“C’mon, these are good!” their father insisted, sounding angrier than he probably meant to. He reached into the basket, pulled out a big twist of dough, took a bite, and chewed for a long time.

“Look, they got pretzels,” one young man whispered to another from the line forming behind the family.

“You have something to trade?” Lydia and Mitchell’s father asked, eyeing their basket. They were going back for seconds, too.

“Sorry, no,” the taller of the two replied. “It’s just that they must really think you’re a sinner in need of extra absolution. The Bakers know everyone is in line for sweets. So if they stick you with bread, it means you should come back and try again.”

“I’m not made of money,” Lydia and Mitchell’s father grumbled to their mother. She gave her husband’s arm an encouraging squeeze and they all stayed where they were on the line.

After a while, Lydia excused herself to search for a restroom. When she found the row of yellow and teal Porta-Johns out past the parking lot, the line for a stall was almost as long as the line for food. She waited as long as she possibly could, then gave up and jogged around to the far side of the cabin where there was a broad back porch, and beyond that, a heavily wooded area that looked private enough. On the porch, a dozen men and boys in coarse denim shirts and button-up pants with suspenders were moving busily like an ant colony, stacking long objects into piles. Lydia couldn't see what they were carrying clearly, since most of the piles were under tarps, but there seemed to be a lot of activity—counting, moving, arranging.

She was hustling for the tree line, but still straining to see what the men were doing, when she tripped on something heavy hidden in the grass. She stumbled and fell. She wondered for a moment why there was a small metal pineapple on the overgrown lawn. Then she noticed the handle with the metal ring on top. Then she screamed and wet her pants. The prickly warmth spread from the crotch of her jeans down both legs into her sneakers. The front of her pink shirt was soaked up to her bellybutton.

At the sound of her terrified yelp, a boy about Lydia's age leapt off the porch and came running. She was too scared to move, and also too embarrassed. But when he reached her, he just scooped up the grenade as if it were an apple recently fallen from the nearest tree, and helped Lydia to her feet. He pretended not to notice her stained clothes or the tell-tale smell, and offered her his arm to hold as they walked back toward the cabin.

“Why was there a grenade in the grass?” Lydia asked.

“We keep weapons hidden in different places, in case we need ‘em,” he answered. His Pennsylvania accent was thick but formal.

“Do you buy weapons with the money from the treats?” she asked.

“Yes ma'am,” he replied, then steered her around another hidden grenade.

“What are they all for, though?” she asked. “The weapons. Why do you need so many?”

“Holy war,” he answered. “It's coming. We just don't know when. In the meantime, the women are offering absolution to as many as they can.”

“That's nice of them,” Lydia said, though she wasn't really sure if it was.

“Wait here,” he whispered, and left Lydia under the porch while he climbed the stairs. Above her head, she could hear boots moving swiftly back and forth and snippets of conversation. Rounds of ammunition were being inventoried and distributed. Occasionally someone would chuckle, but in general, the conversations sounded like they were strictly business.

The boy came back with a long flowered dress in his arms a few minutes later. It was off-white with small pink rosebuds all over it. The collar, long sleeves, and buttons down the front to the waist had clearly been hand-sewn with great care. "You and my sister look like you're about the same size," he said, handing it over. Lydia had never been so grateful or so humiliated. He turned his back politely and she slipped the dress over her head, then wriggled out of her wet clothes. When she was finished, the boy handed Lydia a burlap sack for her soiled clothes and cautioned her to stick to the path on her way back down the hill. Then he was gone.

As Lydia made her way back to the food line, a few tourists who had already eaten their fill and weren't afraid of getting kicked off the compound pulled out cell phones and took her picture. Even her own parents didn't recognize her until she was back beside them.

"Oh honey!" Lydia's mother exclaimed. "Don't you look pretty!"

"Where'd you get that dress?" Mitchell demanded.

"I met a Baker and he gave it to me," Lydia said, hiding the sack of dirty clothes behind her back.

"See! I knew those pretzels didn't mean anything. They like our little girl the best," her mother said proudly, examining the stitching at the waist of the full, gathered skirt with her fingertips.

"We're done here," Lydia and Mitchell's father said firmly. "Get in the van."

The rest of the family waited a second to see if he was serious. He was. They all got back in the van, and once they'd made it onto paved roads again, Lydia and Mitchell sang a few rounds of "Jesus, is gonna drop a dime on you," until they got bored with it.

Lydia stared out the window, fingering the delicate mother-of-pearl buttons now adorning her chest. She did a mental inventory of what flours and fruit they had at home. Satisfied their pantry contained all she'd need, Lydia decided that when they got back, she would try and make her family a pie.

Addict

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I've never thought of myself as a liar. In fact, it was the pursuit of "rigorous honesty," as referred to in the various 12-step manuals I'd been reading at the time, that got me into this mess. Or maybe it was my doctor.

See, when you're a young woman, and you also happen to be fat, it's wise to avoid doctor's appointments all together. Not because medical intervention isn't important, but because the aggravation of such encounters often outweighs the benefit. There's something about all that wasted beauty—a person squandering what should be the apex of her attractiveness—that is unduly provocative. And for this reason, doctor's visits for the clinically obese can go in one of two directions. Sometimes the doctor will discreetly avoid the subject of your size, letting you explain what's wrong (broken toe, stomach flu, migraine) in a way that lulls you into a false sense of security that you're actually being listened to. But then he'll suddenly switch gears at the end of the appointment, suggesting that your malady (broken toe, stomach flu, migraine) can only really be addressed with his favorite aggressive weight-loss technique.

The other direction such office visits can go in is more to the point. As soon as this type of doctor walks in, before you have a chance to even get to the reason why you're there (broken toe, stomach flu, migraine) a righteous fire and brimstone body size sermon is unleashed that leaves you with no doubt that you are a FOOD SINNER, and that the angel of death is in fact waiting just outside the examining room door, ready to stagger off this mortal coil with your flabby eternal soul overtaxing his bony arms. In these scenarios, tears are often shed, and the original purpose of the visit (broken toe, stomach flu, migraine) is totally forgotten in a whirlwind of born-again theatrics and promises to change.

It was in the midst of this second scenario, after my nose had ballooned into a bulbous, snot-spewing knob and my choked sobs had caused my physician to cycle from grim satisfaction, to uncomfortable silence, to cajoling parental pleas to settle down, that I was given this ultimatum. "Start going to Overeaters Anonymous meetings right now," he said. "I don't want to see you again until you've been abstinent from compulsive overeating for at least a month and have found yourself a sponsor."

Now, I may have been a dedicated binger with no frame of reference for normal eating. But I've also always been a good little soldier—always eager to please. A teacher's pet from way back, I was determined to return to this authority figure in a month's time with a progress report that would earn me a pat on the head. So four hours later, I found myself in a downtown rehab center that opened its doors daily to the community for various 12-step meetings. Conference Room A housed Debtors Anonymous. Room B hosted a large and defeated-looking circle of Underearners, commiserating on their shared plight at 2 pm on a Thursday before all the alcoholics and

cokeheads left work to take their place after 5. The food people were discreetly tucked away from the rest of the meetings down a side corridor in a dead-end hallway by the elevator bank, as if to provide the center's homeliest sufferers with the speediest escape route possible.

Overall, my first meeting was unremarkable. The folding chairs were comically small for the few attendees like myself who really seemed to need what the program purported to provide. And the stuffy, unventilated room would have had me sweating even if I wasn't a newcomer. But my nervousness, combined with the heat, had my bangs quickly separating into black oily chunks across my clammy forehead within minutes. The weird thing, however, was that most of the folks sitting around me didn't feel the heat at all, since they ranged in size from average, to thin, to "OMG are you a *model*?" to Auschwitz. My heart slowly sank when I realized that OA was a catch-all group for everyone with weird food issues. And since this was a meeting in the middle of a weekday in New York City, the self-lacerating observations of struggling actresses, tortured dancers, and fashion industry refugees dominated the testimonials. I was intimidated. I was annoyed. I felt a surge of self-righteous snark as each beautiful starlet and sunken human clothes hanger took her turn sharing her "experience, strength, and hope." But I stayed put.

"There's a powerful voice inside of me that keeps saying, 'Just get down to 110 pounds and all this pain will go away,'" shared a leggy, six-foot brunette named Jan dressed head-to-toe in Lululemon Athletica. "But I know it's a lie," she continued, her eyes welling up. "I can't get down to that weight without at least a week of juice fasting. And the last time I tried that, I passed out in Acro-Yoga and then went right home and binged on Vienna sausages and sweet pickles." A half-dozen ponytails bobbed up and down in silent identification. Someone passed Jan a box of tissues.

There's a powerful voice inside of me that wishes you would shut the fuck up, I thought, grabbing a paper napkin out of my rumpled Jansport backpack and dragging it under the moist neckline of my T-shirt until the paper fibers curled up on themselves and disintegrated. I didn't want to share in front of these people. So I decided to keep quiet until I had the chance to talk one-on-one with someone a little more relatable.

After the meeting, I introduced myself to a weary-looking, 40-something woman in a plaid jumper named Viv who had identified herself as someone who was able to sponsor, and who also happened to be the second-largest person in the room after me. I asked her if she could talk to me more about the program, and she sighed and hedged a little bit about not feeling well that day. But then some sense of guilt or duty or 12-step brainwashing won out inside of her so she suggested we go to a nearby Starbucks. I listened intently as she ordered a small, unsweetened herbal tea and quickly did the same. She told me OA had no specific food plan. Instead, members identified what foods and food behaviors were problematic for them, and then they abstained from those food behaviors, "one day at a time." She also told me about books and workbooks they used to work the 12 Steps of Recovery outlined in *Alcoholics Anonymous*, the book and program that spawned all the other books and programs.

It sounded simple enough. “It’s simple, but it’s not easy,” Jan said, giving me a conspiratorial wink. I had no idea what she meant, but I thanked her for her time, took her phone number, and gave her mine so we could keep in touch. Then I looked up the local Recovery Bookstore she’d told me about on my phone’s browser, saw it would be open for another hour or so, and jumped in a cab so I could pick up “The Big Book” (*Alcoholics Anonymous*), *The Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions of Overeaters Anonymous*, and *The Twelve-Step Workbook of Overeaters Anonymous*. Once that was taken care of, I hailed another cab, and while riding home, my backpack bulging with purchases (I’ve always loved that “new book smell”), I ordered a large pizza with extra cheese, pepperoni, and sausage so by the time I arrived back at my tiny studio apartment, I’d only have to wait a few minutes for the food to arrive.

Later that night, after devouring the entire pizza along with two hours of *Gilmore Girls*, I called Viv crying. I told her that I didn’t like what I was doing with food but I couldn’t make myself stop. In a feather-soft voice, she said it was good that I was reaching out for help and suggested that I start emailing my food to her every morning. She said I should “turn over” everything I’d eaten the day before, and then write out a healthy plan of eating for the day ahead. She also told me that I should count every day I was able to refrain from bingeing and “recreational sugar,” and that I could announce my day count at meetings. I thanked her for all of her help and support, then apologized for calling her so late. Then I thanked her again and apologized again. That’s when she said she had to go.

I woke up the next morning at 6 a.m. even though my freelance news-blogging shift didn’t start until 10. I was all set to email Viv everything I had eaten the day before, but before I hit “send,” I erased the pizza and the macaroni and cheese and the two bacon-egg-and-cheese breakfast sandwiches and the seven diet cokes and the Cool Ranch Doritos, and instead wrote: “Breakfast: Fruit salad. Lunch: Mixed greens with chickpeas, cucumber, feta, and red onion. Lite dressing on the side. Dinner: Whole wheat penne with marinara sauce and parmesan. Snack: Kale chips.”

I knew I wasn’t technically telling the truth. But since that was what I planned to eat during the day ahead, my “Day 1,” why not retroactively let her know how much she was helping me instead of getting off on the wrong foot? I hit “send” on that email, and then walked over to Gristedes to pick up everything I had just turned over. The bill for that one day of groceries swallowed up much more money than I had been prepared to spend. And to make matters worse, when I got home, I didn’t want to cook or eat any of the stuff I’d just bought. Instead of preparing it, I filed it all away inside my fridge, then set my phone alarm for 11:45 a.m. so I could order another pizza from Nino’s as soon as they opened, and then graze on it all day while I worked.

My life dragged on this way for the next couple of weeks as my turn-overs to Viv descended deeper and deeper into fan-fiction. Full of fabricated smoothies and quinoa and grilled tofu in appropriate portions, my daily inventories were beyond reproach. Meanwhile, my refrigerator and kitchen cabinets became so overstuffed with unprepared ingredients that I soon had a phalanx of grocery bags in front of my closet to accommodate the overflow. Not that any of this stopped me from ordering takeout. In fact, I had begun to accumulate so many to-go containers that I started

dividing up my trash into separate, smaller bags so I wouldn't run the risk of seeing anybody on my way to the garbage chute while holding too much incriminating evidence.

I tried out some more meetings between blogging shifts. But aside from Viv, I was still put off by the high cheekbones and jutting clavicles of my fellow addicts, so I kept my shares brief and vague. Viv sensed I wasn't really as "serene" as my turnovers to her suggested, so she strongly encouraged me to go home and get started on my step work. After reading the first chapter in the two-tone *12 & 12* book, "Step One: We admitted we were powerless over food — that our lives had become unmanageable," I flipped open the maroon workbook to the corresponding chapter. Question one read: "In OA we are encouraged to take a good look at our compulsive eating, obesity, and the self-destructive things we have done to avoid obesity—the dieting, starving, over-exercising, or purging.' Here is a first-step inventory of my compulsive eating history." The essay question was followed by a whole empty workbook page full of blank lines waiting to be filled. But I knew I'd need a lot more space for that kind of assessment than what the page provided.

Feeling overwhelmed, I shut the workbook and instead opened up the blue *Alcoholics Anonymous* paperback and started leafing through it. I giggled at the avuncular, depression-era turns of phrase: "Though my drinking was not yet continuous, it disturbed my wife," wrote Bill W. "We had long talks when I would still her forebodings by telling her that men of genius conceived their best projects when drunk; that the most majestic constructions of philosophic thought were so derived." After that, I skimmed over the more boring and annoying chapters advising impatient employers and put-upon wives on how to deal with the rowdy alcoholics in their midst. But when I got to the "Personal Stories" section, I was hooked. I devoured the first-person accounts of boxcar-jumping hobos and sanitarium-bound salesmen as if they were Lifetime Original Movies and I knew I'd found a fellowship I could really immerse myself in. The fact that I wasn't an alcoholic didn't seem like such a big deal. If every 12-step program was just an offshoot of AA, then why not go right to the source?

At least that's what I was prepared to tell anyone who tried to bar my admittance to the late night meeting I crashed at the Lower East Side AA clubhouse two days later. But nobody gave me any static. I just walked in, took a seat, and immediately could tell by looking around that I liked this crowd much better. Instead of snug cardigans drawn protectively over shivering anorexic shoulders, the fashions scattered around this dingy, linoleum-tiled former schoolroom tended toward elaborate hoodies, band T-shirts with cutoff sleeves, and jagged tattoos. And then when the sharing started, I was instantly transported by the dramatic tale of that night's guest speaker—a gay man with regal faded features whose days of rent boy debauch came to an abrupt end after a horrific traffic accident.

That first time around, I kept quiet like I had over at OA and soaked it all in. But since this was AA, they had a spread with free coffee and cake afterward, so I did slow, furtive laps around the refreshment table, nibbling, refilling, and eavesdropping until a dude with stretched earlobes and an ironically preppy polo shirt came over to greet me.

Of course my mouth was full when he introduced himself, and when he stuck his hand out to shake mine, I had a paper napkin loaded up with Entenmann's in one hand and a light and sweet coffee in the other, neither of which I was willing to relinquish. But after some awkward juggling and uncouth shirt-crumbs wiping, we established that his name was Ron and it was my first time at the meeting. Ron gave me a beginner's packet of info, along with his phone number and some words of encouragement to keep coming back. So that's what I did.

Emboldened by my first attempt at AA infiltration, I decided to raise my hand at an afternoon meeting the next day. I was supposed to be working a shift for a celebrity gossip site, but after all, according to my doctor, this was a matter of life and death. I identified myself as an "addict" and added the caveat that I hadn't had a drink in almost two years. (True, but not for any sobriety-related reasons. I just never acquired the taste for alcohol while single-mindedly indulging my food whims). I got teary when the room applauded my day count, and then shared that I had first come into "the rooms" when my doctor insisted that my only options were the 12-steps or death. Then I thanked everyone for letting me share.

Just like that, I was in. After the meeting, a pair of night nurses who had been nabbing their daily dose of sanity before work asked me to join them at a local diner for what they called "fellowship," and by the time we left together, we had four other alcoholics in tow. Sitting at the head of a long, imitation-wood-grain table at the back of the Gramercy Cafe like royalty, I felt like I was finally in a cool, tough gang, and nobody could tell me shit. In fact, I didn't even hang back and wait for other people to order first like I had on my timid OA tea date. I jumped right in as soon as the friendly-yet-frazzled waitress made her way over to us and I definitively requested a bacon cheeseburger deluxe with ranch dressing to dip the fries in and a chocolate shake. There was a brief pause as she wrote my order down, and I thought I caught a whiff of self-righteousness from the nurse on my left when she ordered a cup of minestrone soup and a small Greek salad. But when nurse #2, a bottle blonde named Sandy, flicked a long, lacquered nail in my direction and said with a deviant gleam in her eye that she'd have what I was having, I knew I'd found a kindred spirit.

That first time at the Gramercy, bathed in the shifting shadows cast by the "Open 24 Hours" sign mounted above the window, it was only Sandy and I who ate publicly the way we ate privately. But I could tell by the hungry eyes tracking us that plenty more wanted to. Afterwards, she and I exchanged numbers, and when she called me while on break from her graveyard shift, I wasn't surprised when discussion moved quickly from alcohol to food. "I don't know what it is," she confided. "But ever since I gave up the booze, I've been so hungry all the time. Like, especially for sweets."

"It says right in the Big Book that when AA was first getting started, detoxing drunks were given lots of sugar to curb their cravings," I told her, relishing how casually sage I sounded about a book I had just started browsing a few days before. "Most booze just turns into sugar in your body once you drink it anyway," I advised. "So why not soothe yourself with a similar substance that's so safe, even kids can use it?"

“I never thought of it that way,” Sandy said. Over the phone, I could hear something clicking across the backs of her teeth, like candy or a lozenge. She didn’t need me to explain to her what a relief it was to have something sweet (or salty, or both) within reach at all times. She was already there.

At my next afternoon meeting, I identified myself as someone who was able to sponsor and Sandy immediately sought me out after the meeting. I told her to get a copy of the AA 12 & 12, and a copy of the workbook, and said that after she had completed the writing for each step, we’d go over it. I felt a little guilty about that part, since I hadn’t done any of the step work myself, but I consoled myself with the knowledge that this girl and I were alike, and I could probably really help her. While we talked, I noticed a round, acne-scarred kid with a huge messenger bag who couldn’t have been more than a year out of high school. He was circling the meeting’s coffee and cake like a shark. “Forget that stuff,” I whispered in his ear conspiratorially. “I know a place downtown that serves half price dim sum before five. You in?”

He was, and so was Sandy, and surprisingly, so were two other women. Sandy seemed to know them, but I didn’t remember having ever seen them at a meeting before. They looked alike, like they could be sisters, only Angela was black and Erika was white. They both had closely cropped dark hair that was graying at the temples, wire-rimmed glasses that made their faces look serious and owlish, and they both wore baggy jeans and work boots. The overall impression was rumpled and nondescript, but intense, especially when magnified times two. We were all riding the 6 train downtown when Angela came right out and said it. “Sandy says eating whatever you want is keeping you guys sober, but I don’t want to get fat.... No offense.”

“None taken,” I said smoothly. I took a few extra breaths before responding further, waiting for the flush to subside from my cheeks and my heart to stop racing with the primal beat of shame. “Look at it this way,” I said. “Life is hard. It’s too hard. I used to feel bad because I felt like I was the only one who couldn’t handle everyday stuff without something to take the edge off. But then, the more I got to know people, and the more I got to observe people, the more I realized that nobody does it cold turkey. Nobody can face the dark night of the soul naked and without comfort.” Now I had their attention. “Luckily, the world is outfitted with anesthetics to suit every personality type and predisposition. We all gravitated toward alcohol, and some of us picked up some other side habits along the way too, like gambling and pills and weed and sex....” I waited to see who’d flinch, but there wasn’t a flincher in the bunch. This crew had been around.

“The way I see it,” I said, taking turns looking each of them in the eye, “abstinence is not a long-term solution. Sooner or later, we all lose our grip. So why not choose the crutch that’s the softest? The easiest? The cheapest? Why not pick the one that’s OK to do anywhere? Why not choose the one that doesn’t cause blackouts? That doesn’t make us lose the trust of our families? That doesn’t make us lose our jobs?” (On that last one I ran out of steam, thinking guiltily of the voicemails I’d been getting lately from editors regarding my whereabouts.) “If you don’t want to get fat, then exercise! Exercise until running that treadmill replaces delicious, soul-comforting food as your

primary addiction. Choose what works for you. I'm just here to share what works for me. Take what you like and leave the rest.”

By that time, the train had lurched to a stop at Canal Street and we all tumbled out. Everyone else took the stairs, but I chose to wait for the elevator instead, which took a while. When the door finally opened, I was joined inside the urine-soaked compartment by a Caribbean woman shoving a double-wide stroller bursting with wriggling blond twins. She smiled and gestured at my abdomen. “When are you due?” she asked, before swooping down and wrenching a plastic dinosaur out of one of the kids’ mouths. “Any day now,” I replied, shifting my backpack to one shoulder so it hung more in front of me than behind me.

When I reached street level, I discovered that Angela had taken off. But the other three, Sandy, Owen, and Erika, were still on board, and between the four of us, we were able to consume a truly heroic amount of half-price dim sum at my favorite little spot at the end of Mott Street. Steamed buns, rice rolls, fried dumplings, spring rolls, barbecued meat, congee, it was all a salty, greasy blur. Our grins gleamed with satiety—with peace.

Over the course of the next few meetings, I noticed more and more mouths twisting into suspicious grimaces when I shared what a relief it was that my higher power had removed all desire to drink from my life. And there were even a few occasions when I wasn’t called on to speak, even though I knew my hand was clearly raised. But afterwards, when I sought out company for post-meeting fellowship, invariably my own private group grew. It wasn’t just Sandy, Owen, and Erika now who wanted a piece of the pleasure pie. Newcomers and oldtimers alike would casually swing by our gathering spot near the cake to inquire where we were planning to go that day, and would then decide if our pizza party or all-you-can-eat sushi field trip or Mexican nacho bonanza was to their liking.

During all the years I spent eating alone in my studio in the dark with the TV on and my comforter catching all the crumbs, I never realized how much I was missing out on. I had no way of knowing there would be so many like-minded people out there who would eat right alongside me without making me feel judged or dirty or gross or bad. In fact, they said I was helping them. One day at a time. I was helping them. “I want to drink so badly!” they would wail. “Easy does it,” I would coo, and offer them a bite of my Fettuccini Alfredo. “I’m desperate to find a connection to my higher power, but I just feel alone in my crazy brain!” another would lament. “Just order the chocolate peanut butter cheesecake, take a bite, and then try and tell me there is no God,” I’d reply.

When some of my sponsees began qualifying about the success they’d had staying sober with the help of “God’s healing bounty,” a few old-timers started voicing their concerns that we were lending the AA name to an “outside enterprise.” And then when Owen in particular shared the good news that his sobriety day count was rising in relation to the numbers on his scale, that was the last straw. Ron, who had so cordially invited me to “keep coming back” when I’d first arrived, politely asked my sponsees and I to leave. Apparently, our views were confusing the newcomers

and he somberly suggested that we each try to fill the “God-shaped hole” inside our hearts with something that wasn’t deep-fried.

From then on, we were on our own. A dozen strong, my followers and I returned to the Gramercy Cafe every few days and adopted its largest formica table, the one flanked by ferns hanging from elaborate macrame harnesses, as our regular home base. Sometimes my gang would have step work to share, so they would read aloud from their workbook questions dealing with issues of surrender, faith, and humility, and I would carefully take notes and respond like any good shepherd would to an ailing flock. “What do you mean you’ve never been truly loved by anyone?” I’d ask gently. “How do you know? Most of us are so self centered, we never truly become aware of how much our higher power loves us, cares for us, and wants us to be happy.”

Other times, I would give the group culinary assignments to help them in their recovery. “Before you order your meal today,” I suggested one afternoon in an inspired moment, “I want you to imagine something that your mother once made for you to eat that made you feel especially cared for and safe. Close your eyes. Picture it in your mind. Taste it with your memory. Now open your eyes and try to find the item that most closely approximates that meal on the menu and order it. They have a pretty large selection here so it shouldn’t be too hard.” When the waitress came to take our orders that day, she seemed a little unnerved by the veil of tears that encircled the table as my fellows ordered matzoh ball soup and lasagna and pancakes and grilled cheese as if they were begging for their lives. When our food arrived that day, we didn’t dive in with our customary greedy carelessness. We reverently bit into our edible time capsules, held each morsel on our tongues, and then swallowed and swallowed and swallowed until we had never felt more full.

Looking back, I think that was the last time we all dined together as a group. After a few months of blowing off freelance assignments, I fell behind on my rent and had to move back in with my folks in Yonkers until I could round up a new batch of clients. For a while, I would take Metro North into the city once a week to meet at the Gramercy, but one by one, we lost our members back to the regular AA afternoon meeting, or to OA, or to Weight Watchers. Then one week, just before my mobility issues made it too difficult to make the trip anymore, I showed up to find just Sandy sitting alone at what was once our big, rowdy table. “You’ve always been a really good listener,” she said carefully, spearing a chunk of sad iceberg salad with her fork in a way that can only be described as resentful. Her colleagues at the hospital had given her the fire and brimstone treatment since the last time we’d met, and without our gang to support her, the pressure had been too great. She was back on that weary hamster wheel of dieting I recognized so well, on the run from death.

“I was always so glad to have your attention, and your guidance, and your company,” she continued, giving up on the salad and putting down her fork. “I don’t think I ever properly listened to you.”

“To me?” I asked, wiping the grease from my patty melt off my hands in a sudden flinch of self-consciousness. “You listened to me,” I countered. “You always listened to everything I said. Every

instruction I gave you, you followed to the letter. And I hope you don't mind me saying, you seemed a lot more 'happy, joyous, and free' back then than you do now." I gestured at the sad salad, hoping it would make her laugh and steal some of my fries. But she didn't move. She just held my gaze steadily.

"Did you ever have a drinking problem?" she asked. Just straight out like that. As if she were asking me to pass the salt.

"No," I answered bluntly. "But like I've always said, everyone picks up something to lean on. Just because my substance of choice is different than yours, it doesn't make me any less of an addict than any of you are."

"Nobody would ever accuse you of not being an addict," Sandy replied sharply, and for a second, I thought she might actually hit me. But she didn't. Instead, she reached over, stole a fry from the edge of my plate, and bailed, leaving me with the check. Luckily she had only ordered the salad.

I finished my meal and then finished all of Sandy's sad salad, just for the heck of it. Then I hailed a cab and caught the next train home.

All Is Peaceful, All Is Quiet

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Jacob wasn't sure exactly why his brother Ethan had decided to stop speaking to him. He knew Ethan had been pissed off for a while after his wedding. (When it came time for Jacob to give his Best Man toast, he was nowhere to be found. Later, he was discovered face down under the sinks in the men's room, suffering the ill effects of a mixture of Champagne and Xanax.) But that was years ago.

Maybe it had something to do with this past Fourth of July. All of the New York cousins had gotten together for a rooftop barbecue over in Greenpoint. Jacob had arrived four hours late with a date he had picked up that afternoon, and on their way to the keg, he introduced her to Ethan and Ethan's very pregnant wife Caroline. They all stood around, making the kind of awkward conversation that often plagues people who are supposed to be close but aren't. After they had exhausted the subjects of how much the city had reportedly spent on fireworks that year, and whether or not it was a waste of taxpayer money, especially considering how fucked up the trains out to Brooklyn were over the holiday weekend, the foursome hit a lull and then they were all just staring at each other. To fill the awkward gap, Jacob chimed in with a news story that he had recently read online that had totally creeped him out.

Apparently, a woman was seen at dusk pushing her toddler in a swing in a park in Baltimore. Neighbors reported seeing her pushing the child in the swing well past nightfall. And when witnesses saw that the woman was still pushing the child in the swing at dawn, someone called the cops. When police arrived on the scene, they discovered the child in the swing was deceased. When they tried to question the woman about what had happened to her child, she was unresponsive. So they carted her off to the state hospital pending the results of an autopsy. "I just can't stop thinking about it," Jacob remarked, slurping the foam off the top of the solo cup his date had acquired for him. "The unbreakable focus of the mother, keeping her dead kid in motion like that, hour after hour. It's as if she thought she could somehow stop time from moving forward. Like, she knew on the other side of that moment on the swing, a world where her kid no longer existed was waiting for her. So she stretched that final moment into hours. I wonder how long she would have kept it up if someone hadn't called the cops on her." Jacob had mostly been addressing the story to his date, a purple-haired bartender whose name he no longer remembered. He didn't even notice that Caroline had started to cry until Ethan slammed down his bottle of O'Doul's, shouted "Jesus, Jacob!" and stormed off toward the elevator with Caroline weepily waddling after him.

That had been over seven months ago. Jacob knew he was now an uncle, since carefully posed, softly lit portraits of his new nephew Preston had been making the rounds on Facebook. But Jacob hadn't heard one word from Ethan. He had tried reaching out; a congratulatory text once the first baby pictures had surfaced online, followed by an email suggesting they get together, and

then a comment beneath an Instagram post of Preston's first Christmas in which Jacob asked publicly, "When can I meet the little guy?"

At this rate, Preston would be attending an elite boarding school by the time Jacob got to meet him. Which sucked, because when he had found out the baby was coming, he had dropped a bundle on a fancy baby monitor. It was the kind where you placed a high tech HD camera near the crib, and then you could log in with an iPhone app and spy on your kid anywhere, any time.

Jacob had been trying to impress the salesgirl at Babies 'R' Us with the extravagant purchase. But the more it sat on his shelf, the more resentful he got that he had not been invited over so he could hand it graciously to the new parents. After all, his few transgressions against Ethan and Caroline had been thoughtless, yes, but not malicious. Surely nothing so major that he should be totally shut out of their lives.

At least that was his rationale when he showed up at their apartment building near Columbia University with the dusty baby monitor box tucked under his arm. "I know who you are!" the doorman exclaimed as soon as Jacob entered the marbled lobby. Considering his shaky standing with Ethan, the greeting made Jacob's stomach flip. But when he saw the doorman was smiling, he realized it was probably another shocked observation of his resemblance to Ethan. They weren't twins, but they had been born less than a year apart. Their similarity to each other was so striking, friends and family often commented that they looked like the good and evil siblings in an afternoon soap opera. But to Jacob, the fact that he and Ethan looked practically interchangeable felt more like a cosmic joke.

"I'm here to drop off a present for the baby," Jacob responded casually. "OK if I go upstairs?"

"They're not home right now," the doorman said, his smile fading. "It's just Dominique up there watching Preston. Were they expecting you?"

Jacob nodded as if he and Dominique were already old friends, then reached into the pocket of his distressed Levi's and palmed two 20s. "I know they're not in," he said, lowering his voice as he approached the doorman's podium. "Dominique is expecting me. I'm here to install this baby monitor as a surprise for Ethan and Caroline." Jacob held up the box. The package was decorated with the photo of a perfectly round, pink child in bed. In an adjacent panel, the kid's mother took a break from doing dishes to lovingly check him out on her smartphone. Jacob nudged the two bills out toward the doorman.

"Sure, sure. Let me help you with that box," the doorman said, lifting the package out of Jacob's arms and pocketing the money in one smooth motion. The doorman pushed the elevator button, pushed the correct floor, and then handed the box back before returning to his podium. It was a good thing that he had pushed the floor button out of courtesy, since Jacob had never been to Ethan's place before. Once they had both moved out of their parents' crowded house on Long Island, they became more like cousins than brothers. Running into each other and catching up at

family functions, but otherwise living completely separate lives on opposite ends of Manhattan Island.

Jacob got off on the seventh floor, shifted the monitor box from one arm to the other, and then stood still in the library silence of the carpeted hallway. He had no idea which door was Ethan's and there seemed to be a lot of doors to choose from. Jacob had resigned himself to knocking on every door until he had found the right one when a piercing infant shriek split the quiet like a fire alarm. "Thanks little guy," he mumbled in the direction of the sound, and followed it to the end of the hall. When he got to the door, he could hear the lilting sound of a Caribbean woman's voice cooing melodically beneath the escalating screams.

"All is peaceful, all is quiet. All is peaceful, all is quiet. All is peaceful, all is..." the crying died down to a mournful whimpering. "Shhhhh, shhhhh, there you go babydoll, there you go," she continued, shushing and soothing until everything was, in fact, peaceful and quiet.

Then Jacob fucked it all up by ringing the doorbell and the baby went wild again, filling the entire hallway with howls of discontent. When Dominique opened the door, she was obviously irritated. But when she got a good look at Jacob, her expression melted into something more friendly. "Wait! Don't tell me. I know who you are!" she said, jiggling the infant up and down on her hip.

"Hi!" Jacob said, trying to stay calm even though the screaming was making his upper lip sweat. "I'm Ethan's brother Jacob. I'm here to install this baby monitor." He thrust the box at Dominique, even though she obviously had her hands full. She stepped aside and let him in.

"I told you not to tell me!" she said mock angrily while trying to disengage the baby's tiny fingers from the dreadlocks at her hairline. "They already have one of those things set up. I'll try not to take it as an insult that they sent you here to set up another one so they can check up on me from even more angles."

Sure enough, as soon as Jacob entered Preston's pastel blue room, the first thing he noticed there on the window ledge was the exact same camera he now held in his arms. The bulbous lens was perched up on its stand like a runaway eyeball placidly resting on a rigid optic nerve. Jacob wondered if Ethan was watching him right now from his desk at the architectural firm. Part of him hoped he was. More of him hoped he wasn't.

The instructions for setup were pretty straightforward. Jacob found a spot for the cam on a shelf crammed with stuffed animals that had an outlet behind it. The fuzzy bodies of a pensive-looking rabbit and a high-end Steiff bear almost covered the device completely. And when Jacob paired the camera with his iPhone to test it out, he noted that the image on his screen was of a crib bordered on either side by fuzz from the animals' encroaching ears.

“That was fast,” Dominique said from the doorway as Jacob folded up the empty box. “Can you watch Preston while I bring that to the recycling chute? He’s in the living room in the baby bouncer.”

Jacob handed the flattened box over to Dominique, tucked the instructions inside his pocket, and followed the sounds of *Sesame Street* until he discovered Preston on the floor strapped into a tilted little chair supported by rods. The baby was trying to shove his entire fist inside his gummy, drooling mouth, and his wriggling made the chair gently rise and fall. “Hi buddy,” Jacob said cautiously, easing down onto the floor beside the baby. “What’s up?” Preston’s eyes stayed riveted to Ernie and Bert up on the wall-mounted flat screen. “Those dudes are gay, you know.”

As Jacob leaned in toward Preston, he caught a whiff of some delicate, delicious scent that seemed to originate from the top of the boy’s head. It was light and sweet like talcum powder, but also slightly sour like cheese. He got a little closer and inhaled deeply. Then he closed his eyes and did it again.

“They smell good, don’t they?” Dominique commented from the hallway. Jacob hadn’t heard her come back in over the din of televised ABCs and 123s. “That is, when they don’t have a full diaper.”

Caught off guard and embarrassed, Jacob scrambled to his feet and headed for the door. As he said his goodbyes to Dominique, he could smell that she had snuck a smoke while out at the recycling chute. His kind of girl. Back in the carpeted hall, he could hear Preston start to wail again, and he hoped it was because the kid was sad that he was gone.

In the following days that stretched into weeks, Jacob checked his phone more often than he’d like to admit, expecting some kind of message from Ethan. “Thanks for the gift!” or “Sorry I missed you!” or “Stay the fuck out of my apartment!” or “Don’t ever sniff my son’s head again!” But no message came. After three weeks had passed, Jacob assumed Ethan and Caroline had found his (very expensive) gift and trashed it out of spite. In fact, he was sure of it. But just to double check, he selected the little baby cam app on his phone and booted it up to see what would happen.

Much to his surprise, an image popped up immediately. It was after midnight, so the crib’s outlines were described in vivid, night vision green. And there, behind the bars, was Preston, lying like a starfish with his tiny limbs spread out in all directions. “Hey buddy!” Jacob cooed, surprised at how happy he felt to see the little guy. “Are you having nice dreams about Ernie and Bert redecorating their condo?” Preston stirred, moving his head one way, then the other, before thrusting a few fingers in his mouth. “I see you,” Jacob whispered at the image on his phone, as if he didn’t want to wake the infant. “I see you.”

A few nights later, Jacob woke up soaked in sweat out of a drunken nightmare where he was alone on the side of a dark highway and didn’t have any memory of who he was or what he was supposed to be doing or where he was supposed to be. He couldn’t remember the name of the girl

snoring beside him and didn't want to wake her, so he grabbed his phone and crept into the bathroom. He didn't even bother to turn on the lights. He just sat down on the closed toilet lid, turned on his phone, and jabbed at the baby app until green night vision light came pouring out of the little screen, bouncing off the tile. Preston wasn't sleeping either. His tiny face was bunched up in an old man grimace of exhaustion and discomfort, and his mouth was a gaping maw of silent screams since the camera provided only video, not audio. "Hey buddy, don't cry," Jacob whispered. "I had a bad dream, too! Isn't it funny that we both had bad dreams at the same time? It's like we're secret twins." The ghostly form of Caroline came shuffling on screen. Her breasts hung unflattering low beneath her oversized night shirt, and Jacob could almost see them in all their untethered glory as she leaned over the edge of the crib to pick up Preston. Caroline draped him expertly over her shoulder and started walking in slow circles around the room, patting and rubbing little circles into the boy's back until his scrunched up face appeared to relax. Jacob wondered if his own mother had ever held him like that, walking and rubbing and patting until the bad dreams faded away. Frankly, he couldn't imagine it.

A soft knocking came at the door. "Dude, sorry to bother you, but I really need to pee." Jacob got up off the toilet, turned on the lights even though the sudden extra brightness stabbed at his eyes, and stepped out of the bathroom so the naked girl on the other side of the door could get in. While she washed her hands, he mentally rehearsed how he would explain that he had an early day tomorrow, and maybe it would be better if she got dressed and started heading home now.

This was obviously a lie. Jacob couldn't remember the last time he'd had an "early day." His band played and practiced at night, followed by long circuitous journeys to various after parties where you had to know someone to get in. The earliest Jacob had been up in a while was the afternoon he dropped off the baby cam, and that had been after three previous attempts to get up at an acceptable baby-cam-dropping-off time.

It was at one of these aforementioned after parties that Uzi, the bassist in Jacob's band, busted him reaching once more for his phone. "Who's the girl?" Uzi leered, gesturing at the phone with an empty shot glass. "She must have your huevos on lock, bro. You've been checking that thing so much, she can probably smell the stink of desperation through the phone."

It was true that Jacob had been preoccupied with his phone. But he certainly didn't need to justify his actions to the dirtbags in his band. He told Uzi to fuck off and left the table to get another drink. The line at the bar was long. So in the interval, Jacob let his thumb instinctively twitch back over to the app.

Preston was awake, but he wasn't crying. He was using the bars of his crib to pull himself up to a sitting position, and he was fiddling with a fuzzy ducky. "Awwwwwww!" exclaimed a girl who looked like a 12-year-old dressed up in her mom's party dress. "Lemmmeeessssseeeeeee!"

She grabbed the phone out of Jacob's hand in that bratty way young girls think is fun and flirty but is actually super annoying, and held it up to her slightly-older-looking friend. "Looooooooook!"

she giggled in an intoxicated drawl. “A wittle baaaaaaayyyyyybeeeeeeee.” Her friend grabbed the phone and they both started to wordlessly squeal.

Jacob placed his drink order, waited patiently for the shot to arrive, downed it, paid, and then eased his body through the crowd until he was behind the girl now in possession of his phone. He didn't say anything. He just reached down, closed his hand around her hand that was holding the phone, and squeezed hard. She yelped in pain, dropped the phone, and called Jacob a dick. He scooped the phone up off the floor and took off out the fire exit.

When he got home, Jacob moved his futon over to the opposite wall where the outlet was. That way, he could keep the phone plugged in all morning as he slept, and he could tap the app whenever an uneasy dream made him momentarily regret whatever life decisions had led him to waking up alone on a futon on the floor of a decently filthy Lower East Side efficiency. He made a mental note that in the future, if he got home by 10, he would have at least eight or nine hours of quality time with Preston before Dominique or Caroline (but not Ethan, never fucking Ethan) came and took him out of his crib for another busy day.

Jacob placed the phone gently on the pillow beside him and whispered to Preston about how he had started writing poetry in junior high, and how all his buddies had called him a fag. But once he'd learned to play guitar, his poems became songs, and his songs were so good he started getting laid. By the time that vivid tale of triumph over adversity had run its course, Jacob and Preston were both asleep. And for Jacob, it was the kind of deep, black, dreamless death-sleep he thought he'd never experience again.

In the morning, Jacob had the shakes. But he'd always been wary of day drinking, so he decided to walk it off instead. In dark glasses, black jeans, and last-night's T-shirt, he walked north, then west, north, then west. He stopped outside The Strand to look at discounted art books. He stopped at The Bean for iced coffee. He stopped at a random bodega near Penn Station for cigarettes. He walked with his headphones on, bouncing between old playlists and the baby app, even though he knew the crib would be empty.

It took a few hours, but eventually he found himself outside Ethan's building just as Dominique was pushing a stroller the size of a Honda out onto the sidewalk. Jacob waited at the corner, pretending to text someone, then followed at a discreet distance as Dominique rolled Preston to a small playground four blocks west.

She took Preston gently out of his stroller and got him all strapped in to a baby swing while singing him a song about different kinds of animals. Dominique kept singing under her breath as she pulled out her phone, and soon she was texting with one hand and pushing Preston on the swing with the other. About 20 minutes later, she was joined by another Caribbean nanny with a white baby, and then another. Jacob pretended to read news items on his phone on a bench just outside the playground area, while listening to the nannies gossip and laugh with one another. He tried to send a few messages to Preston telepathically, but the gentle back-and-forth motion of the

baby swing soon had the little guy snoozing away, and Jacob didn't want to wake him with intrusive thoughts.

When the nannies finally packed up the babies and headed back to their respective high rises at dusk, Jacob decided to stay on his bench instead of following them. He scrolled through text messages he had been ignoring all day. Some were from girls whose numbers he had assigned descriptions to instead of names: Skull Shirt, Trash Bar, Lotus Tattoo. The more recent messages were from his bandmates regarding their gig that night in Williamsburg. It was already getting late. If Jacob wanted to shower and put on something that looked good on stage before sound check, he'd need to get going now.

But he didn't leave. Instead, he strolled over to the rack of regular swings for bigger kids now hanging empty next to the baby swings. Jacob sat on one, just to try it out while nobody was looking, and pushed off with his feet. At first, the motion made his insides slosh around unpleasantly. But he got used to the sensation after a bit of rhythmic pumping with his legs.

The streetlights seemed to glow brighter as the dusk deepened around them. And as Jacob swung higher and higher, he felt as if he could almost touch their glowing bulbs on his way down. The phone began to buzz in his pocket. He slowed the swing down enough to ease it out, but he didn't answer the call. He just hit "Ignore" and swiped over to the baby app just in time to catch Dominique arranging Preston carefully in his crib before heading home for the night. Caroline stopped in briefly to smooth the corn silk strands over Preston's forehead and to feel the familiar curl of his miniature fingers around her one big finger. After that, Jacob had Preston all to himself.

"Hey buddy! Did you have fun today?" he whispered warmly at the screen. It was a nice night, with cool breezes ruffling the leaves on the oaks nearby and fluttering the edges of Jacob's shaggy hair as he swung. At the top of the screen, text alerts began to appear over the baby app, accompanied by buzzing phone vibrations that sounded like an angry insect. First they were curious: "Sound check starts in 5. U on ur way?" "Where r u man?" Then they were pissed: "WTF J? 2 good 4 sound check now?" "U btrr b ded or I'm gonna kill u." Then, an hour or so later, the messages were mostly worried. "Pick up yr phone dude." "R U OK?" "Just let 1 of us know where U R. We can come get U."

That last message from Defonte, the drummer, seemed to snap Jacob out of his meditative haze a little bit. If he kept blowing them off, he might return home to find cops tossing his apartment or something. So he texted Defonte back: "All is peaceful. All is quiet." Vague as it may have been, the message seemed to do the trick. Finally his phone fell silent and Jacob once again had an unobstructed view of his nephew.

Preston was hard at work pulling himself up to standing with help from the crib bars. "Go for it buddy!" Jacob whispered to him. "You're a champion!" In no time the kid was standing, and was sort of yanking his body towards and away from the bars as if he were doing some form of baby calisthenics. The boy seemed agitated. Or maybe just excited. There was a gleam in his bright,

night-vision eyes as he used one little foot to kick his fuzzy ducky closer to where he was standing. The ducky was pretty big, as far as stuffed animals go. So it provided a substantial platform once the kid got it into his head to steady himself with the crib rail and stand on top of the duck. From that height, the crib rail now only came up to Preston's chest, and the kid was leaning forward, forward, forward, flexing and straining toward the darkness outside his baby cage.

Jacob closed the app, quickly scrolled through his contacts, and called Ethan's home number. It rang a bunch of times and went to voicemail, even though he was positive somebody must be home with the baby. Then he tried Ethan's cell—no dice. He would have called Caroline's cell if he'd had the number, but he didn't, so he just started running. He flew through an intersection and hurdled over the leash of a cranky-looking bulldog that had created a trip line across the sidewalk. He was so out of breath by the time he reached Ethan's lobby, he could barely speak. So he just held up his phone to the doorman, as if that were all it would take to get waved upstairs.

"Is your brother expecting you sir?" The doorman asked. He was much stiffer and more formal than he had been before. Like maybe it wasn't cool that he'd let Jacob up the first time, and he wasn't about to get in trouble for the same guy twice.

"Please," Jacob panted. "Preston's in trouble. I need to get up there." The doorman picked up the receiver of the phone on his podium warily and dialed a few numbers.

"Sorry to disturb you Mister Ethan," he said. "Your brother is downstairs and says he needs to see you. Something about trouble with the baby." Ethan started replying on the other end of the phone and he wasn't saying, "Tell him to come up." Jacob grabbed the phone from the doorman's hand.

"Ethan!" he shouted into the receiver, interrupting some condescending lecture his brother was in the process of delivering. "It's Jacob. Go check on Preston. Seriously dude, now!"

Ethan didn't answer. The line just went dead. But on the baby app, Jacob could see Ethan flick on the lights and scoop the kid off the crib railing before he hurt himself. Slowly, the adrenaline started to leave Jacob's system and was replaced by nausea. "Mind if I sit?" he asked the doorman, and sagged into an uncomfortable, ultra-modern chair in the lobby that was clearly just for show.

Once the kid was settled back in bed, Ethan started rummaging around all the shelves in Preston's room. He really did look so much like Jacob, for a minute, it was as if he were watching footage from some bizarro alternate universe where he was actually a dad instead of a problematic relation taking up space where he clearly wasn't welcome.

Ethan found the second camera peeking out from behind the bunny and the bear without too much effort. He checked his own baby app on his phone to make sure he knew which camera was

the one he and Caroline had installed, and then with a look of blank resolve, he ripped Jacob's camera out of the wall.

The image on Jacob's screen disappeared. "OK, time to go," the doorman said, and extended a hand to help Jacob out of the uncomfortable chair and back onto the sidewalk. Jacob walked a block and then pulled out his phone again to check his messages. Clearly, the gig was a bust. But there might still be an after party somewhere, and he could definitely use a drink. He sent a few texts to find out where everyone had ended up, then caught a cab heading downtown.

All You Can Eat

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In Greek mythology, “ambrosia” is the food of the gods. It’s a magical delicacy that provides longevity to some, and immortality to others. And it tastes like heaven on a silver spoon.

At the M Resort in Las Vegas, the ambrosia the kitchen girls heap into a fluffy white pile at the cold salad station of the all-you-can-eat buffet isn’t quite so grand. But I still wonder about what attributes this marshmallow-citrus concoction might be able to impart—either in this life, or the next.

After all, in a place like this, with no windows or clocks, no day or night, a person could be 53 like me, or 153. Longevity is relative. You can spend half your life feeding credits into the same slot machine just to loosen it up. And then the minute you decide to take a bathroom break, a giggling honeymoon couple in cutoffs and flip-flops may decide to take a spin, and that spiteful hunk of chrome will just start gushing like an open wound. Showering the already obviously lucky, the already obviously blessed, with even more luck, even more blessings. I don’t know much about the gods of ancient Greece, but the gods of Las Vegas are famous for pulling stunts like that.

It can be tough on morale, which is why I’m surprised “Crane Day” didn’t happen a lot sooner. I’ll explain more about that later. But for now, I’ll just point out the obvious and say that when this place starts to break you down, there’s always a little comfort to be found at the buffet.

I won the casino’s Eat Free For Life! raffle back in 2010, in the midst of a blackjack bender, and hardly gave the perk a second thought at the time. But after mom passed away, the Studio B Buffet became my home away from home. With their interchangeable pink gingham outfits, cowgirl hats, and glossy smiles, the wait-staff there was as wholesome as a bucket of buttermilk—a sight for grief-sore eyes. Especially Stephanie.

Stephanie’s the hostess whose shift I usually made a point of catching. She’s got a butterfly tattoo on her leg, and when I finally worked up the courage to ask her about it, she told me it was in honor of her late mother. That’s when I knew there was a real connection between us. After that conversation, I started seeing signs and omens wherever I went: in the décor at the Encore Casino, at the Butterfly exhibit in the conservatory of the Bellagio. There were butterflies everywhere, and they all whispered softly to me to tell her how I felt. I began to see that even the Eat Free For Life! raffle had been the work of a divine hand invisibly pulling us together. All I had to do was close the deal.

At first I tried to establish a rapport by strolling over whenever there was a lull at her seating station to humorously report on all the gluttonous tourists going hog wild behind her. “Remember that heifer in the blue caftan you sat in section 11?” I’d ask, gesturing with my head to

protect Stephanie from getting in trouble. “You should see the mountain of tuna salad, chocolate mousse, and Saltine crackers she has on her plate right now! Insane!”

She'd smile and laugh, but I could see tightness at the corners of her mouth that signaled to me that this was not the way to her heart. Stephanie wasn't a bully like the kids who used to wait for me in the junior high boys' restroom just to kick me in the balls. Stephanie was a good person. Her mom probably raised her to be kind and thoughtful. I realized pretty quickly that I wouldn't want to spend my life with someone who genuinely laughed at jokes like the ones I was making anyway. I knew I had to show her my softer side.

I took a book on the ancient art of origami out of the Las Vegas Municipal Library and started practicing folding butterflies on a TV tray while watching documentaries at home. Once I got pretty good at it, I showed back up at Studio B with one perfectly symmetrical butterfly folded out of pink paper that was an exact match to her pink gingham uniform. When I gave it to her, the tightness was gone from her smile. Her eyes sparkled, and she hugged me.

When I came back the next day, though, I noticed the butterfly wasn't there on the podium where she'd placed it after our hug. I asked her about it, and she told me she had taken it home. This sounded reasonable. After all, she shared that hostess podium with lots of other co-workers and she probably was afraid someone might steal it. Two days later, I brought her another butterfly for work, this time folded out of fancy, more expensive, metallic paper. She thanked me again, but this time there was no hug, just a nervous, shy kind of laugh.

When the butterfly was gone from the podium on my next visit, I knew what I had to do. I ate a substantial prime rib dinner with all the trimmings, then stayed up all night, folding and folding, until the whole pack of special paper I'd purchased had been transformed into a rainbow of winged love tokens. I needed to use one of my mother's old carry-alls to transport them to the casino. But I didn't just hand Stephanie the bag. I waited until just the right moment, snuck up behind her after I'd finished my paradise parfait and complementary cordial, and then dumped 147 butterflies over her head there at the hostess station. I had meant it to be a grand playful gesture. Like she had just won the Superbowl of romance and her teammate was showering her with paper butterflies instead of Gatorade. But she didn't laugh, or smile, or hug me. She told me that I had made a mess, and asked me to clean it up. Her lips had never looked so tight.

On my next visit, Stephanie was gone. In her place was a bottle blonde named Monique. Truth be told, she seemed a little long-in-the-tooth to be wearing a pink cowgirl outfit, but there was no need to point out the obvious. I asked Monique where Stephanie was, and she said she didn't know. When I told her I didn't believe her, Monique's eyes got hard. She told me that some crazy guy had been bothering Stephanie, so the hostesses had all changed their shifts around to help her out. Blood rushed to my face, and I could feel sweat pop out all around the collar of my monogrammed M Resort polo shirt as I fumbled with my “Eat Free For Life!” pass and asked to be seated.

Monique placed me as far away from the podium as possible, in the steamy no-man's land back by the kitchen. One of the more colorful aspects of Studio B is that it's outfitted with huge screens hanging from the ceiling that broadcast a rotating view of the restaurant's army of chefs as they create their constant flow of indulgences. There was a view of the stovetops, where dramatic flames shot in the air whenever the sous chef at the sauté station deglazed a pan with a hit of bourbon. In the pastry cam, a slender, beak-faced gal in a tall white hat made identical rosettes of icing on a vast tray of little cakes like the ones my mother used to buy from the Italian bakery to serve at her bridge game. The salad bar, shot from above, was leafy and verdant, like a Garden of Eden erupting in the heart of the desert. And though I didn't notice it at first, when the camera cycle had gone through its rotation a few times, I saw that the carving station cam, while focused mainly on vast animal flanks being sliced to order, also picked up a corner of the hostess station in the upper left hand area of the screen.

I drank my coffee, leisurely sampled every flavor of ice cream, sherbet, and sorbet, one by one, and stared at the bleached back of Monique's head every four and a half minutes whenever the carving station appeared. A few hours passed, and finally the head in the corner was no longer those brassy pigtails. Instead, it was shiny long braids, black and sleek, snaking out from beneath the pink cowgirl hat. This certainly wasn't Stephanie, but it did provide a pleasant diversion as afternoon crept along into night.

At first, a deep sense of calm enveloped me as I got lost in the flow of flaming pans, sugar art, leafy greens, and bleeding beef. And those shiny braids wiggling like a mirage at the edge of every fourth frame were a sweet, special accent. Like a mint left just for you on a king-size hotel bed. The longer I waited, however, the harder it was to keep my growing sense of agitation at bay.

This wasn't the first time I'd been upset like this. Back when my mother was alive, she used to caution me that the world would eat up people who weren't made of what she called "sterner stuff." I managed to convince her to come to Studio B with me just once before she passed, for their annual Mother's Day Seafood Buffet. I was thrilled to be able to whisk her in past the line at the register with my magic ticket and pointed out the prime rib, rack of lamb, sushi rolls, crab legs, roasted turkey with dressing, oyster bar, shrimp cocktail, honey glazed ham, and butter-poached lobster like a tour guide taking art history students around the Louvre. She smiled and nodded, helped herself to a small bowl of New England clam chowder, ate half, and told me she was ready to go. By the time Mother's Day rolled around again, she was already gone.

I thought I had just been letting my mind wander, but out of nowhere I felt a firm hand on my shoulder. A teenage busboy with squinty, blood-shot eyes was muttering something about no sleeping allowed. I nodded groggily, sat up straight, and took a big gulp of cold coffee. I figured it must have been just a quick nod, but when I looked up at the screen and the carving station returned, the braids were gone. There instead, was the unmistakable auburn halo of Stephanie's head, bent forward, as if in prayer. I knew she was probably just reading something. Or even more likely, sending a text. But the gesture struck me as so pure and sweet, especially in the midst of all this clanging, neon-lit excess, I wanted to cry. I also wanted to do something for her. Something

to show her that we were the only people with any integrity left in this whole depraved city. Words weren't enough. I wanted to show her.

Stephanie was gathering up her purse and sweatshirt and was about to clock out when I finally approached her station. "Oh, hi!" she said, brightly but at top volume, when I was still a few steps away. "I didn't know you were here."

"Yup," I said. She waited for me to say something else, but I was having some trouble finding the words.

"You OK?" she asked. "You look kind of pale."

"I made you something," I replied, closing the gap between us in a few wobbling strides. I took a cocktail napkin out of my jacket pocket and placed it on her station. It was a little crumpled, and in the center was a rust-colored print of a butterfly, with the edges of the antennae running a little haphazardly into the damp contours of the upper wings. She stared at it mutely, not making any move to pick it up or examine it. So I hiked up the darkening hem of my pant leg, and showed her the place where I had carved a butterfly into my lower calf with a steak knife from the utensil station. It was in the same exact spot where she had her tattoo for her mom. Surely she could see that. But she didn't say anything. She just turned her back on me, grabbed the reservation phone, and called security.

A week later, I received a notarized letter from the M Resort informing me that my "Eat Free For Life!" prize had been rescinded because I had violated their terms and conditions. At a loss for where to turn for help, I asked Marjorie, my favorite librarian at the Las Vegas Municipal Library, if she could help me use the computer there to contact some attorneys. She showed me how to set up an email account, and how to use Google to find law offices in our area. But after that, my time was up and she said I'd have to come back another time to do my research.

I was back at the library right as they opened the next morning, and I sent the details of my complaint against the M Resort to various local law firms. A few legal secretaries got back to me with their rates, but when I explained that I was looking for pro-bono representation against the casino, I never heard from them again. Las Vegas will crush you if you let it. My mother always warned me about that whenever she thought I was spending too much time at the tables. But at least the tables have rules and players know where they stand. If a man wins at blackjack, some pit boss doesn't send a letter to his house a year later demanding that he give his chips back. He won them fair and square. But I had won goods and services instead of money. And now some legal loophole was allowing the M Resort to literally take food out of my mouth. It was a kick in the balls worse than any I'd received before.

But Stephanie was no bully. I knew if she were just made aware of how I was being treated, she would be shocked at the injustice of it. Not only that, but she'd probably do her best to help me get my prize back. Now that I had some distance, I realized that when she called security that night,

she probably thought she was helping me. After all, there was a decent amount of blood filling up my loafer at the time. So much blood, in fact, that she might not have even been able to discern that what I had carved into myself was a butterfly. Her butterfly. One day, I was sure, we would laugh together about this terrible misunderstanding over a slice of mile-high lemon meringue with two forks.

I returned to Studio B during the late-night shift, presuming the new hostess schedule was still in place. But when I got there, the gal with the long black braids was up front, so I turned around and left. The next day, I came back during the lull between breakfast and the lunch rush. It's a time when the staff routinely converts the omelet station into a risotto station, and when Stephanie and I had previously shared some of our best repartee. But some young Asian girl with a name tag that said Esther was working instead. I asked her what her real name was, and she said it was Esther. I clarified that I wanted to know what Chinese people called her. She said she was Korean, and asked me for \$15.99. I tried to tell her that I was a prizewinner, that I didn't have to pay, and that Stephanie would vouch for me. But before I could fully explain my situation, a manager came over and asked me to leave.

I also told him that Stephanie would vouch for me, but he wouldn't listen. I offered to pay full price that day with the understanding that I would keep my receipt for reimbursement once this whole matter was sorted out. But he told me I was banned from the premises, and that I wasn't allowed in even as a paying customer. A small line of tourists had formed behind me and they were all staring as if I had done something wrong. It felt so terrible, I ran out of there and headed straight to the library to inform the attorneys I had contacted previously that a good deal more mental anguish had been experienced since I'd last written to them. I pointed out that my settlement should be even higher now, but none of them got back to me.

That was a week or so ago, and since then I haven't had much of an appetite. My leg is swollen, crusty, and beginning to ooze. Even the documentaries I used to enjoy in the evenings have become an irritation rather than a pleasure.

Try to understand, I've been banned by the bullies at the M Resort from the last place I ever spent Mother's Day with my mom. It's also the last place I ever felt happiness, or excitement, or hope, or any kind of real human connection. All people need human connection. I saw a documentary not too long ago about the long-term psychological effects of solitary confinement, and that's basically what the M Resort is inflicting on me now. The only difference is that the prisoners in the documentary had a fair trial and all I got was a notarized letter in the mail.

An ancient Japanese legend I read about in my origami book says that anyone who folds a thousand paper cranes will be granted a wish. So from this day forward, I am switching from butterflies to cranes. I'll focus on my wish with each crease, with the honesty and sincerity that this kind of project deserves. I plan to fill my whole car with them, until my fingertips are calloused and cross hatched with paper cuts, and every empty space but the driver's seat is filled with this one, sacred wish, over and over again. Once the thousandth crane has been folded, I'll

drive the whole shebang to the M Resort, light the car and all the wishes ablaze as an offering, and head down the concourse to the Studio B All-You-Can-Eat Buffet to see if my wish came true.

I'd like to say that I have the utmost faith that this experiment will work. But sadly, I do not. That's why I've written a 270-page letter of explanation that I'll be sending to the *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, as well as to all the law firms I've previously contacted, on the morning of what I've decided to call "Crane Day." That's also why I've purchased a handgun. After all that's happened, after all the times and ways I've tried to make himself understood: by Stephanie, by management at the M Resort, by the lawyers, and the librarians, and even by my own mother, I can't bear the thought of being misunderstood at the apogee of my human experience. Handguns speak a language that is globally understood—the muzzle, a universal translator. Of course, if the hostess just lets me in when I arrive, the recipients of my massive pile of documentation might read it with puzzled surprise, and wonder, "Whatever happened to that guy?" Maybe they'll even show my letter to their friends and have a good laugh.

But if they don't let me in—if whatever cowgirl is working the entrance frowns at me under the brim of her pink hat, turns her mouth into a hard, glossy line, and picks up the phone, I won't wait to be removed by some brute. I'll remove myself. And I'll know two things. I'll know why this happened. And I'll know that my mother was right all along. This world is no place for magical thinkers. It's made for men of "sterner stuff." And for newlyweds in cutoffs and flip-flops who always win on the first try.

Andy

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My mom was gone for a while before I figured out that she had split for good. She's a painter with a workspace on Avenue D that she shares with a bunch of other squatters, and she's out most of the time and sometimes doesn't come home until morning.

At least I had the keys. Before I turned 12, my mom used to say, "No son of mine is going to be a latch-key child." I kept telling her that it was 1988 and everyone else in my class had keys. But she'd watched some dumb *NBC News Special Report* about how latch-key kids were the silent victims of the feminist revolution, so she wanted to let me in after school herself. That would have been fine if she'd been home when I got back from PS 15. But she never was. So I'd wait for her on the spiky green welcome mat in the hall outside our apartment or on the marble stoop outside the building. Back when I was in fourth grade, I only had to wait about half an hour before she'd run up the stairs, her pink hair sticking out in all directions and her bangle bracelets clattering so loudly, I could hear her before I could see her. She'd unlock the door, kiss my face, ask me how school was, and then put a frozen dinner in the oven for me before heading out again to whatever party or rock show or art opening she had going on that night.

By the time fifth grade rolled around, those minutes locked outside became hours, and I started having problems. The first time my mom was over three hours late, my insides felt all twisted up, and the longer I waited, the more I had to use the bathroom. Finally, she showed up, acting as if nothing was wrong, and I made it to the toilet just in time. When I asked her why she was so late, she said she was busting her ass to pay the rent, so I shut up about it. But later that night, she pulled me close on the couch during the *11 O'Clock News* and asked me if I knew that she loved me. She smelled like clove cigarettes and paint thinner and sweat. I said yes and wriggled out from between her white, veiny arms to go put on my pajamas. "Why are you always hiding from me in your room?" she shouted from the couch during the commercial break. "I'm afraid to go in there because I don't know if I'll find you playing with your Legos or jerking off." I hated it when she said stuff like that, so I just pretended I couldn't hear her and put myself to bed.

The next time she was super late, I couldn't hold my pee so I knocked on old Mrs. Epstein's door and asked if I could use her bathroom. She didn't want to let me in, but when she peeked through the peephole and saw my knees buckling in a last ditch effort to keep from whizzing all over the hall, she waved me in toward a pink powder room decorated with seashells. Afterward, I thanked her and tried to leave before my mom caught me bothering the neighbors, but she told me to sit down and pointed at the kitchen table. She poured me a glass of grape juice and spooned a weird white dumpling out of a jar onto a tea saucer and set it in front of me. I thanked her for the juice and pretended not to see the dish.

She asked if I wanted to call my mom and gestured at the phone hanging next to the fridge. I told her no thanks, that my mom's studio didn't have a phone. She frowned and asked where my dad was. I said he was traveling around painting murals on government buildings. She frowned some more and asked if I had a babysitter to watch me after school, but I pretended I couldn't understand the question through her thick Eastern European accent. I thanked her again for the juice and left just in time to see my mom in a paint-spattered pair of coveralls lugging a grocery bag full of frozen dinners up the stairs.

I hoped she hadn't seen me leave Mrs. Epstein's, but no such luck. She waved at the old lady's peep hole, then dragged me inside our apartment where I caught holy hell. She didn't hit me or anything, but she did scare the crap out of me. "Damnit Andy, do you want to be taken away from me?" she whispered, as if child protective services was already waiting outside the door, listening. I shook my head no. "Well that's exactly what's going to happen if you keep advertising the fact that I'm running late," she warned, poking me in the chest with a calloused finger. "Do you know what happens to kids in foster care? Do you?" she demanded. I nodded yes. She had already freaked me out with stories deliberately read out of the newspaper and *NBC Special Reports* about the lost children of The System. And while I knew my life wasn't perfect, I also knew I was lucky not to be one of them.

"But I *really* had to pee," I explained, trying not to whine but not totally succeeding. She softened a little, and I thought I might actually get keys. But she wasn't ready. "You're too young to have keys," she said, jiggling her own set nervously from hand to hand. "What if you got mugged and someone took your keys and robbed us?" she asked, gesturing toward the TV. "From now on, pee before you leave school," she said, "and if you still have to go while you're waiting, find a McDonalds, or a dumpster you can hide behind to do your business."

Alphabet City didn't have too many McDonalds, but we did have plenty of dumpsters. So after the Mrs. Epstein incident, I pissed behind every dumpster from the FDR drive to Second Avenue. It kind of became my thing. I thought if I always pissed behind the same dumpster, people would start complaining about "the kid always peeing behind our dumpster." So instead, I'd case different areas for privacy, and then pounce like a ninja when the timing was right.

I was usually lucky about not getting caught, but finally my luck ran out. I was taking care of business in a parking lot behind Stuy Town when some eighth graders popped up out of the dumpster and caught me. "Hey! Look what I found!" a tall skinny kid in a Knicks jersey shouted, jumping down from the ledge of the metal container and grabbing my arms behind my back. "If someone leaves sneakers, a bookbag, and a ball cap outside on trash day, that means they're up for grabs, right?" A chubby kid in head-to-toe green camo struggled to the lip of the box as trash shifted beneath him. He stared at me, confused, until he finally caught on.

"Oh yeeaaaaaaah!" he replied, swinging one stubby leg over the edge and then the other before cautiously dropping to the ground. Two more kids in acid-washed jeans and heavy metal T-shirts followed, both filthy and stinking from wet food trash. They were the scariest ones, because they

didn't say a word. They just walked casually up to me, knocked the hat off my head, wrenched the bag from my shoulder, and removed my shoes one at a time, as if this were their real job and the dumpster diving had just been a lunch break.

"You got something to say faggot?" Knicks kid asked. I shook my head no and kept my eyes down on my big toe sticking out from the tip of my sock. "Didn't think so," said camo kid, before hocking a loogie right on my head where my hat had been. That made the silent kids laugh, which I guess broke the tension enough for Knicks kid to let me go. "Run back home to mommy, pussy," he growled. So I took off toward home, trying not to flinch at the little pebbles and chunks of asphalt and beer bottle shards that bit into my heels.

By the time mom got home, it was too late to buy me new shoes since all the stores were closed. Luckily she wasn't mad. She was just coming home to change before going out again, and she said the party that night was really really important for her career, so she didn't really care that I had lost my shoes and bag and hat. Mom played Siouxsie and the Banshees super loud on her boombox while she set her hair in hot rollers, then painted her eyes with heavy black liner just like the picture on the cassette cover. I stayed in my room for a while after that, since she liked to change clothes over and over again all over the apartment before a party. But when I finally did come out, she was wearing a tight black dress with a bunch of silver amulets around her neck, and her hair looked like a puffy pink cloud of cotton candy. I told her she looked awesome, and she giggled like the girls who hung out on the smoking patio after school.

In the morning, still wearing the dress from the night before, she took me by cab in my socks to Payless on Delancey and told me I could pick out any pair of Pro Wings I wanted from the clearance rack. Then she walked me over to the locksmith and had a set of apartment keys made for me. She tucked them in my pocket, along with a note for my teacher Ms. Conway explaining my lateness and my missing schoolbooks, and told me I could walk the rest of the way to school by myself.

Once I had keys, mom didn't even try to be home at a certain time. Days would go by without us crossing paths, but I would know that she had been there because either the freezer would be refilled with frozen dinners, or there would be a 20 tucked beneath a little ceramic cat that she kept on the kitchen counter. I liked the money better, because I could use it to get Twizzlers and cheese-flavored popcorn from the bodega for dinner instead of eating the mushy Hungry Man green beans and damp fried chicken. But a 20 was supposed to last me more than one day, so if I wasn't careful and spent it all at once, I'd either have to go to bed hungry the next day or invite myself over to Tran's house for dinner.

Tran was one of the only kids at PS 15 less popular than I was, because when he started there in September, he didn't speak any English. He spent part of the day in the English as a Second Language room, and part of the day in Ms. Conway's class. But when he was with us, every time he was called on, the girls would whisper about his accent and the guys at the back of the room would pull the corners of their eyes into slits and bow at each other. They called him "gook" and

“chink” in the cafeteria and made fun of the weird-smelling food his mom packed him for lunch. And even though there were other Vietnamese kids at our school, they said he was “fresh off the boat,” and stayed away as if his immigration status were a disease none of them wanted to catch.

His mom packed him lunch every day, and once I told him he was lucky, since I never had food from home. The next day, he sat down across from my usual spot at a table labeled “the cootie corner,” by the extra pretty Puerto Rican girls who hung out toward the middle of the cafeteria. When Tran unpacked his bag, he had a takeout box for me. He said the little cigar-looking things inside were fresh rolls, and he even brought dipping sauce to go with them. I asked him if he thought the Fresh Prince ate fresh rolls, but he had no idea what I was talking about. The food was good, so I asked him if he would trade me more in exchange for help with English. He gave me a thumbs up, and then carefully bent his fingers into the sign for OK.

After that, I ate better than anyone else at PS 15. And then after school, Tran would use the payphone at the bus stop to ask his mom if he could come over to practice English. On the days she said yes, we would sit together on my saggy, stained couch and watch *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* or *ThunderCats*. During the commercials, he’d ask about the plots in broken English and I would try to explain. Sometimes I’d do this by talking really slow and loud or by writing out the storyline, because reading English words was easier for him than listening to them. If I was feeling creative, I’d draw pictures explaining what I wanted to say, and if I wanted to be really goofy about it, I’d act the stories out, which always made Tran laugh. At first, we could barely understand each other, but soon he was picking up the language on TV faster and faster. Although a few times, I had to explain that it wasn’t cool in real life to say “cowabunga dude,” so don’t ever do it at school.

On many nights, I’d wake up briefly to the jangling of mom’s bracelets just before dawn. Then I’d pass her slumped on the couch with the morning news blaring on the TV in front of her while I was on my way out the door to school. If her feet were still on the floor and in her shoes, I’d slip the grimy converse or spike heels off and ease her legs onto the couch so her ankles wouldn’t swell. Sometimes, especially on mornings when I could still smell the red wine on her, this would startle her out of an uneasy dream and she’d launch a swift kick toward my face. But I’m quick and could usually dodge her.

If I woke up and realized she hadn’t come home at all—no loud TV, nothing in the freezer, no cash under the cat—I didn’t worry. This happened from time to time, and though she didn’t appreciate questions like “where were you last night?” and refused to answer them, she did always come back. That is, until she didn’t.

Life went on as usual for a while. Tran came over after school, and after a few days of no freezer food and no dinner money, he started taking me home with him below Houston Street to eat. Tran’s parents and older brothers barely spoke English, so I just slurped up the noodles and broth his mom put in front of me and listened. I didn’t mind not understanding anything. To me, they sounded like a flock of tropical birds calling to each other across the jungle. Once, after I had inhaled a platter of pork and rice, Tran’s mom gestured at me and said something that sounded

pointy like a stick. Tran didn't want to tell me what she'd said, but his mom elbowed him in the ribs until he spoke. "She wants to know why she's feeding you all the time," he said, his mouth turning down in an embarrassed half smile. "She says she keeps feeding you but I always come home hungry from your house."

I didn't know what to say. I only knew what not to say. "Tell her we're poor," I said. Tran told her this, but she just shook her head and gestured at the rest of the table. "She says we're all poor," Tran said. "If you want to eat here all the time, you have to work."

That put an end to the English lessons after school. Instead, as soon as three p.m. rolled around, we both headed down to Tran's parents' takeout restaurant, Pho Garden, where I'd take the English-speaking phone and counter orders and write them down carefully before passing them to Tran so he could write the orders in Vietnamese for his family cooking in back. Tran taught me how to keep track of the orders and then bag them for pickup or delivery by whichever one of Tran's brothers was riding the bike that day. If delivery orders got backed up, Tran and I carried them on foot. But if that happened, his mom always sent us together, because once she'd sent Tran alone and the customer had taken the food and slammed the door in his face without paying. "She doesn't think they'll stiff a cute white kid," he said before our first delivery, and it turns out she was right.

Thanks to Pho Garden, I didn't have to worry about going hungry, but I had plenty of other things to worry about. After mom had been gone a week, and a visit to her studio turned up no sign of her, I used the restaurant phone to call around to some of the galleries and ask if anyone had seen her. "I think she said something about doing a residency upstate," an assistant said at the third place I tried. "Is there something I can help you with?" I didn't answer. I just quickly hung up before Tran's mom noticed I hadn't been taking an order. That was my first clue that mom wasn't coming back. The second was the postcard.

"Greetings from the Great Smoky Mountains" it said in curvy red letters above a photo of a log cabin with smoke coming out the chimney. I flipped it over and noticed familiar handwriting, almost unreadable except for the dotted i's and crossed t's that gave the scrawl some meaning. "Hey Andy," it started. "Your mom wants you to come stay with me for a while. I'll send you a bus ticket after I finish this job. Keep an eye out for it. —Dad."

I imagined my dad—a lankier version of Paul Bunyan in flannel and denim—painting a forest of spruce firs on the wall of some Tennessee municipal building. I could barely remember his face, but I could always remember his brush strokes, since he had painted the whole ceiling above my bed with stars and comets and planets and flying saucers before he hit the road when I was eight.

So that was that. I went to school, worked at the restaurant, did my homework with Tran while his mom packed up leftover rice for me, and sorted through the mail every day looking for the bus ticket. Now and then I'd have to field uncomfortable questions. Mrs. Epstein stopped me in the hall three weeks after mom's disappearance and mentioned she hadn't seen her in a while. I said

she'd been working a lot. When I brought in a forged signature on a permission slip for a field trip, Ms. Conway doubted that it was mom's handwriting. But after she left a few messages at mom's gallery and got no call back, she let the issue drop and I was able to go with the rest of the class to the Brooklyn Botanical Gardens.

I was yanked awake early in the morning a few times by loud banging on the front door. When this happened, I'd lie very still in bed and count the stars and planets on the ceiling until the intruder went away. When I finally did creep out of bed, I'd usually find a nasty note from Eddie, the super, under the door telling my mom the rent was way past due. On those days, I would peek through the peephole before leaving for school to make sure nobody was waiting with a summons or something in the hall.

After a bunch of warnings, the electricity was cut off, and that's when my stomach got bad again. I hated being in that dark apartment alone after dinner, but Tran thought moving me into his already super-crowded bedroom with his brothers would make his mom flip out. So instead, he wrangled me a flashlight and a jumbo pack of batteries from the basement of Pho Garden, and I started actually reading the books we were assigned for homework to pass the time till dawn. I especially liked a book Ms. Conway gave us called *Julie of the Wolves*, about this Eskimo orphan who gets married off at 13 and then runs away and gets adopted by a pack of wolves on the Alaskan tundra. Tran really liked it too, even though his brothers made fun of him for reading a book with a girl on the cover. "Jooooooooo-llllllllll, Jooooooooo-llllllllll," they'd call across the restaurant kitchen when their mom stepped out for a smoke break, and then they'd make an OK sign with one hand and stick a finger from the other hand in and out of the hole.

Whenever my guts hurt at night, usually reading about Julie surviving on her own made my insides settle down. But as weeks went by and my situation got more complicated, nothing could stop the nasty-tasting acid from squirting up the back of my throat whenever I tried to lay down. One night, I got home from Pho Garden and there was an orange eviction sticker on my door and a chain wrapped around the doorknob with a big padlock on it so I couldn't get in. Luckily, I'd been sleeping with the window open a little because I liked the sound of street noise, so I was able to get in through the fire escape. Instead of sleeping in my bed that night, I took my book to the couch so nobody would see my flashlight if they were looking up at my window from the street. My body started shivering all over, so I wrapped my mom's old afghan around me and fell asleep sitting up with my Pro Wings on, in case I had to make a fast getaway.

Four days later, the couch, the afghan, and even my trusty flashlight were gone. While I was at school, Eddie had cleared the entire place out and started repainting for the next tenant. I felt creepily numb when I saw that all my stuff had been chucked out. Even the fact that dad's painting on my ceiling was now a blank square of rental-apartment white didn't bother me. But when it finally dawned on me that I hadn't gotten a single piece of mail since the eviction notice had been posted, I felt the same weird feeling I'd had the first time I rode the Cyclone at Coney Island. A big, lurching, stomach flipping dip.

My window was nailed shut from the inside the next time I tried to climb in from the fire escape, so I crawled back down to the street. I'd already decided that if this ever happened, I would sleep in the schoolyard of PS 15, so that's where I was headed when I heard the tapping. At first it was really quiet, so I didn't even bother to turn around. But when the noise got louder and more urgent, I looked up and saw movement on the other side of Mrs. Epstein's window. She tapped and made weird motions with her hands and then tapped some more. When I just stood there, shaking my head because I didn't understand, she struggled to heave her heavy window open and leaned her thick torso out toward me. "Andy!" she hissed, "get in here before somebody sees you. I've got something for you."

It was eerie using the main staircase after so long climbing the fire escape. Mrs. Epstein hustled me in, and this time, when she set a cold, white dumpling on a saucer in front of me, I devoured it and asked for seconds. "You're a hard man to find," she said casually. "Eddie asked me if I knew where to forward your mail, and I said I would take care of it." She shuffled over to a cabinet full of porcelain animals and opened up a drawer bursting with envelopes. Most of them had angry past due messages stamped across them in red, but one didn't. It was thick and worn around the edges, and unlike the bills, this one had my name on it. Inside, there wasn't just one bus ticket, but a few—enough to make all the connections between Port Authority and Richmond, Virginia.

I spent that night on Mrs. Epstein's sofa, and showered in her seashell bathroom the next morning, being careful not to leave my towel or any puddles on the floor. She made me an omelet filled with milk-softened crackers, and then I headed to school to say goodbye to Tran. When I told him I was leaving, he acted like it was no big deal. But when I decided to cut out early at lunch time, he told me he'd give me a lift to the bus station. We walked over to Pho Garden, and after a few minutes inside, Tran came back out with the keys to the delivery bike lock, and a big bag of Fresh Prince rolls for the bus.

He climbed up onto the slightly-too-high bike seat and motioned for me to stand on the two rods sticking out on either side of the back wheel. I hopped on and grabbed Tran's windbreaker to steady myself. "Cowabunga dude," he called over his shoulder as he shoved off against the flow of downtown traffic. "Cowabunga dude," I shouted back, and held on tight.

Anniversary

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dea her boyfriend had packed the four-inch-long serrated bread knife until he pulled it out on the subway. Across the aisle, an Asian girl of indeterminate age wearing Nikes the bright neon yellow of a first-day-of-school highlighter saw the knife and let out a little gasp.

“Babe,” Calvin said, pushing a few stray dreadlocks out of his eyes as he rummaged around, “do you have the bagels in your bag? I’m hungry.” Elizabeth did have the bagels in her bag. She handed him a soft cinnamon-raisin one, and Calvin cut it in half with the knife. He briefly handed the bagel back to Elizabeth so he could pull a Tupperware container out of his pack. Then she held the bagel open for him while he layered sliced Brie and prosciutto onto the bread.

Calvin ate his sandwich and pointed out the Statue of Liberty off in the distance as the train crossed the bridge. Elizabeth opened up the novel she had brought with her, but soon the combination of the air conditioning and the rocking train made her drowsy and she drifted off to sleep.

Calvin gently nudged Elizabeth awake about half an hour later as the train was pulling into the Coney Island Stillwell Avenue Station. From the train, Elizabeth could see the skeletal Cyclone and the stately Wonder Wheel making its slow circles in the air. She was also surprised to see the girl with the neon shoes was still there, across from them. She was turned backward in her seat, trying to snap a photo of the amusement park from above before the train entered the covered station.

An automated male voice announced, “This is the last stop on this train. Everyone please leave the train,” and about a dozen people headed down the station ramp toward what locals sometimes refer to as “Sodom by the Sea.” Elizabeth and Calvin lugged their bags across Surf Avenue, then paused for a moment so Elizabeth could peer through the wire fencing into the darkened cave of the bumper car attraction. A recorded voice invited passers by to “Bump, bump, bump your ass off!” on a continuous loop as disco lights strobed across the metal floor and fuzzy bass boomed from a blown-out speaker. But all the miniature cars, dark and shiny as a nest of beetles, remained still. It was a weekday after Labor Day and nobody was inside. The woman in the ticket booth looked up from her stack of scratch tickets and stared hard at Elizabeth and Calvin until they moved on.

A few tattooed punks were congregated around the Freak Bar that filled the lobby outside the sideshow, day drinking. But the sequined sword swallower was texting idly beside the open door to the theater, and the human blockhead was sitting with his legs dangling off the bally stage, smoking a cigarette, waiting for customers. Even the barkers famous for bullying and shaming tourists into playing the rigged carnival games during peak season were a little subdued. Across the alley, newer, more upscale attractions like a trapeze school and a row of artisanal Brooklyn

food vendors had recently moved in where a flea market of stolen goods used to be. And though nobody was actually riding the Polar Express, an unruly gang of teenagers cutting school for the day had started a dance party on the street in front of the ride, chanting along to the chorus of the song the operator was blasting from his booth. "Watch me Whip!" they called out to each other. "Watch me Nae Nae!"

Just before they hit the beach, Elizabeth stopped in front of a small glass case with a mannequin in it. The sign above the case read, "Watch Her Dance To The End Of Love," and an arrow pointed to a coin slot. Calvin gave Elizabeth a quarter, she shoved it in, and the brunette facsimile of a woman started jerking back and forth, her waist twitching mechanically beneath a flowing peasant skirt while a music box churned out tinkling carnival music. "This thing is weird, I don't know why you always want to start it up," Calvin said, then walked away toward the boardwalk. Elizabeth stayed and watched, wanting to get her quarter's worth, until the statue was once again still.

Down on the beach, Calvin took the first shift watching their stuff on the sand while Elizabeth ran into the water, sidestepping broken glass. The ocean was still warm enough to swim, but just barely. At the shoreline, trash from Nathan's and some discarded plastic sand toys had accumulated, but farther out, the waves got cooler and cleaner. Elizabeth swam out just over her head and bobbed around treading water. Down the beach, a Muslim woman in a full head-to-toe burqa with only her eyes showing was wading into the water with her toddler. Wind whipped the black, billowing fabric around her small body. The movement of the water rocked Elizabeth back and forth as it eased the dirt from the day off her limbs. A yellow Nerf football hit her in the head, but she didn't care. She just returned the ball to the woman with baby footprints tattooed on her neck, then dove underwater to swim farther out. She felt like she could float around for hours, but she didn't want to make Calvin wait with their bags for too long, so she reluctantly returned to their spot on the sand and let him take his turn.

Calvin didn't spend nearly as much time in the water as Elizabeth had. He was born and raised in the Caribbean, and this murky Brooklyn water with debris floating in it was totally unappealing compared to the crystal turquoise sea of his youth. Plus, it was cold. The water raised goosebumps all over his body. And he hated letting his locks soak in polluted New York seawater. But the beach made Elizabeth happy.

Before long, Calvin was back on their blanket. Elizabeth's hair was dripping all over the pages of her novel, and when she tried to wipe the drips away it just got more of the book wet, so she finally closed the cover and reached in her bag for a bagel. Calvin waved over a little Central American kid with a red plastic cooler on wheels and handed him a five for a Corona longneck in a paper bag. "Did you see that girl on the train? The one with the sneakers?" Calvin asked Elizabeth, popping the top off his beer with one of his house keys.

"Yeah," she replied, flipping over and handing Calvin the sunscreen so he could reapply on the spots she couldn't reach. "Why?"

“Did you see her face when I took the bread knife out of my bag?” he asked, rubbing the lotion into Elizabeth’s broad back. “We were obviously together, but she thought I was going to rob you because I’m black and you’re white.”

“I don’t think that’s necessarily true,” Elizabeth said. She wanted to get back in the water, but she could tell Calvin wanted to talk, so she stayed put.

“I know it’s true,” he said, taking a long drink. “Stuff like this happens to me all the time. I’m fucking over it.”

“Let’s just try to have a nice day, OK?” Elizabeth asked, in a tone more pleading than she had intended.

“You don’t believe me,” Calvin said sadly, wrapping his wet hair up in a bandanna. “You were sitting right there. You saw her, and you still don’t believe me.”

“It’s not that I don’t believe you,” Elizabeth said cautiously. “It’s just that if I were on the subway by myself, and someone pulled a big serrated knife out of his...or her...bag, no matter what race the person was, I would be concerned until I found out what they intended to do with it.”

Calvin didn’t say anything more about it. He just quietly sipped his beer. Elizabeth waited a few minutes, then got up and headed back in the water. This time she swam for much longer. She floated on her back, staring at the clouds. When a pair of jet skis nearby kicked up some waves, she jumped up into them as they rolled in. But when something hard and sharp shifted beneath her right foot, she got startled, and decided to head back to shore.

When she got back to the blanket, Calvin was gone. Elizabeth let the sun dry her off for a few minutes. Then she wadded up their belongings and headed toward the ladies’ bathroom on the boardwalk to change.

The empty, cavernous restroom echoed with each of Elizabeth’s footsteps until the sound was dampened by the slurry of water, sand, and toilet paper that muddied the floor closer to the stalls. She stepped gingerly through the muck to a stall, and maneuvered carefully out of her bathing suit and into dry clothes, trying not to let anything touch the sludge on the floor. When she was done, she let the door swing open. But she didn’t walk out.

Under the stall door across from her, a pair of neon yellow Nikes caught her eye. Slowly, silently, Elizabeth withdrew the serrated knife from the bottom of her bag. Then she slipped the pack over her shoulders and waited. She could hear the awkward thud of the industrial-sized roll of toilet paper being turned over a few times in the girl’s stall. Then the whoosh of the autoflush. Elizabeth waited for the sound of the lock sliding back, then lunged across the slippery aisle between her stall and sneaker girl’s. In a flash, Elizabeth had pushed the much smaller girl back against the wall of her stall with her legs bowed awkwardly on either side of the toilet. The girl’s eyes teared

up, and her bottom lip started trembling, but she didn't make a sound when Elizabeth locked the two of them inside the stall together and pressed the serrated knife against her slender throat.

Elizabeth put out her hand that wasn't holding the knife and waited. The girl feigned confusion for a moment or two. But when Elizabeth pressed the tip of the knife into the spot just above where the girl's pulse was jumping, and a thin trickle of blood escaped from under the blade, the girl gasped and produced a Hello Kitty wallet from her right hip pocket. Elizabeth stayed right where she was, wallet in one hand, knife in the other, gazing steadily at the girl, until she pulled the iPhone out of her other pocket and handed it over as well. Shoving the phone and wallet into her bra, Elizabeth unlatched the door behind her, but kept the knife extended toward the girl until she was able to make a quick getaway.

Back on the boardwalk, Elizabeth made her way to the pier and followed it to the end where she caught sight of Calvin talking to an old man who had two lines trailing down into the water.

She gave Calvin an up nod, to signal she was there, but didn't interrupt his conversation. Instead, she picked a spot nearby and started releasing the girl's belongings into the waves, as if they were fish getting a last-minute reprieve. First the iPhone, then the ID, then the credit cards, then the cash, one bill at a time.

"What are you doing?" Calvin asked Elizabeth after she had finished. "Isn't this beach dirty enough without you throwing your trash in the water?"

"It wasn't trash," Elizabeth said, snaking her arms around Calvin's waist and pulling him close. "It was offerings for the sea. I was thanking the sea for bringing us together on this beach ten years ago."

"You're crazy," Calvin said, and kissed her on the top of her salty head.

Apartment

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At first glance, they looked just like babies. Frozen, lifeless newborns still curled up as if they had never left the warm insides of their mothers. But once I got a little closer, I saw what they really were—suckling pigs. I couldn't believe my luck.

When I'd first told my boyfriend about the job interview at the prestigious media company downtown, he'd seemed more interested in the neighborhood where I'd be visiting than the position I'd be vying for. When I asked him why, he'd said, "Chinatown...that's piglet country." He was practically salivating, his gaze a million miles away.

Until that moment, I didn't think he'd had any interest in cooking at all. Our evenings together usually consisted of takeout on the couch and Netflix. But he explained that when he was a kid, his grandpa had shown him how to spit-roast a pig on the lawn of their family farm. Spit-roasting, he explained, was a man's job. And he'd grown up to be the greatest barbeque man his family had ever produced.

I reminded him that we lived in New York City, that nobody here had a yard, never mind a place to legally roast a whole pig. But that's when he told me about the piglets. "They're no bigger than turkeys," he'd explained. "And so tender and flavorful, eating one makes you feel like royalty."

He said whole piglets were hard to come by in our part of town. "Actually, in any part of town," he admitted. But he'd urged me to keep my eyes open for them while I was in Chinatown. And now here they were, fresh off the truck. I got closer to the pile of bodies on the street hoping to catch a glimpse of what store they were being loaded into so I could return after my interview. As I edged closer, however, I realized that the truck was the store, and guys in dirty aprons and bundled up Chinese housewives were bunched up near the truck's cab waiting for their signal to start paying and grabbing.

Before I had a chance to even decide what to do, the waiting customers surged forward, thrusting bills in the face of the driver who was now standing guard over the shipment on the ground. I knew it was now or never, so I reached into my wallet, pulled out almost everything inside, and pushed my way to the front, hoping what I had was enough.

Clearly my cash was sufficient. Calloused fingers wrenched the bills from my hand, and replaced them with the slippery end of a clear plastic recycling bag. The sack was surprisingly heavy, and once I'd managed to weave my way through the crowd back onto the sidewalk, I could see why. Peering through the condensation building up on the inside of the bag were four sets of sightless eyes, staring in different directions. Four pigs in a plastic bag in exchange for almost all the contents of my wallet. Maybe they weren't such precious commodities after all.

Once the thrill of the unexpected purchase had subsided, I realized that I now had to find a way to hide the pigs during my job interview. I asked in every store I passed for a large opaque bag, and eventually, I was able to buy a flimsy wheelee suitcase from a street vendor that just barely contained the bodies if I packed them in tight. Then I noticed the time. My appointment was in ten minutes, and while I thought I'd been keeping close tabs on where I was in relation to where I was going, the streets now all seemed identically unfamiliar.

I stood there for a moment on the corner, not sure which direction to head in, when an annoyed woman shoved me out of my motionless panic. Though visually she fit in with all the other Asian merchants and shoppers that frequented the area around Canal Street, when she got up in my face to yell at me for not moving, the stream of invective that she used to lay into me was unmistakably French. "*Sortez de la façon dont vous idiot! Vous bloquez la rue avec tous ces porcs!*"

"*Pardon,*" I stammered, "*je ne comprend pas Francais.*" It was the only French I knew, but the phrase often inspired enough goodwill in the person I was addressing to get them to respond in English. The woman's face relaxed a little, and I knew I'd done the right thing. She asked me in English if I needed help. I grabbed the crumpled paper with the address of the media company out of my purse and handed it to her, but I could tell by the look on her face that she had no idea where the street I was looking for was, so I took back the paper and thanked her for trying.

By now it was almost my appointment time, so I called the media company on my cell and sheepishly asked for directions from the street corner where I stood. The receptionist sounded irritated by my incompetence, but she also knew exactly where I was, and directed me just a few blocks north to a gleaming glass high rise where I was instructed to take the elevator up to the ninth floor.

I tried knocking on the only door in the hallway, but nobody answered. So I turned the knob, let myself in, and realized that instead of the bustling office space I had been expecting, I was instead stepping into a massive apartment with lots of rooms but almost no furniture. Discreetly, I removed my pigs from the suitcase and stashed them on the bottom shelf of the empty fridge in the kitchen, then followed the sound of laughter to the back of the apartment where about eight well-dressed hipsters were gathered in a large bedroom that still had some furniture in it.

"Hey," I said cautiously, peeking my head into the room before stepping in with the rest of my corporate-casual-clad body. "My name is Adrienne, I had a 1 p.m. appointment. I'm so sorry I'm late, I got a little lost."

Everyone welcomed me as if they had been expecting me, and a round girl in cat-eye glasses and a vintage dress invited me to come in and sit down in a wing chair by the window. But once I was inside the room, they all just went back to lounging and chattering on the bed, on the floor, and around a small dressing table. It was like a house party, only with no music or food or booze.

Since I didn't know anybody, I just sat there by the window, listening to their meandering conversations about makeup brands and fantasy football and the pitfalls of political correctness for what seemed like hours while my resume and references sat untouched in my purse. As day turned to early evening, I realized they all seemed to be getting increasingly intoxicated, as if they were all taking drugs together and I just couldn't see them doing it. This was unnerving, so finally I decided to pipe up and ask nobody in particular why the apartment was mostly empty. A handsome young Indian guy with impeccably tailored clothes turned to me and explained that the apartment belonged to his parents and they were moving away, so he'd decided to use the space for a while after they'd cleared out.

I nodded, and asked where the bathroom was. He directed me to the third door on the right, but as I made my way down the darkened hall, I was distracted by the discovery that someone had dismembered my baby pigs and had left remnants of snouts and tails and ears and hooves all along the hallway that ran the length of the apartment. I was *pissed*. Picking up all the pig pieces I could and swearing under my breath, I cleared the hallway of body parts and stuffed them in the freezer once I'd reached the kitchen.

I heard a noise coming from the adjoining living room and followed it. There was an older-looking Indian woman in there wearing a conservative pantsuit, and when I walked up behind her, I saw she was gazing down at a little shrine on the floor that seemed to be commemorating the well-dressed guy I had just been talking to in the bedroom. There was a photo of him smiling out of a gilded frame, and there were unlit candles and dead flowers and mala beads strewn around it on the carpet. I didn't understand why the woman would have a shrine to someone who was just hanging out in the next room, and I wanted to know more—like, was he famous?—so I tried to strike up a conversation.

“Isn't it strange how apartments look so different after all the furniture has been taken away?” I asked casually. The woman turned abruptly as if she thought she'd heard something, but then her eyes looked right through me as if she didn't see me. All at once, I felt sick and a little scared, so I headed back toward the bedroom, resolving both to assert myself about the job interview and to ask the Indian guy about the woman in the living room. But as I strode purposefully down the hall, I remembered I hadn't yet used the bathroom. I ducked into the third doorway as previously directed, glanced into the mirror over the sink, and when I saw my face, I screamed. My features were not my own, and half of my face looked grayish, as if it were frozen, rotting, or both.

A preppy sort of guy in a rugby shirt and khakis came rushing in from the bedroom and asked if I was OK. Between startled gasps, I told him something was wrong with my face. He laughed and said there was nothing wrong with my face, that I was just high. I told him I didn't remember taking any drugs, and he just laughed some more and told me to come back and join the others. The hallway leading back to the bedroom was now littered all over with dead sea creatures, like the ones they sell in buckets all over Chinatown. I had to step around spiky uni and glistening eels, giant silvery tuna and turtles with cracked-open shells. Considering the carnage, I expected the hallway to stink, but when I inhaled, all I could smell was fresh paint and carpet shampoo.

Back in the bedroom, everyone was now glowing as if under black light. The guys were talking about the new *Star Wars* movies on the bed, and the girls had changed into cocktail-party attire and were commiserating about skin problems. A blonde in a blue spaghetti strap dress was moaning about a condition that she didn't know how to treat. The other girls were saying that her complexion looked great, that she looked beautiful, but under the black light, I could see distinctly that patches of her skin looked mottled and rotting.

This made me think about my own face, so I went back to the bathroom to check it out. The sea creatures in the hall were gone, but when I got to the bathroom and looked in the mirror, I saw that my hair was now completely gone, and in its place was a large squid resting on top of my skull, its tentacles hanging down around my face like hair. I thought about this as calmly as I could while I peed. And after I flushed and washed my hands in the sink, I tried arranging the suction-cupped tendrils into some kind of style, so my transformation would be a little less obvious. But when the animal started fighting back against my efforts to coil its limbs into a bun at the nape of my neck, my startled screams once again caught the attention of my hosts.

This time, both the preppie and the Indian guy rushed into the bathroom in response to my shrieks, but when I saw them, I didn't want to tell them what was wrong. They both had squids on their heads, too. But instead of gray and squishy like mine, their squids were ornate works of art, made of gold, silver, and precious jewels. The squids glittered on their heads like regal headdresses from the lost city of Atlantis, and I was so surprised, all I could do was laugh. They laughed too.

They asked me once again to join them in the bedroom, but I said I needed some air, and took the elevator back down to the street. When I left the building, however, I realized I wasn't in Chinatown anymore, but instead found myself walking along the Coney Island boardwalk. I heard footsteps on the wooden slats behind me and turned to see a ruggedly handsome man coming toward me, smiling. His face looked so familiar, at first I thought he must be an acquaintance whose name I had forgotten, so I smiled back. But as he drew closer, I realized that he looked familiar because he was famous. Like, really, *really* famous. Movie-star famous. When he was finally beside me, he reached for my hand, possibly because he thought I was a friend whose name he couldn't remember. Whatever the reason, I accepted, hoping he wouldn't wise up to the fact that we didn't actually know each other yet. Together, we gazed out to sea.

The waves were a dark, menacing purple, heavy clouds were rolling in, and there was lots of choppy, agitated movement in the water. "Sometimes the ocean is like a drunk stepfather," I said to the movie star. "You know it's going to hit you, but you don't know when." His brow furrowed in concern. "Did you have a drunk stepfather?" he asked. "Nope," I answered, and laughed. His face relaxed and he swept me up into his arms, just like at the end of a summer blockbuster. Then we kissed and kissed and kissed until our bodies collapsed down onto the boards beneath us.

Angry waves from the shoreline had now grown so huge they were pummeling the boardwalk, soaking us. We ripped each other's wet clothes off and continued kissing, getting more and more turned on. "This is what it's like to make out with a famous person!" I shouted inside my own

head, giddy with excitement but also trying to stay in the moment. “We’re totally gonna do it!” I silently cheered. “We’re doing it like famous people!”

But all at once, self-consciousness rippled through me. I remembered who, what, and where I was, so I pulled away and propped myself up on one elbow to look around. “What if somebody sees us?” I asked shyly, grabbing the movie star’s wet black T-shirt from the heap of clothes beside us to cover my bare breasts. He looked confused, then concerned. He seemed about to say something to me, but then stopped himself and said instead, “Maybe we should get you back inside.”

We got dressed and rode the elevator back up to the apartment. But when we walked in, there was no longer laughter coming from the back bedroom. Instead, I noticed bright morning sunlight coming in through the unshaded windows, and in the living room, a realtor was explaining to a young couple that the previous tenants had left a few things around, but that basically the space was empty and ready for move-in. I walked into the living room to join them, but nobody even turned around. I walked right up to them and waved my arms around, but still, nobody noticed me there at all. I turned around and saw that the movie star was standing over by the open door, watching me, waiting for a spark of understanding.

It took a few minutes to sink in, but when I did finally grasp my situation, I wasn’t sad or scared or anything like that. I was relieved. I dropped my purse with the references and the resume and the media company’s address and my phone and my wallet and my keys and my lip-gloss in it onto the carpeted floor. Then I took the movie star’s hand and led him down the long hallway that ran the length of the apartment. But before we even made it to the back bedroom, I pulled him to the floor and we picked up where we had left off outside, removing each other’s wet clothes and exploring each other’s bodies with our hands and mouths. The realtor continued giving the young couple a tour of the apartment, and as he led them down the hall, their heavy, solid legs passed right through us. Then they were gone.

Extra Help

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TW: Childhood sexual abuse

Hebrew School was a tough place for me to be even before I met Elliot. Most of my classmates had been there—learning to read and write and speak and sing in our ancient language—for years before I even started. My parents had dropped me in at age 11, out of a sudden urgent desire for me to be ready to have a Bat Mitzvah by the time I turned 13. So there I was, after my regular New York public school day and on weekends, struggling to learn the basics while everyone around me either overtly or more quietly doubted my ability to catch up. I was not popular at all. I had two friends, Lauren and Bev, but aside from them, I was the butt of everyone's jokes. I found crude drawings of my fat body under my desk. A kid named Andrew kicked my shins as hard as he could every time he walked past me, until they bruised a deep purple ringed in green. Popular girls would whisper, giggle, and then get quiet when I came near. It sucked.

One afternoon during my first few months there, the teacher told me a Hebrew High School student was going to tutor me. I walked out into the hall and there was Elliot. He was about 17 and very, very large. I remember feeling a surge of relief when I met him. First, because I'd thought I was the fattest kid in Hebrew School. And second, because I assumed his size would make him less likely to pick on me. He led me down a long hall, past the auditorium, and up some stairs to a dingy little storage closet. There was a desk and two chairs inside. On the wall was a painting of a Rabbi, and boxes of dusty prayer books crowded the rest of the room. He started going over some worksheets with me, but it quickly became clear that I didn't even have enough of a grasp on the alphabet to begin the assignment. So instead, he started drawing out tic-tac-toe grids and hangman games on the back of the paper and said we could do that instead. I was relieved, but that relief turned to discomfort when he wrapped an arm around my waist and pulled me onto his lap. I didn't know what to do. I was embarrassed, both for me and for him. Part of me wondered if he was confused and thought I was a little kid or something. I was still a little kid in many ways, but not in a way where sitting on a stranger's lap felt good. I was scared. I stayed still for a while, and then I asked if I could go back to class. He said OK.

The next week, I was sent out to meet with Elliot again. This time, he pulled me onto his lap as soon as the door was shut. I knew I didn't want to be there. I felt claustrophobic and nauseous. I asked him if I could sit in my own chair. He asked if I wanted to play games or do work. I said play games. He said if I wasn't going to do my work, then I had to sit on his lap. So that's what I did. I sat on his lap, playing tic-tac-toe while he rummaged around under my shirt as if I were a couch with loose change hidden under the cushions.

Back at home, I begged my mom not to make me go to Hebrew School anymore. I told her that I hated it, that the kids were mean, that I wasn't any good at it. She told me it was very expensive and my tuition had already been paid and my dad would be very disappointed if I dropped out. So I just kept on going. I never knew when Elliot would be back for me. Days would go by and I wouldn't see him at all. But of course, one day, he finally did come back.

That day, as soon as we were alone, I told him flat out that I didn't want to sit on his lap anymore. He started crying, and begged me to sit with him, to sit on him, so I did. He held on to me tightly and cried into the back of my neck while his fingertips roamed across my preteen chest in desperate little circles. He told me I had to lose weight, right away, or my life would be as miserable as his was. He wanted me to promise him that I would go on a diet, and threatened that if I didn't do what he said, I would die alone and my tombstone would read, "Here Lies Emily, Nobody Ever Loved Her." He cried and cried while I totally numbed out. I started counting prayer books (22, 23, 24...). Then I stared at the Rabbi painting on the wall, wondering who had painted him and when. Maybe he was somebody's grandfather or something. My dad's grandfather had been a Rabbi back in Europe. I wondered if he had looked like that.

Afterward, I went back to class. At the break, I asked my friends Lauren and Bev to meet me in the bathroom. I told them what was going on and neither of them seemed shocked. Lauren said Elliot had tried to get her to sit on his lap once and she had just told him no. I wondered why she had been able to stop it and I hadn't. Bev said I could copy off of her paper for tests so I wouldn't need extra help. It sounded like a good idea.

The next time the teacher called on me to go out into the hall with Elliot, I told her I didn't want to. When she asked why, I said I didn't need extra help anymore. She looked skeptical, but she just said OK. I never had to go with Elliot again. I don't know if it was the cheating that saved me, or if my friends had tipped her off that something was going on, or if she just had good instincts. But I was so relieved, I let myself cry a little bit.

At the time the Elliot stuff was going on, I was really confused and ashamed. I didn't understand why I hadn't been able to stand up for myself. I wondered if secretly I had wanted the attention and blamed myself for being an easy target. But as an adult, my perspective is much different. I know that my 11-year-old self worked things out the best way she could. I may not have felt like I could reach out directly to parents and teachers, but I did reach out to my friends, and they helped me break out of my isolation enough to ask for what I needed. Even now, at 41, I sometimes feel too soft, like I'm an easy mark for coercion, or just too vulnerable. And my coping strategies in many ways are still the same as they were when I was 11—I ask my friends, "Is this OK? Is this right? What should I do about this? What would you do?" I confide in them without shame and I listen to what they have to say. And sometimes, that's all I really need.

Fat Camp Confidential

Standalone scene from novel-in-progress

Lee

If John Hughes made a prequel to *Pretty in Pink* all about the adolescent, fat-camp years of James Spader's preppie villain Steff, he could have cast Lee as his leading almost-man. I didn't know that much about him. I knew he made a show of being grossed out by me when he was hanging out with his friends by the soda machine in the rec hall. Once I overheard him say that his family made their money breeding rare Shar Pei puppies, but he pronounced the breed "*Shahhhh Paaaaayyyyyy*," just to make it clear his dogs were fucking fancy. He wore collared polo shirts all the time, even in the pool when our same-age divisions had swim time together, and he was wearing one in the weight-lifting room on the morning I happened to walk by the open door on my way to the record shack. He was alone in there, fumbling with some circuit training equipment, trying to move the peg from a super heavy weight up to something lighter. I didn't realize how intently I'd been watching him until he looked up and waved me inside, as if he were expecting me.

As soon as I walked through the door, he closed the door behind me and put a couple free weights in front of it so nobody else could walk in. "Get on the mat and lie down," he said, motioning to an area at the back of the room covered in gym mats for stretching. I must have been curious, or maybe I just had nothing better to do, so I shrugged and did what he said. While I got myself situated—debating whether I should take my shoes off, then deciding not to because my feet were too smelly—he went back to the weight machines, doing a few more reps with the lateral pull-down bar, then some leg presses, then some chest presses. When he was done, he flopped down beside me, a thin sheen of sweat glazing his face, and grabbed my hand.

His breathing was heavy, but mine wasn't. Lying there on the mat for so long had made me drowsy and spacey. But when he suddenly climbed on top of me, I became abruptly, urgently awake. He tried Frenching me, but his tongue was thick and awkward in my mouth, not long enough to twine around mine. Once his hands slid under my shirt and started playing around with my nipples, though, I didn't really care. I reached under his polo shirt and felt sticky skin. Sinking my fingertips into his fleshy sides made me whine a little into his mouth, and when I felt my way up to his pecs and discovered two soft handfuls not so different in size to mine, I felt an odd urge to knead them, like when my cat at home would make biscuits on my bed. This made us giggle a little, but our tongues were still in each other's mouths, so our laughter made drool start to dribble out over our lips, which only made us laugh more.

When he started grinding his hard-on against my thigh, I hiked both of our shirts up so I could feel his soft, white, belly skin pressing against mine. His knee found the crotch of my shorts and I humped up against it like one of his puppies. If I had a tail, it would be wagging.

I knew our bodies were wrong. He had been doing extra reps early on a rainy Sunday morning trying to get less wrong as quickly as possible. I didn't believe I'd ever not be spectacularly wrong, so I never saw the point of doing anything extra. But as we wriggled our bodies together on the mat, I marveled at the silky-smooth heat our softest parts generated when we slid them against each other, even through our clothes. I hiked my leg up so more of the surface area of our bodies could touch. I sought out his elbow with my forearm, the small of his back with the side of my knee, my left hand fiddled with his ear while my right found a surprisingly satisfying nook where the curve of his belly met the side of his hip. Pulling away from his probing tongue, I buried my face in the space between his neck and shoulder and I inhaled as much of his sour boy smell as my lungs could hold, the aroma making me as hungry as if his sweat were a batch of Toll House Cookies straight out of the oven.

Every minute at fat camp, I had been relentlessly hungry, my mind skipping through fields of lasagna, swimming oceans of nachos, and climbing mountains of peanut-butter cups. But the more I arched myself up towards Lee's damp knee, the more I felt like I had been set loose at an all-you-can-eat buffet—like finally, I was being fed.

Something good was happening, I could sense it drawing closer. But before I could find out what that something was, Lee rolled off me and stood up. He strolled over to the weight machine, picked up his water bottle he had left there on the floor, and took a long drink. Then he moved the free weights away from the door, opened it wide, and returned to his circuit training, picking up where he had left off at the bicep curl machine.

I stared at him, my body throbbing, waiting for more instructions. But they didn't come. When he finished biceps and moved over to hamstrings, he finally looked over at me and said, "What?"

I didn't know what to say so I just stayed quiet.

"I don't have any candy, if that's what you're waiting for."

"Candy?" I asked, and jumped to my feet, as if he'd said the magic word that brought me back to myself again. "Whose got candy?"

"Nobody. That's what I just said," he replied. Then he fished his Walkman out of a bag stowed beneath the workout bench, slid the orange foam earpieces over his ears, and pressed play on his cassette tape.

I could hear the tinny whisper of Poison's "Every Rose Has Its Thorn" escaping from his headphones as I walked past him and out the door. Something vaguely bacon-y wafted down the hill from the dining hall and I wandered towards it. I knew whatever they were cooking over there would be a disquieting facsimile of food, but I decided I wanted to be first in line for it anyway.

Nightmare Before Christmas

January 15, 2024

A few days before Christmas, I had a dream.

We were visiting my guy's parents, and the holiday was delightfully bland. There was a tree and presents and eggnog—everyone on their best behavior.

Then his sister arrived, which was a surprise since she lives far away. She came in lugging an object too bulky and irregularly shaped to wrap. It was an infant car seat, with a big red bow tied festively around the handle. I stared at it like a dog that's just been shown a card trick.

My guy lunged at her, angrily, desperately, trying to shove her and the unwieldy gift out the door. But it was too late. The object he didn't want me to see clattered to the floor, lolling on its side.

“Stop it!” his sister demanded. “Get off me. What are you doing? Where is the baby?”

Nobody answered. Their mom started crying. My guy took my hand and led me away, out of the house, and into his car. We sat there quietly. I looked out the window at the snow. Finally, he said, “There was a baby. It died.”

I nodded, but I didn't know what the fuck he was talking about.

He tried again. “We were going to have a baby. But something went wrong. You were not OK. I just wanted you to be OK again. So, I hypnotized you. I wiped your brain and you forgot everything, and our lives went back to normal. But I forgot to tell my sister. So, she bought us a car seat.”

I didn't know whether to be angry or grateful. Mostly I was surprised that I could create new life, even if only for a little while. I looked at the snow some more and then I asked, “What went wrong?”

My guy reached across me to the glove compartment, pulled out an envelope, and handed it to me. Inside were sonogram photos of a fetus with three heads and each image was grislier than the one before. The heads all had teeth, and they were all attacking each other, trying to eat each other. The little body had wounds all over. They were killing themselves because they thought it was their only chance at survival.

“That baby is definitely mine,” I said, laughing, sobbing, holding the spot on my sagging gut that now felt like a boarded-up haunted house. “Who else's could he be but mine?”

Couch

January 18, 2024

When I lived in New York, my couch came with the apartment. A couple had signed the lease, bought a couch, and filled the particle board cabinets with bone white plates from Ikea before their love abruptly soured. They never used any of it and never came back. So, I ate off their plates and I wrote and fucked and cried on their couch for 18 years, until my own love soured. Then I paid some metalheads I knew to drag it all to the curb.

When my friend Susan moved from one place to another in New York, she had a friend who was a production designer for television and movies, and that friend had another friend who was also a production designer for television and movies. The friend of a friend was paying a fortune to store all the cool furniture she had acquired for film sets. She needed to downsize, so she gave a vivid, turquoise, mid-century-modern couch to a dude from a band I used to love in the '90s. He wanted to shoot a video at Susan's new place. So, he had the couch delivered to Susan and left it behind when the video was done.

When my friend Callie moved to a new place in Brooklyn, she brought along an extra couch from The Chicken Hut. The Chicken Hut was a former poultry slaughterhouse in the warehouse district full of artists and punks and bike messengers where she had been crashing for a while. I wondered how bad a couch would have to be for it to be deemed expendable by The Chicken Hut. But when I visited her at her new place, we sat on it together, and it felt comfortable.

Now I'm in Kansas, living in a place more than triple the size of my New York apartment for a third of the rent. It feels huge and cavernous and a little uncomfortable without a couch. But walking into a furniture store gives me a full-on identity crisis.

Why are all these khaki-dockers people acting like it should cost thousands of dollars to have some place to sit? The friends I left behind have always, somehow, had somewhere to sit, even though all of us are artists. Am I now too old to sit on something abandoned or cast off or donated—with all the mystery stains and smells that entails? My new guy says he's past all that. But what does that say about me? Will I ever have the kind of friends again who know somebody who knows somebody with an extra couch?

Will I ever have friends again?

The lights are too bright in the furniture showroom and the saleswoman is much younger than I am. Too young to have ever heard of that band I used to love in the '90s. We spend hours comparing seat depth and cushion firmness and fabric swatches. I thank her for her time and take her card and tell her I will think about it. But I know I will never go back there.

I would rather sit on the floor.

1313

March 24, 2024

At my new job I dust toys for hours.
Silently, I wipe the grime from He-Man, Darth Vader, GI Joe, Optimus Prime, Hulk Hogan.
I remember fiddling with these guys long ago, in my brother's room,
when nobody else was looking.

After 23 years writing about feminism, objectification, and women's liberation,
it's a private joke between me and myself when I brandish my pricing gun
at all these grimacing mini macho men.
I pull the trigger again and again with a satisfying, spring-loaded thwack—
\$15, \$15, \$15—and then hang them on display hooks designed to make them
as appealing as possible to the male gaze.

They have my sympathy, but not really.
After all, I'm not actually the one who decides their worth.
I just render the verdict.
Just like I wasn't the one who decided my own worth at my last job.
Wringing myself out in thousand-word increments, I put my head down, I blocked out the world,
and I wrote.

In a Fifth Avenue loft, in a converted Brooklyn warehouse, on a sagging East Village couch, in a
lonely Harlem sublet, in a former Kansas dancehall—
I sold off every drop of ambition I ever had at bargain basement prices until
my well finally ran dry.

But at the store, nobody needs me to write anything but sales slips.
If a customer requires help getting a coffin-shaped purse off a high shelf or wants to know if we
carry a VHS copy of *The Amityville Horror*, I can get the job done with a brisk efficiency honed by
decades of deadlines.
There's always re-stocking to do, ghoulish black T-shirts to alphabetize, and my perpetual,
Hemingway-style, man-versus-nature war on dust to wage.

When I used to tell people I edited a feminist magazine,
they'd usually apologize. Either for not having ever heard of it before,
or for not reading any sort of magazine in years, or for loving it back in the 90s,
but losing track of it after undergrad.

Now, I just give the people what they actually want. I used to think the antidote to rising fascism, environmental collapse, and brutal systemic injustice was activist journalism. But now I know better—it's a mint condition Masters of the Universe Vintage Eternia Playset. And it's a hell of a lot easier to sell.

Waffle House Abecedarian

April 10, 2024

For Melissa Fite Johnson

At the Waffle House,
Beside the overpass in Kansas
City, as I plowed through a bowl of cheese grits
Drenched in hot sauce, my
Ears perked up when I heard a
Faintly Southern accent ask a
Girl waiting nearby with her baby
How much jam she wanted
In her to-go bag. Four packets of strawberry
Jam was the answer. And I could imagine her
Kid getting all sticky from
Licking sweetness straight out of the tubs. That somehow made me want
More, too. So, when the waitress finished with the girl and was
Next to me again, I
Opened my mouth to ask for jam, but her
Piercing gaze
Quieted my tongue
Right there in my mouth. Her same tag read
Sarriah, spelled S-A-R-R-I-A-H and her
Teeth were white and straight, like a movie star.
Under her steady gaze, I got
Very quiet,
Which is unusual for me, and I signed the bottom of the bill with an
X, then, three more, like a row of kisses.
“You two are twin flames,” she said, motioning to my guy beside me, and smiled—a
Zenith color television smile. I smiled back.

Passenger Princess

May 15, 2024

It was a week into the road trip my boyfriend had planned for us and I was leaning into the whole passenger princess thing pretty hard.

I asked for ice cream.

I asked for a hotel with a swimming pool.

I asked for change for the souvenir penny machine.

I asked for selfie stops beside every alien statue in Roswell, New Mexico.

My guy obliged every time, without complaint.

That night at the Holiday Inn Express,

I dreamed we were already back in his white Buick,

headed towards Carlsbad, our fingers entwined between the cup holder and the gear shift.

But when I peered into the darkness, I saw we were no longer in the blooming, cactus-dotted desert.

We were pulling into my parents' garage.

And it was my dad's hand holding mine in an easy grip—our knuckles so similar.

From the back seat, another hand reached into the gap between seat and door and grasped my wrist.

It reminded me of this one time in high school when my old boyfriend came back to town to visit after finishing his first semester away at college.

I asked my new boyfriend to drive all three of us to a party and he said OK.

So with old boyfriend in the backseat, new boyfriend behind the wheel, and me forever riding shotgun, at one point they both reached out to touch one of my hands.

I squeezed back, first one, then the other, keeping my gaze steady on the ribbon of road ahead.

In the dream my dad's face took on a rubbery, mask-like quality and his eyes went vacant.

I got scared and tried to pull away but I knew he would never let me go.

Or was it the other way around?

“Why are you holding me twice?” I asked him, urgently, pleading.

“Who else is holding me?”

He couldn't reply, he was only a shell.

My head swam, trying to remember who had been in the driver's seat before, who might possibly slide in to fill it next.

Moments before waking I could feel my limbs wriggling free from all those insistent fingers.
But instead of relief I only felt more fear.
A passenger with no driver is worse than any night terror.

In the morning, I told my boyfriend to just keep driving.
I never wanted to go home again.

Liberty

June 19, 2024

I dreamed all the girls I knew from fat camp were gathered on the Liberty Island Ferry, cruising toward the base of America's most gigantic woman. We were all trying on fancy, slutty outfits in the bathroom like we used to do before rec hall dances—short dresses covered with crystals and rhinestones and sequins. Under the fluorescent ladies' room lights, we were blinding. At that point I should have known it was a dream, because we were all telling each other how hot we looked instead of the normal shit talking and helpful hints on how to hide our rolls better. Of course, we were all still our normal, dumpy selves, but in these special dresses, we felt somehow less unlovable.

There was a commotion on the deck as the ferry drew closer to Liberty's humongous feet, planted resolutely beside the shackles she had just smashed. We rushed towards the statue as the boat inched closer, the sun bouncing off our sequins and turning us into hyped up, round little disco balls. It was fun, and when you climbed up on the rail with your arms outstretched, we all cheered. But when you leaned out even farther and then jumped towards the statue with everything you had, only to fall down, down, down into the water, we stopped cheering and started screaming instead.

I was afraid to look down. I didn't know how I would survive without you, and I didn't want to try. I was so scared and so mad at you for going overboard and leaving me there alone. The ship's crew elbowed past me with rescue gear, tossing you a line, and then dragging you, dripping and dazed, back onto the deck. I rushed to your side, and even though you were already shivering, I started shaking you even more.

"Why did you do that?" I screamed in your face. "Don't you know how much everything would suck if you were gone?"

"Quit it..." you muttered, wriggling out from under my too-tight grip. "I never meant to go over the edge..." you started to explain, then trailed off, craning your neck to get a last glimpse of green copper as the boat reversed course and started heading back. "It's just so hard, trying to stay on board all the time. I wondered what would happen if I stopped trying not to jump."

I wanted to beg you not to do anything like that ever again, but you looked so tired, I shut up and hugged you instead. When I woke up, I was clutching my pillow so tight, my fingers were numb. But I couldn't let go. So, I stayed as I was, breathing in the dark, as if daring the day to find me.

Custies

July 16, 2024

Back when my cousin was still a drug dealer I found it sad but also funny and maybe vicariously thrilling when his phone would ping during Christmas dinner. He'd shrug, explain with one word— "Custies"— then take off for an hour or so to make a delivery.

In the same way I rarely consider the route my mail takes to reach my door, I doubt any of the Brooklyn stoners blowing up my cousin's phone on December 25th thought of the meal his mom made especially for him, growing cold on the stove. It's probably for the best. Guilt is bad for business.

When I started working retail, I called everyone who walked into the store my "custie." I also wondered for the first time what my cousin's Christmases were really like. How he'd appear magically in people's homes like Santa Claus bearing the only gifts anyone actually wanted.

The toys and trinkets I sell aren't as alluring as my cousin's wares, but that doesn't mean I don't cater to addicts.

When I gently urge a Gen X regular to pay his rent first before buying the Falkor doll from the 1984 film *The NeverEnding Story*, he twitches and flushes and can't even say goodbye in his hurry to leave.

When an elaborately accessorized young woman tries to buy a huge, rabbit-shaped purse, her card is declined. I attempt to ease her distress by suggesting that perhaps today is simply not a fluffy-bunny-type of day. But she fishes out another card, and then another, until she finally comes up with one that hasn't been maxed out.

Another custie hurtles towards me like a meteor 15 minutes before closing time. She tells me she was just released from prison and spent \$200 on an uber trying to make it from the pen to my store before we closed. She has scores to settle. It's time to rain hell upon her enemies. Her women are gathering to perform a ritual on her behalf, and she needs to inspire them to unleash their fury. I pick out a few choice objects I think might pack a punch—a long, pointy pentagram, a classic Parker Brothers *Ouija Board*, a goat's skull. She pays with fistfuls of crumpled up bills and I feel like a member of her coven.

A towheaded little boy tells me he's worried his bedroom may be haunted. A determined trans teenager from rural Kansas wants to wear something that will telegraph to the world "I am a girl! And I am a punk!" A Johnson County mom confides that she's sexually obsessed with Michael

Myers, the killer from the Halloween movies, then drops a bundle on a rubber mask signed by the guy who played him. Sometimes an employee of one of the other stores I shop at on our town's main drag comes in, and there's an illicit thrill as the custie role suddenly switches from me to them—like when I would sometimes see my therapist on line in front of me at the deli.

It never occurred to me that retail would feel so intimate, though I'm sure my cousin could have clued me in if I ever bothered to ask. Our custies crave what we've got so much more than the things they truly need. It's hard not to get a contact high off all that desire. Their hunger dapples our faces like sunlight filtering through leaves. Golden, fading, and then gone.

Wings

August 25, 2024

The first night I ever stayed over at my guy's bachelor apartment, I found a mostly full Jumbo Pack of Always Ultra-Thin Size 4 Overnight Maxi-Pads with Flexi-Wings stashed in the crumbling particle board cupboard beneath his bathroom sink. I asked him why he had them, even though I already knew.

Only one other woman has ever had unfettered access to his cabinetry. Seven years before it was my turn, she had taught him what he needed to know about smart, horny girls and what to do between their damp, pillowy thighs, in the car, in the dark, on a Topeka hilltop, in the shadow of a blinking television transmitter.

I admired the fact that even though at one point she had required a triple-protection system consisting of RapidDry, OdorLock, and LeakGuard technology, she hadn't shied away from spending the night. Hadn't worried too much about possibly staining the bedspread his parents had quilted for him by hand using fabric cut from his grandma's dresses.

This eagerness to stay close to him despite the antics of her unruly body was something I could relate to. I also felt a kinship with her premature death not long after they broke up, even though I had somehow survived my own close call with the big sleep just months before her ex appeared out of nowhere to lure me back from the brink.

I wasn't in need of the 100% Leak-Free Comfort the package promised on the day I found it. But I knew someday I would be. So, I took the glossy blue bag with me, and kept track of where I had stashed it for the next 20 months. Whenever my flow coincided with time spent with our mutual boyfriend, I'd use one of her pads so she could go on a date with us.

It would have been poignant, I suppose, if I had been wearing one on the night he proposed, kneeling bedside in a sudden spasm of never ever wanting us to end. But I was, in fact, bleeding like the elevator scene from *The Shining* the day we visited a hotel in his hometown where he thought we should hold our wedding reception.

Afraid I might stain my jeans, I ducked out of the private dining room and made a bee-line for the biggest stall the nearby Ladies' Room had to offer. From my pocket, I pulled the final pad I had taken from the pack, sad to cut the imaginary cord, but figuring this was as good a place as any to finally bring my weird fertility ritual to an end.

The wrapper was white plastic, whimsically printed with curvaceous orange shapes. Circles, asterisks, diamonds, and rounded rectangles intersecting with tiny words printed in girlish script. "Courageous!" the perforated envelope proclaimed. "Bold! Keep Going!" I fastened the adhesive

strips to the crotch of my sweaty August underwear and washed my hands—her wings carrying both of us into whatever comes next.

Kobe Bryant

September 18, 2024

I had been drinking champagne and watching oiled up men gyrate for about three hours when the news started spreading through the bar that Lakers legend Kobe Bryant had been killed in a helicopter crash.

Times Square's Sapphire 39 Gentleman's Club had just started opening their doors to women on weekend afternoons, offering up bachelorette party brunches with a healthy side of sausage. I was covering this astonishing leap forward for feminism for the magazine I worked for, and I had brought some of my colleagues along for the ride.

“Woooooo!” We had all shouted, dropping our cool, detached journalistic veneers and sounding like girl-powered ambulances rushing to the scene of some kind of lewd emergency. “Wooooo! Woooo! Woooooo!”

“The hottest thing about these guys is that they have jobs,” my friend Callie snarked, motioning to a cop in hot pants, a shirtless firefighter, and a construction worker with a very hard hat who had emerged from backstage to gather beneath one of the club's glowing TV sets.

I laughed but I was distracted. One dancer was center-stage, lathering his pecs with a wet sponge, another was body-rolling a girl in a plastic tiara into oblivion on the floor, and a Casanova in black leather pants had just grabbed our boss from behind and was bending her over the back of our VIP booth.

That's why it took me longer than it should have to realize that the nearly nude tradesmen standing over by the TV sets were crying. Not big, heaving sobs, but rather, the soft whimpering I remembered boys making in grade school when they were suddenly shocked by hurt and the tears escaped them before they had the chance to play it tough.

I watched them console each other amid the chaos of the club. The firefighter offered the cop a cocktail napkin to use to blow his nose. The construction worker steadied himself with a hand on each of his friends' shoulders, their faces all upturned towards the flickering images of Kobe Bryant's Sikorsky S-76 strewn across a Calabasas mountainside.

In that moment, the baseline of “Pony” by Ginuwine released its grip on my senses and the carefully crafted fantasy I had been invited to experience gave way to something much more tender. Grief had transformed beefcake into something too beatific for Times Square—never more naked, never more sublime.

Perfect Day

October 16, 2024

The worst hardship ever faced trying to travel west by wagon train was suffered by the Donner Party in 1846. Delayed by high water in the Big Blue River, they arrived in the Sierra Nevada too late and were snowbound. Of the 87 who set out from Springfield, Illinois, only 48 survived by resorting to cannibalism.

Six months before the snow, the group spent a few pleasant days camping by an uncommonly cool and clear stream just south of Marysville, Kansas, while waiting for the river to drop. “Altogether it is one of the most romantic spots I ever saw,” Donner member Edwin Bryant wrote in his diary on May 27th, 1846. “We named this the ‘Alcove Spring,’ and future travelers will find the name graven on the rocks, and on the trunks of trees surrounding it.”

The clearing is still called Alcove Spring, and a month before our wedding, my beloved brought me there. Edwin Bryant didn’t lie. Nestled alongside the whispering sway of the tallgrass prairie, we sat all alone in the shade of two towering oaks, peering over a sudden, vertiginous ledge into a glassy pool below.

The Donners had no idea during those balmy days spent carving names into rocks and trees that if only they’d managed to move a day or two faster, they could have all made it safely to California. Certainly, they knew that winter never fails to take what it wants, that the year was rolling onward like a wagon wheel. But in the face of a rising tide, all they could do was wait and make their mark on what, for many, would be their final gentle season.

A breeze tousled my true love’s hair. As he bent over his notebook, I watched his brow crease with the effort of drawing something to the surface from the depths of his own secret sea. It was summertime warm, but the leaves overhead knew it was really mid-October, and stubbornly refused to stop falling.

Maybe the Germans have a word for the exquisite desolation of a perfect day. How, for someone like me, it’s impossible not to mourn the memory of it even when I’m soaking in it up to my neck.

I snapped a picture of him there in the fading sunshine, scribbling away. And like a dog, trained too well on a diet of disappointment, I started ruminating on how stricken I’ll be one day, gazing upon our sun-dappled hopes from the eternal night of my frozen future. Grief pouring from the overfilled cup of this pioneer heart.

My almost husband looks up from his writing, he takes my hand, and I smile. My lips only slightly parted, hoping he can’t see the carrion, wedged dark and thick, between my trail-hardened teeth.

Hot Flash on My Wedding Day

November 20, 2024

At least it waited until after we said, “I do.”

Floating down the aisle in the best simulation of maidenhood my 49-year-old flesh could muster, I reached the altar in a cool, somewhat disembodied, state of grace.

Standing before the minister, it occurred to me that I had seen a lot in almost five decades of life. I had hung out backstage with Joan Jett and lived in a medieval castle and coughed up the acrid ash that blanketed my city after 9/11 and had held my arm steady as my best friend shoved their foot as hard as they could into my palm—creating the leverage to will their only child out of their body and into the world.

I wouldn't say I was jaded, just very experienced. Still, it took me almost 50 years to get all the way to the front of a flower festooned room where a man was standing, willing and ready to promise in front of his mom and everyone that he would never leave me.

I looked up into his face. Trying to telegraph gratitude and maybe a little panic, too. And whatever he was holding back in that decorous, ceremonial quiet breached his inner battlements, and he started to cry.

Reaching into my bra, I pulled out a tissue and handed it to him. Everybody laughed, and then I think I went into some sort of fugue state. Because the next thing I knew, I was married. Flash bulbs were going off, my face felt frozen in an unnatural rictus of mirth, different sets of loved ones were being shuffled in and out of the spaces around me. And I was hot. So fucking hot.

Through means of enchantment, I had shown up at the ball cleverly disguised as a maiden, and now my illusion was melting like the sherbet in the punch bowl. The door to theoretical motherhood was slamming shut behind me right there on the altar in real time and my crone era had entered the chat with a literal splash.

Sweat tangled with my garters as it coursed down the insides of my legs and into my silver slippers. Moisture gathered at the ends of my rapidly wilting curls. “Somebody get me a paper towel!” I growled as the photographer snapped away. “I'm sweating like a whore in church!”

My best friend stepped between me and the camera, grabbed my hand, and led me outside. I chugged from a big cup and steam rose from me like the warning shots off an angry volcano. Something molten had been awakened by the gold ring on my finger. I thought of my new husband, I wiped the salt from my neck, and I took another long, deep drink.

Clinton Lake

December 17, 2024

Last week, my new husband took me to a serene stretch of wetlands meandering through a corner of our Kansas town I'd never seen before. Created by the Army Corps of Engineers, Clinton Lake gushed across 35 miles of the Wakarusa River valley in 1975, the same year I was born, simultaneously creating a solution to seasonal flooding and completely washing away what remained of the little town of Bloomington.

A free-state settlement and a stop on the Underground Railroad, Bloomington, in 1865 was one of the earliest Black communities to take root on the prairie in the wake of the Civil War, a refuge for the newly emancipated.

Now, it is a refuge for deer, turkey, waterfowl, mourning doves, bobwhite quail, squirrels, rabbits, reptiles, amphibians, and fish. Teeming with life, yet eerily quiet on that warm December day.

I stood in an overgrown furrow between two rows of trees that once was a busy thoroughfare and was overtaken by a creeping, insistent dread. Something was coming closer. Demanding that I reckon with all that I had chosen to wash away in my hurry to arrive on this new, lush frontier.

The ripples of dam water placidly mirrored the sky as if they had been there forever. The sneakers I'd bought on Mass Street tread with sure-footed belonging across the winter grass blanketing the old dirt road. But down deep, beneath the waves and between the thrumming of my haggard heartbeats, ghosts were stirring in the dark.

A restless longing rose to the surface and took flight. On the wings of mallards and cinnamon teal. On the lingering heat left over from a nightmare. The one where I don't know if I'm awake or asleep. And then I see my lost love painting, shirtless, in the golden gray of a Brooklyn dawn. That dream, where I know, in my marrow, that the rattling I often feel at the bars inside my chest is the past, shouting, "Unlock this door! I live here! Let me in. I'm coming home to you."

5 A.M. in The Pines

January 15, 2025

The dream begins in a twin bed,
My brother and I sleeping the way we often did,
One head on each end with our legs tangled somewhere in the middle.
The room is dark, but overhead, a skylight reveals an impossible vista of brownstone tops and tenement cornices shooting upwards towards an indifferent sun.

It's the East Village, the first place I ever persevered in long enough to claim as home all by myself, and it's right outside, but I have so many questions. If my brother and I are kids again, does that mean my parents are here, too? I moved to New York to get away from them. What would happen if I started over again here with all of them—all again? Whatever this was, it probably wouldn't last. Best not to get too comfortable.

A whispering voice from someone I could not see blasted cool puffs of sound into my ears. "Sing," it insisted, as adrenaline knocked the remaining sleep from my eyes, and I scooted upright in alarm.

"Sing what?" I whispered back into the blank, stale air. As if I didn't know. As if the song hadn't been clambering around in my head since well before I had woken up. A maddening, repetitive round that was sometimes the Leadbelly version and sometimes the Nirvana version and sometimes a version much older and farther away than either one of those:

"My girl, my girl, don't lie to me, tell me where did you sleep last night? In the pines, in the pines, where the sun never shine, I'll shiver the whole night through..."

As if summoned by the crackle and quake of my frightened voice, a hand somewhere under the covers started sliding, like a charmed snake, up the side of my leg, heading towards the inside of my thigh. "No!" I shouted once, knocking the hand away, and then my voice died in my throat, hardened into a steely knot.

I clambered to the other end of the bed and a little boy version of my brother was down there, but his face was gray and waxy and his eyes were open and unblinking, a grin spreading grotesquely across this cadaverous imitation of his once cherubic face. I grabbed him by the shoulders and his tiny, vice-like hands clamped back, up against my throat. "Who are you?" I gasped as he yanked the air from my lungs. "Who are you?" I demanded as his grip tightened and the sound of children's laughter started to ricochet around the darkened room. "Who are you?" I begged once more before I was snuffed out.

Next was endless darkness—and then a jolt as my husband shook me awake, yanking me back to this gentler place. “Oh no, not again” he muttered wearily, peering down into my terrified face, “You’re safe. You’re here. You’re safe. You’re here. You’re safe.”

I Paid a Witch to Make You Love Me: A Villanelle

Published by Write Bridge Journal, September 2024

I paid a witch to make you love me
She said, "It doesn't work like that"
But I know my lock will fit your key

It was cold that day on Avenue B
Embarrassed, weary, desperate
I paid a witch to make you love me

Is it possible to die from being lonely?
She took out her candle-carving kit
Since I know my lock will fit your key

Resorting to back-room heresy
I give up, I give in, I sob and submit
I paid a witch to make you love me

Beside a jar of wine and honey
I strike a match, the wick is lit
I know my lock will fit your key

Relinquishing my dignity
Offering more than what I've got
I paid a witch to make you love me
Now I know my lock will fit your key

New In Town

September 30, 2024

(I entered a Lawrence Transit Department poetry contest with this poem and was named 2025 Poet Laureate of the Number 4 Bus. A poster with this poem on it appears on that bus route. Come visit me and we can ride my poetry bus!)

New in town, eager to trace the unfamiliar shapes
of what home means now,
I board a bus, then another, and I ride all day.

Parrying hawks glide along the Kaw,
sycamores share secret handshakes with sugar maples,
porches beckon with the genteel order of their shade.

Backpacks everywhere up on Mount Oread,
shopping bags and tattooed biceps dot the stops in the valley below.
“Hello!” I want to say to each new rider. “I’m new in town!”

When the woman seated across from me,
meets my gaze and smiles, I give it a shot.
She’s friendly, tells me who has the best barbecue.

I may not be home just yet,
but I know the bus will carry me there.
Somehow.

Ecovillage People (2003)

BUST Magazine, Winter 2003 (First reported feature)

Thirty-six years ago, one woman dreamed of creating an independent society. Today, her dream is a thriving community that's creating its own feminist culture.

By Emily Rems

MOST PEOPLE have never chucked a trash can through the window of a Starbucks or done time for revolutionary antics aimed at the WTO, but who among us hasn't felt the urge to throw off the shackles of global corporate culture in favor of a simpler, more independent life? If you've ever longed to be free of sexism and materialism, to live off of home-grown and homemade food, or to work in a place where your tasks are meaningful and your financial needs are minimal, you may have dismissed such ideas as being no more than a pipe dream. But for the residents of Twin Oaks, a feminist ecovillage tucked away on 465 acres of farmland in central Virginia, these dreams are a tangible reality.

Established in 1967 on a former tobacco plantation 35 miles south of Charlottesville, Virginia, Twin Oaks is part of what is known as the "Intentional Communities" movement. Intentional Communities include everything from rural farming communes like Twin Oaks to those group-house hotbeds of punk rock activism that tend to crop up in more urban areas. And while they numbered in the thousands at the peak of their popularity during the heady '60s, you might be surprised to learn that there are over 600 such organizations still operating in North America alone.

Back in '67, the entire population of Twin Oaks numbered only eight people. They were all there because of *Walden Two*, a novel written by Harvard psychologist B.F. Skinner, which Kat Kinkade—a self-described "bored secretary"—had read in a night school class. The book inspired Kinkade to look for other folks who might be interested in putting Skinner's blueprint for a new kind of peaceful, egalitarian society into practice.

Eventually, five brave souls stepped up to the plate, and together with her husband and her teenage daughter, Kinkade went on to create what is known today as one of the most successful and remarkably enduring social experiments the communities movement has ever seen. While countless other '60s-era communes and outposts of radical thought imploded under the weight of disorganization, in-fighting, and economic hardship, Twin Oaks has managed to grow and thrive with each passing decade. Today, Twin Oaks is home to 85 adults, all living and working together alongside their 15 kids, 5 dogs, 6 cats, 3 ferrets, and 30 cows and chickens in a labor sharing, cottage-industry system.

Twin Oaks calls itself “a self-supporting and somewhat self-sufficient community.” Each member is promised housing, food, health care, and personal spending money in exchange for working an assigned number of hours in any of the community’s businesses or domestic roles. But the citizens of Twin Oaks are not only committed to achieving economic independence—they also strive to create what they call a “feminist culture.” Intrigued by what that might look like, I traveled down below the Mason-Dixon line to catch a whiff of feminist utopia for myself.

Twin Oaks Road is a long dirt driveway that curves through pristine woodland, runs beside a breathtaking expanse of rolling green fields, and terminates at the white clapboard entrance to the community’s front office. On the morning I arrived, the crops were teeming with the yield of late summer beneath a brilliant azure sky. As the car rolled to a stop, I spotted six tanned young people in tees and cutoffs, quietly harvesting big shiny peppers and tending to beans out in the field, while cows mooed their good-mornings from a dairy barn down the hill.

Inside the office, I was introduced to my host, Mala, a 28-year-old woman with a Chicago accent and a laid-back but briskly efficient manner. Grabbing my bags, I followed Mala up a wooded path to my accommodations in Kaweah, one of nine housing structures dotting the mile-long main drag of the community. Kaweah combined the homey, wood-plank architecture and clean outdoorsy aroma of a ski chalet with the hodgepodge utilitarian decor of your typical liberal arts college dorm, minus the television. Each of Twin Oaks’ small living groups houses between 8 and 20 people in individual rooms. This arrangement was my first lesson in Twin Oaks feminism. As Mala explained it, people at Twin Oaks are all seen as individual entities, regardless of relationship status, so even if you come to the community already partnered with someone, or become partnered, you will always have your own individual room to do with as you wish. The room assigned to you by the community may or may not be in the same building as your partner’s room, and considering some of the complicated Twin Oaks relationship dynamics I learned about later, this is probably a good thing.

After ditching my bags and taking a peek at the communal bathroom down the hall, I headed over to Zhankoye (aka ZK), the massive wooden dining hall and recreation center where lunch and dinner are served daily. Food supplies are always available in each household’s residential kitchen, but with a rotating roster of cooks whipping up seasonal offerings twice a day, group dining here feels like a real occasion. A typical Twin Oaks meal may include fresh-baked bread, just-picked organic produce, fruit from the orchard, honey from the beehives, milk, yogurt, cheese, and beef from the dairy, or tofu, tempeh, and soymilk made from homegrown soybeans. Because I arrived on a Wednesday, I was treated to a steaming plate of River’s Famous Wednesday Mac ‘n’ Yeast. This kickass vegan concoction involving elbow macaroni, nutritional yeast and a blend of magical herbs and spices was so inexplicably cheesy, it could win over the palate of even the most devoted dairy-lover.

I had moved on from macaroni to a plate of organic greens with tahini-herb dressing when Val, a 38-year-old with a bright smile and an even brighter blond mullet wandered over to the picnic table I was sharing with Mala and her friends. Mala politely and efficiently made the

introductions. “*BUST? I love BUST!*” declared Val, and in one fluid motion she set down her tray and whipped off her shirt. To their credit the guys at our table didn’t even flinch, but there was something triumphant about the reckless glee with which Val proudly dangled her exposed ta-tas above her lunch plate that gave me the sense this was not an everyday occurrence. “This is something new,” Mala confirmed, introducing me to the most recent piece of Twin Oaks feminist legislation. Apparently, when it comes to personal conduct, there aren’t really many rules at Twin Oaks. Instead, there are socially enforced “norms” which govern day-to-day life. The Twin Oaks policy on toplessness had always dictated that since it was inappropriate for women to go topless in public, in the interest of gender equality, men, too, were prohibited from going topless in public, no matter how hot or strenuous their farm labor may be. However, this summer at a community meeting, the issue was raised that perhaps toplessness should be allowed for all genders. In response, this new nudity norm was established with the stipulation that the issue would be re-evaluated after a summer trial period. I could tell already which way Val would cast her vote.

After lunch, Mala gave me an eye-opening tour of the community while explaining the ingenious motor that has kept this place going for 36 years: the Twin Oaks labor system. “This community has no group religion or charismatic leader,” Mala began. “Instead, our labor credit system is the glue that keeps this community together. Members are required to maintain an average of 42 hours of work per week and can choose daily from any of 100 different work areas. A third of the work to be done at Twin Oaks is in one of our three cottage industries: hammock-making, tofu-making, and book-indexing, which together bring in about \$2 million per year. From this income, members are each given \$75 per month as discretionary income and the rest of the money goes toward supporting all the vital needs of the community [i.e. food, clothing, shelter, health care].” According to Mala, pocket money is usually spent on personal travel or on things like Ben & Jerry’s Chunky Monkey, which is picked up by volunteers who drive into neighboring towns once a day.

“Jobs like cooking, cleaning, and childcare,” she continued, “and other work, like farming, dairy processing, and machine maintenance are all considered equal creditable forms of labor and earn the same hourly credits as our cottage industries.” In other words, in the Twin Oaks system, tasks traditionally considered to be “women’s work” carry as much weight as those jobs directly responsible for earning income. This is not to say, however, that division of labor here has anything to do with gender.

Women are mechanics here. Men here find great fulfillment in the realms of childcare and gardening. There is a general openness here to the concept of non-gender-traditional work,” Mala explained.

“But what about all the yucky jobs?” I asked. After all, in a society where work is self-elected, who cleans the toilets? “Everyone must do one kitchen-cleaning shift per week,” Mala explained, “but every other job gets filled through volunteering. When we submit our schedules to the labor

coordinators, we decide how we want to plan our week and how much open space we want to leave. These free spaces are what allow for all the necessary job posts to be filled.”

As for the bigger picture of community government, decision-making for the population of 100 is a family affair. “Overseeing everything is a rotating board of planners with two to four people on the board serving staggered terms,” says Mala. “Current planners collect community input and appoint new planners. There is no community leader. Everyone at Twin Oaks has equal power and equal say.”

At the conclusion of our tour, Mala handed me a sheet covered with the names of Twin Oakers, mostly young women with a smattering of men, who had signed up to tell me more about life on the farm. I met with them while they chopped veggies outside the kitchen and while they milked cows in the barn. Some took a moment between work shifts to sidle up next to me on a bench in the shady courtyard, and others chattered free and loose between sips of moonshine slurped out of a mason jar by the light of a crackling community bonfire.

Most of the people I spoke with were recent college graduates or recent college dropouts when they moved to Twin Oaks and had heard about the communities movement at their schools. That explained not only the collegiate atmosphere of the community, but also helped me to understand what Mala meant when she described new members as usually being “in a transitional stage of their lives.” One such member is Summer, a 23-year-old woman with white-chick dreadlocks who has been living at Twin Oaks since she completed her three-week membership application visit last February. “I was going to Oberlin College in Ohio for two years and then dropped out,” she explained. “Oberlin is big into co-ops, and lots of people from my school visit Twin Oaks during their independent study terms. That’s how I heard about it, through word of mouth. When I visited, the diversity of the labor system and the resource sharing I saw here made me want to stay.”

Others told me that just as *WaldenTwo* had been the catalyst for Kat Kinkade to start her new life, it was Kinkade’s own book, *A Walden Two Experiment: The First Five Years of Twin Oaks Community*, that inspired them to follow in her footsteps. “I had read Kat Kinkade’s book in the ninth grade, so I always knew that someday I wanted to visit,” 22-year-old Meredith explained. “I finally came to visit two years ago while taking a break from my studies at Kenyon College, and loved the people and the land here so much, I just never left.”

By all accounts, gaining new members is rarely a challenge at Twin Oaks—it’s keeping them here that’s tough. Tom Freeman, a 38-year-old father of two who’s lived here for eight years, says he knows why. “The worst part of community living is having to live with the people you’ve broken up with and their new partners. That is the biggest reason people leave,” he revealed. “Families break up here and there’s no support network for those in pain.” Some community members are involved in “process teams,” who come in at the request of an ailing couple to help broker a peaceful co-existence. Sometimes this does the trick, sometimes not.

“If a problem comes up, you need to process and talk about it. It can be annoying and hard,” a 21-year-old German ex-pat named Anja told me. “I have an ex-boyfriend here. Seeing him every day was hard, but we worked it out. A lot of women here have to deal with that.”

Rather than putting all of their emotional eggs in one person’s basket, some dodge the break-up blues by engaging in the popular Twin Oaks practice of polyamory. It is estimated that about half of the adults at Twin Oaks have explored this option of mutually consensual non-monogamy between partners, but of the women I spoke to, only two seemed really gung-ho about “poly” being the right choice for them. One was Phoenix, a free spirited former actress from Cincinnati who told me, “It’s a great feeling not to be defined or dependent on one relationship when you can have multiple romantic relationships.” The other woman was an enigmatic 31-year-old named Anissa whose family unit, known throughout the community as “the Star family,” consists of herself, her two male lovers, her one female lover and her female lover’s young son.

The two women I spoke to who arrived at Twin Oaks with their male partners in tow—Mala, my tour guide, and Mele, a 24-year-old dead ringer for Lauren Ambrose from *Six Feet Under*—both admitted to experimenting with poly during their time at Twin Oaks. In Mele’s case, it didn’t work out, so she and her partner Sean, an avid knitter who moved with Mele to Twin Oaks from Chicago three years ago, elected to return to monogamy. As for Mala, her nine-year relationship with her partner Ezra is “as monogamous as it’s ever been,” now that a compromise has been reached between them not to carry on romantic relationships with other members. “Flings and hookups are still OK, though,” she added.

Despite Tom’s nookie-flight theory, the average length of a residency at Twin Oaks is a solid eight years. Interestingly enough, the two people I spoke with who had passed the eight-year mark were Val and Valerie. Val (my friend from lunch who’s been hanging out at Twin Oaks for 16 years) confessed that now that her daughter Maia is about to graduate from the local high school, she’s becoming a little restless. “I don’t plan on always living here,” she confided. “I’ve started to question what might be next now that my daughter is going to college.”

Valerie, on the other hand, a 36-year-old former college English teacher and researcher from Montreal who has been at Twin Oaks for 10 years, hasn’t yet felt the same wanderlust. “I have no immediate plans to go,” she said, “but the rest of my life is a long time...I’ve given up predicting what will happen.”

As for the newbies, they all struck me as possessing a weird combination of honeymoon-stage fervor for community life and youthful confidence that there is more for them to explore in the world. “It’s so comfortable here, it would be giving up a lot to move,” Mele told me. “I think of leaving every time I get pissed off, though.”

Mele’s partner, Sean the knitter, also seems pretty attached. “When I first moved here, I was behind on bills, so I figured not having to pay bills for six months or so while I live at Twin Oaks

was a good idea. Now, living here makes me feel much more intentional. I think sometimes I want to stay.”

There is also among the newer residents a pioneering contingent who aspire to one day start their own communities. “Twin Oaks is my home, I love it a lot,” Anissa told me. “I’m very interested in starting my own community, but I can’t imagine not living in a community now. It’s nice to know I am a part of Twin Oaks’ history.”

There is an uncompromising idealism embedded in the citizenry of Twin Oaks, especially in those like Anissa who are looking forward to founding communities of their own one day. Not content to merely ditch all the trappings of privacy and personal accumulation, some members I spoke with want to see the community push its ideals even further. “I would like us to be more environmentally responsible,” 36-year-old Debby Bors told me. “I would like it if we bought everything organic, installed more solar panels, got off the power grid. We could collect rainwater as well as using well water, and we should stop using so many unnecessary chemicals, like Comet. I’d also like it if we traded in our vehicles for hybrid cars.”

Despite the daily revolutionary act of merely continuing to exist after 36 years, the people of Twin Oaks refuse to see an end to the struggle for independence they’ve begun. “We don’t pretend to be some utopia,” was repeated to me over and over again like a mantra during the course of my visit. In fact, the second book by Kinkade (who, at 72, recently moved to her own home near Twin Oaks and is reportedly in love with having her own space) is even titled, *Is it Utopia Yet?*

But on my trip home, after a hug from Mala and a bowl of homemade granola, the memory of something Anja said made me wonder if, for Twin Oaks, utopia is only a matter of time. “The people who live here come here from the outside world and bring in all their bullshit behavior,” she told me, “but underneath, there is a desire to change. There are activists out there who say we’re just hiding in the woods, not changing anything, but every day we are learning to consume less, to live more responsibly than they ever could. Things are getting better, but slowly.”

Tina Fey interview (2004)

BUST Magazine, Spring 2004 (First cover story)



[Introduction from April 2018]

As we get closer to BUST's 25th anniversary this July, we're bringing some of our favorite pieces from the past online. In Spring 2004, Tina Fey appeared on our cover—an experience she later recalled in *Bossypants*, writing, “Feminists do the best Photoshop, because they leave the meat on your bones. They don’t change your size or your skin color. They leave your disgusting knuckles, but they take out some armpit stubble. Not because they’re denying its existence, but because they understand that it’s okay to make a photo look as if you were caught on your best day in the best light.”

“According to a new study, women in satisfying marriages are less likely to develop cardiovascular diseases than unmarried women. So don’t worry, lonely women, you’ll be dead soon.” It’s biting, unquestionably feminist barbs like this one delivered by 33-year-old Tina Fey on *Saturday Night Live* that have propelled her to the top of the comedy heap as the show’s first female head-writer. Scouted from the famed sketch comedy training ground Second City in Chicago, her meteoric rise up the ranks at *SNL* began in 1997 when Executive Producer Lorne Michaels hand-picked Fey to join his staff. By 1999, Michaels had appointed Fey head-writer, and, in 2000, she became a household name by taking on the role of co-anchor with cast cutie Jimmy Fallon on the show’s satiric news segment, “Weekend Update.” Seemingly overnight, Fey’s sparkling wit, conservative suits, and fetching frames made her a geek-chic fashion icon, earning her legions of sometimes freaky fans and a Prime Time Emmy Award for comedy writing in 2002. Websites focusing on every aspect of Fey’s life and work have since invaded the net, including one devoted entirely to speculation about the origin of the scar that runs along the left side of her face (the result of a “grim” childhood injury she prefers not to speak about).

Now a full-fledged *SNL* cast member while still maintaining her post as head-writer, Fey recently inked an impressive \$4 million deal with NBC to extend her *SNL* contract and to develop a new prime-time comedy show. As if that weren’t enough, the prolific wise-cracker also just made her feature-film screenwriting debut with *Mean Girls*, a comedy to be released by Paramount Pictures in April. The movie stars Lindsay Lohan (*Freaky Friday*) and features Fey as a school counselor trying to intervene in the vicious psychological warfare raging among a group of teenage girls.

Despite all the acclaim, however, without her trademark glasses and crisp on-air accoutrements, Fey can operate in her daily life completely incognito. In the midst of feverish preparations for our cover shoot, a tiny woman bundled in a brown sweater and red wooly hat silently crept into *BUST* HQ. “Can I help you?” our intern asked, stopping her at the door. “Hi,” the woman replied in a low, almost inaudible voice. “I’m Tina.”

So, how did you enjoy all that glamorizing you did for the *BUST* photo shoot today?

It was really fun, completely brain-dead delightful. Writing is so tortuous compared to getting makeup done and then putting on an outfit and standing still. This was absolutely fun times.

What was your family situation like growing up in Upper Darby, Pennsylvania?

It was good. It was me and my parents, and I have a brother who is eight years older than me, which is kind of like having a third parent. He was very nurturing and sweet to me. My mom is Greek-American, and the other side is German and Scottish, which is where the ice-cold side to me comes from. Germans are weird, though, because they can be ice-cold and then also extremely sentimental at the same time.

Do you find that’s true with you? Do you cry at cotton commercials?

Yeah. One time when I was a freshman in college, this guy in my dorm put up lights that said “Noel” in his window. I think he was kind of a nerdy guy, and then his roommates, when he was

out, re-arranged them to spell, like, “dick” or something like that. For some reason, I just wept. I was like, “This guy is away from home for the first time and he bought these Christmas lights...” Every now and then, I just cry about something random.

While you were developing into an oddly cold and sentimental gal in Upper Darby with your three parents, were there jokes happening?

We were big comedy viewers, and I think there is a wise-assness built into people from the Philadelphia area. It’s a cultural thing. My childhood was a very good era for TV. We’d watch *Mary Tyler Moore* and *Bob Newhart* into the *Carol Burnett Show*, on this one giant night. *Saturday Night Live* was a giant thing, too. I probably wasn’t staying up and watching it for real until like, 1980, so the cast that I really identified with in terms of being able to stay up every week was that year with Martin Short and Billy Crystal and Christopher Guest.

Speaking of the show, in the big SNL biography, *Live from New York*, Janeane Garofalo said, “With the Tina Fey regime, things started turning around. I think the prevailing attitude had been that women just aren’t quite as funny.” Do you agree with her assessment?

I think it’s very kind of Janeane to say that, and she means it as a compliment, but I would not even remotely be able to say that I alone have made some big change at the show. I work with an almost entirely different group of people than Janeane was with, so I can’t really speak to what Janeane’s experience was. The show is so naturally cutthroat, there’s no time for real prejudices. If it’s funny, it’ll go on because the funniest things have to go on. We’ve also got a pretty evolved group of guys there right now. I don’t think anyone sits down and says, “I don’t want to do that. That’s a chick piece.” But I think there are different things that make men and women laugh, so when there are more women at the producing end of the show, it’s just going to come out fairer. I don’t think anyone was purposely ever trying to keep anybody down, but if you have all guys in a room, their tastes are more likely to be all the same. They’re going to naturally gravitate to the Chris Farley piece over the Julia Sweeney piece, because that’s just where their tastes are going to lie. So the one thing that’s changed is that now I’m in that room. Diversity breeds fairness. Cutthroat competition breeds fairness, too. You get in there, and you have women in the room like Amy Poehler and Maya Rudolph and Rachel Dratch performing their pieces, and the boys really have to step up to keep up with them. The comedy writers are naturally going to go where the strength is and where the heat is in the show, and they’re going to write for people who deliver for them. Right now, a lot of times, that’s the ladies. Whoever happens to be the star at the time is going to be on the show more. That’s show business. Does that answer your question?

You were kind of quick to dismiss what Janeane said, but you’ve been credited with an enormous amount in terms of the resurgence in the popularity of the show. Are there any changes you can acknowledge that have your mark on them?

One thing I always bring up, and it rarely gets printed, is that I share my job with a guy named Dennis McNicholas. I always say that, and people just don’t print it, but Dennis and I split the same job, so if there has been a change in the tone of the writing, it would be the two of us together. Maybe “Weekend Update” has changed the face of the show a little bit, and I’m actually

on camera doing that, so at least that's one thing I can pinpoint. I also feel like I've tried to drag a lot of my friends over to the show. Rachel Dratch and Amy Poehler were people that I've known for years. I'm not taking credit for hiring them; everybody wanted them. It wasn't like I was fighting to get them on.

But they were your homies, right?

They were my homies, and I think they've been great additions to the show. I write a lot with Rachel and Amy, and I write some with Maya Rudolph. Maya is fucking awesome.

The reputation of SNL as an infamous boys' club has stuck to the show for most of the time it's been on the air, but that image seems to have been broken by this group of women that you're involved with. What do you think it is about their humor that helped them break through and change public perception of the show?

Well, they're all very skilled. And it might be a little bit generational, too. They all grew up watching Gilda Radner and Jane Curtin and Laraine Newman, so they had a point of reference. Women have been doing sketch comedy longer now. More women are in the Groundlings. More women are in Second City. Women are doing their own shows and creating material for themselves. They're not at the mercy of other writers to create characters for them. It might just be a natural evolution of things.

I've noticed more writing about women on the show, especially in the fake commercials. I love the one for "Pampers Thongs" (a commercial parody depicting moms running after babies with leaky diaper-thongs wedged up their lil' butts), and the one for "Mom Jeans." (A hilarious spoof featuring a gaggle of suburban moms in matronly, ultra-high-waisted jeans, which included the tagline, "Because I'm not a woman anymore...I'm a mom.")

Thank you, I wrote it! I'm not very good at commercial parodies, so I'm particularly happy with "Mom Jeans" because I've written very few of them.

Mom Jeans is a huge favorite. Also the one for "classic" belted maxi pads. (A commercial in which female cast members sport giant, antiquated, belted maxi pads protruding from their low-rise jeans.)

Oh, that's hilarious. Paula Pell, who has been a driving force behind the show since 1995, wrote that. Here was a great example of a cultural disconnect [between men and women]. The producers sat on that commercial for the better part of a year. Paula would be like, "You guys, it would be so funny." And the guys would be like, "I don't know what you're talking about. Like, we'd build a prosthetic thing in the front?" And Paula would be like, "No, no, it's in the back!" The upside to this was that it was a big relief to know that all those times when you were 12 and you thought boys could see the giant pad in your pants, they had no idea, because these boys did not understand what we were talking about. We just kept saying, "I'm telling you, it would be so funny." Finally, it got made and it was really funny. I certainly have buzzers that go off at first, though, like, "Uh, period comedy? Lady comedy?" You don't want to be doing bad lady-'80s-

stand-up comedy or anything, but for me, the piece was more about the ridiculous advertising trend of going back to things that are more primitive and saying they're "classic."

Tell me how you came up with the concept for Mom Jeans.

I had a fire in my apartment, so I was buying jeans every day because my stuff was all dirty and smoky. And then I just bought, like, the wrong pair. I was at a Tuesday night writing meeting and I was suddenly like, "Oh God, these are mom jeans!" Maya started making up a little jingle about it, and that was it. The experience I've had is that if you write something and it comes out really fast and easy, it is probably going to work. That was really fun to shoot, because we all had just a little bit of really realistic mom belly padding, and a little tiny bit of realistic butt padding, and those short-haired mom wigs. It was very freeing.

You also had appliquéd vests!

And appliquéd vests. One of the crew guys said to me, "My mom saw that commercial, and she threw out half her jeans." I was like, "All right. We've done some good."

Ever since you and Jimmy Fallon took over as anchors of "Weekend Update," it's been more popular than it has been in years. How much of that "brainy chick interacting with goofy guy" chemistry is real, and how much is manufactured for the segment?

We do enjoy each other genuinely. Jimmy's not an idiot, but I'm the more serious of the two, certainly, in real life. I'm always the one working and typing, because I'm the one with two jobs [as head-writer and performer]. But he contributes a lot of bits for "Update." He likes the crazy, silly, unexpected bits, which I think have set the tone that anything can happen within that little ten-minute window. He's punched me in the face several times, we've established that Jimmy's wife is a black bear, and we implied last week that he and I are having a baby because I couldn't get a Plan B pill in time. Jimmy's a great partner.

I read that in 2000, you lost 30 pounds to make the transition from SNL writer to on-air personality on "Weekend Update."

No, actually, I lost the 30 pounds before, in 1998. I just started to feel really sedentary because I was in that lifestyle where you sit all the time, you order in food, and you're a workhorse, you know? So I took it upon myself to lose some weight. Partly too, I was living in New York. The weight I was at in Chicago was normal, and then in New York it was like, you go out your door and everyone's a six-foot-tall Vietnamese woman. How is that even possible? I was in N.Y.C., and I had money for the first time, and I couldn't buy clothes because nothing was fitting me, so I lost weight. And then, it's true, once I had lost weight, things started to pick up. It's probably no coincidence, but I lost the weight at a time when absolutely no one was interested in me being on television.

Have you ever looked at any of the message boards or websites dedicated to how awesome you look in glasses?

Oh—no!

Lots of sexy librarian stuff.

Right. It's an existing fetish that I'm trying to capitalize on.

I've noticed that you aren't wearing them now. Have you considered adopting them full-time?

No. I don't need them all the time, and I certainly don't need to try and be recognized. I'd rather just continue to be invisible. I wear them to go to the movies, drive a car, and read cue cards.

Since you don't read the boards, how else do your fans manifest themselves in your life?

Sometimes I meet girls after the show who want to talk to me because they're writers or they want to be writers, and I think that's nice. It's nice to be a writer who's not faceless, because it's the secret dream of every writer to not just be a writer but also to be acknowledged for it. It's like a fantasy come true.

Tell me about what your relationship is like with Lorne Michaels. He's equally admired and feared in TV Land, and has this enormous rep. But he's also been tremendously instrumental in your rise up the ranks of SNL, and he's the producer of your movie.

I get along really, really well with Lorne. Chris Rock once said, "I ain't never been broke a day in my life since I met Lorne Michaels." And I feel the same way. The man's given me nothing but opportunity. He's a really smart guy, and he's very funny, very dry. He's also extremely loyal to his writers and his friends. He's my buddy.

In interviews with SNL alums and current cast members, he comes across as this big daddy figure.

I think whatever your relationship is with your own dad, you will somehow apply it to Lorne. If you get along with your dad, you'll get along with Lorne. If you have weird daddy issues, you're going to project that onto Lorne and be like, "Lorne didn't talk to me today!" I used to be intimidated by him, but I've known him for seven years now.

What about your own relationship with your father plays out when you're working with Lorne?

Well, I'm kind of a daddy's girl; I get along really well with my father. Maybe I'm a little bit of a daddy's girl with Lorne, too. I don't know. I like to please. I like to please my daddy. *[Laughs]*

So, to complicate the family dynamics [at SNL] even further, is your husband, Jeff Richmond, still working there as a composer, too?

Yeah, this is his second year. It's actually working out really well. I've had friends that I've hired that I've been nervous about, but I've never felt that way about Jeff. He's very qualified. He did the same job at Second City, so he really knows how to do what he's doing. And the good thing is that we have the same schedule and work in the same place, but we rarely cross paths. Neither one of us supervises the other, which is good because when I was at Second City and they decided Jeff should direct the main stage show that I was going to be in, I thought it was such a terrible conflict of interest that I left town.

Wow!

We stayed together, but that's when I applied to get a job at SNL. I left, and he directed, and his show was a hit, and I got a job at SNL, and we stayed together, so it all worked out well.

Of all the women you've seen host since you've been at SNL, did any of them surprise you with their ability to be funny?

Gwyneth Paltrow was a really good sketch player. Julianne Moore, not surprisingly, was also really good. I find that people who have done soaps before are often really good, because they can work quickly and they don't have to always use a long, involved actor's process. They just hit their mark and do it. Queen Latifah was also fantastic.

During your time at SNL, what woman hasn't hosted who you'd totally love to have on?

I would love to have Oprah on. I actually know a woman who does publicity at Harpo [Oprah's production company] and every year or so, when I talk to her, I'm always like, "Will Oprah do it?" and she's always like, "As her publicist, I *cannot* let Oprah do it."

Why?

I think because it's a lot of work and risk with small returns for someone like Oprah. Loretta Lynn wouldn't do it either, but I would like that. Obviously if somebody like Meryl Streep would do it, that would be great. I was at this event the other day, and I was alone in the bathroom with Meryl Streep. We washed our hands at the same time!

So exciting! Did you say anything?

No. I made pleasant eye contact. I just thought to myself, "What? Am I going to tell Meryl Streep she was good in *Angels in America*? She knows she was fucking good in *Angels in America*. She doesn't need to hear it from me."

How famous do you need to be to tell Meryl Streep she was good in *Angels in America*?

I think you would need to be Mike Nichols to tell Meryl Streep that she was good in *Angels in America*.

As much as you push the envelope on the air, everybody knows that up where you comedy writers are lurking in your offices, the humor is on a totally different level.

Regular people would immediately pass out and then start litigation if they heard us. Comedy writers say terrible things.

Can you give an example?

I can't. You wouldn't be able to handle it.

I can handle it. I feel secure.

I had just started *SNL* when Princess Diana died. That was not treated respectfully around the office at all. It takes more to make comedy writers laugh. It's like Rush Limbaugh and OxyContin. In the beginning, it took two pills. A couple of months later, he was taking 20 a day. You need the harsher, uncut stuff. You need AIDS jokes and all the things that other people would be horrified by to make a comedy writer laugh.

Do you consider yourself a feminist?

Yeah, I do.

Since that's the case, is it tough to make women the butt of your jokes without feeling a little misogynistic?

If I'm writing about women truthfully, the way I see them, and not as some stereotype, I think it's OK. I'm not going to write a sketch where Hillary Clinton is a raving, ball-busting, secret lesbian, because that's not my perception of her. I've written things where she was the furious, put-upon wife of an adulterer, but the tone is much different because a woman is writing it. You can't be afraid to write comedy about women, because then you're just going to perpetuate the idea that women aren't as big a part of society [as men are]. You have to be able to do it, and Hillary Clinton or Oprah have to be able to laugh at themselves.

Is it different when you call a woman a slut than when a guy does it?

It probably is. It's like black people can use "the n-word" and white people should not. It's a little bit...It's between us.

Speaking of calling people sluts, I'd like to ask you about the new movie you wrote, *Mean Girls*. How did this project come about?

I got a hold of this book by Rosalind Wiseman called *Queen Bees and Wannabes [Helping Your Daughter Survive Cliques, Gossip, Boyfriends, and Other Realities of Adolescence]*. Rosalind's work attempts to explain to parents what their daughters go through between the ages of 10 and 17 in terms of dealing with other girls. A lot of what I read in the book struck me as very funny because I remember these kinds of behaviors from middle school and high school. It reminded me of the unbelievably genius, invisible ways that girls fuck with each other. You know, the way they'll say, "Oh, your hair... That's *cute*. Did you change it? No, it's cute though." The book contains anecdotes

from real girls about their experiences, which were heartbreaking at times, but also very funny. Girls will say to each other, “Well, there’s pretty, and there’s ugly, and there’s average. You and me are average.” Which, in a way, is saying, “Don’t think you’re better than me. Don’t think you’re so hot.” Girls can never say anything positive about their own physical appearances, ever. The unwritten rule is I have to say, “Oh, I have such bad skin,” so that you will say, “No, you don’t! Oh my God, you have beautiful skin!” That’s the only way I can own it. There are just these unwritten rules of behavior.

The book is basically a nonfiction parenting guide...

Right, which I foolishly said I wanted to adapt into a movie. I didn’t realize it would be so hard to take a nonfiction guide for parents and make it into a movie with a story and characters and stuff. So Rosalind was nice enough to let me and Paramount Pictures and Lorne Michaels option her book, and then in the spring of 2002 I started working on adapting it into a movie. I worked on it through that summer, rewrote it over the following winter, and then we shot it this past fall in Toronto.

Will audiences be rooting for the mean girls or rooting for the nice girls? Do the nice girls get mean?

Part of the movie is that there is that mean girl part in all of us. We all have people who are above us who treat us like we’re crap, and no matter who you are, you have somebody beneath you as an underling who you wind up hurting at some point. It’s more about recognizing that part in all of us and trying to rise above it. But the mean girls are pretty tasty. They look fantastic from what I’ve seen, and they’re pretty enticing.

And your protagonist, where does she fall into that whole spectrum?

She’s a girl who comes in as a blank slate because she’s previously been homeschooled and was living abroad, so she doesn’t have any understanding of these unwritten social rules. She comes in, starts out with one set of friends, and then gets caught up in a more glamorous set of friends. These are some of the ideas that Rosalind talked about in her book, because sometimes you can get caught up in a group [of people] who aren’t even nice to you. They go to cool places and they have nice things, so it’s a popular group of friends, but they don’t even really trust each other or mutually benefit from sticking together.

Your premise reminds me of the movie *Heathers*, the way those girls hated each other and were best friends.

Right. It’s a more hopeful version of *Heathers*. Nobody dies. *Heathers* is an awesome movie, and it has a weird connection to *Mean Girls*. Mark Waters, who directed *Mean Girls*, is the brother of Dan Waters, who wrote *Heathers*.

The whole family is hooked on mean teen girls! In an interview you recently did with the *New Yorker*, you said that in high school, you were a mean girl.

The thing that I remember about me in high school is that I was very caustic. If I liked a guy and he liked some other girl, I'd turn all of my rage against that girl who'd done nothing to me except go out with a guy that I liked. I think back on the wasted hours I spent just talking and picking apart various girls that had done nothing except maybe be better-looking and have the boyfriend that I wish I had. I would try to make people laugh at other people's expense. I was always trying to craft the most cutting possible comment about any situation. By the time I was 20, I really felt like other people saw me and thought, "Oh, that girl is kind of funny, but she's really scathing and mostly just mean." I didn't like feeling that way. I actually made an effort to cool it a little bit by the time I got to college. Even now I don't like to feel like I'm actually in personal conflict with anyone.

I've also seen you describe yourself in high school as a "super nerd."

I was an activities nerd. I did school paper, jazz choir, yearbook, and I was an AP student. I'm an extremely obedient person. If there is one word to describe me, it would be "obedient." I'm a good student, and I listen to management. In every job I've ever had, I've sided with management. So the snarky-ness, for lack of a better word, is the only form of rebellion that's really presented itself in me.

I don't know if I would ever think to use "obedient" as the defining word to describe you. I watch you on "Weekend Update" going out on a limb every week, and you don't seem obedient.

If you worked with me, you would see it. They could say, "Be here at two and stay all night." And I'd say, "OK, I'd better do that." The current [Bush] administration is the only place in my life where I question authority. I'm very law-abiding and don't drink or smoke. I'm incredibly boring except when it comes to joke-writing time. When I was high school and college age, I lacked curiosity. I've never tried any drug once. The bulk of my growing-up life, Ronald Reagan was president. Nancy Reagan said, "Just say no!" and I just kind of took that at face value.

Hugs, not drugs?

Hugs, not drugs. And I don't really feel like I've missed out. But I'm 33 now, and I'm actually trying to learn more. Now that I'm later in life, I'm training myself to question authority more.

What does that mean? Do you go on crack binges now?

I'm on crack binges! *[Laughs]* No, I'm not. It means now I aspire to educate myself more about what's going on around me. About nine years ago at Second City in Chicago, we had a secret Santa thing and someone gave me this 800-page autobiography of Leni Riefenstahl [the Nazi filmmaker], which I was fascinated with. The thing I remember taking away after reading it was the way she would say *[adopting a German accent]*, "He was the president and he was the leader of my country, and I was in the country, and what was I to do? They told me to make films." I feel I

have a responsibility not to be Leni Riefenstahl, and to question the leaders of my country and to see if I want to go along with them. That book was important to me because I was like, “Yeah, you have to know what is going on, you can’t just make your art with blinders on.” Which is not in any way to imply that I’m the Leni Riefenstahl of fake news. I’m not as talented or as Nazi-friendly.

Going back to Rosalind’s book, she talks about these really specific groups that teen girls fall into. She talks about “queen bees,” “sidekicks,” “bankers,” and “floaters,” and the list goes on and on. Did you identify with any of these profiles as your M.O. in high school?

Everyone likes to think they were a floater [someone who got along with everyone] and almost no one was. I may have been a banker. Bankers are the ones [who] traded on information. I didn’t have any girl that I was particularly in the service of, but I definitely enjoyed the gossip, even about people [who] were nothing to me. I was just like, “What do you know? Gimme it!”

Is the banker game of hoarding information something you can identify as part of your personality now? It seems like part of the job at SNL.

Sadly, yes, it’s part of my job to bank information to later form into mockery. That sounds terrible. What a terrible job!

If something were to come up in the news about, say, Suzanne Pleshette, would you have a bank of information about her to draw on?

She’s married to Tom Poston, they married late in life, they liked each other before, but they were both married at the time. Give me another one!

This is fun!

I try to be informed. *SNL* had a writer just a few years ago, during the election, who wrote a joke implying that Dick Cheney was kind of homophobic. I said, “Actually, you know what? Dick Cheney’s daughter is gay, and I think they’re relatively cool with it.” So you do have to bank information, because you wouldn’t want to take a swing like that and be wrong.

Your humor over the years has been described as “hard-edged” and even “cruel.” Is being mean a necessary part of being funny for you?

I hope not. I’m really trying to move away from it. A lot of times, when we’re getting an “Update” ready, we’ll count and go, “Mean, mean, mean—too many. Take one of these mean ones out. Put a lighter one in.” Because I don’t think you can have a long future in that. You can be mean and caustic in your teens and your 20s, but if you keep it going, by the time you’re 40, you’re just going to be a cunt. You’re just going to be an old cunt. I’m trying to find more silliness, more political satire. I need to have a couple of other moves up my sleeve.

John Waters interview (2007)

BUST Magazine, February/March 2007



FROM THE EARLY, gross-out cult films like *Pink Flamingos* and *Female Trouble* to the later, more mainstream escapades—like *Hairspray* and *Cry-Baby*—esoteric music has always been central to the John Waters cinematic experience. So it should come as no surprise that the director/actor/writer/photographer has branched out yet again as the musical curator of bizarre holiday-song collections. Hot on the heels of last year's irreverent *A John Waters Christmas*, New Line Records is releasing *A Date with John Waters* just in time for Valentine's Day; a love-song compilation crammed with raucous rock 'n' soul, crazy novelty tracks, beloved Waters' film alumni, and more. Here, the iconoclast talks to *BUST* about records, rowdy behavior, and, of course, romance.

The Valentine's album is amazing! Are all the songs from your private collection?

These were all in my private collection, pretty much. Actually, *Tonight You Belong to Me* [by Patience & Prudence] was the very first record I ever had, and I stole it. I was with my mother. She turned her back in the drugstore, and I just put it up my coat. I was about eight.

I have to tell you, my favorite song on the album is *All I Can Do Is Cry* [by Ike & Tina Turner]. When she starts screaming, I just wanna throw myself on the floor.

Ah, yes. Me too. I love that record. She goes so insane. Tina was such an influence on Divine and me. She and Ike would play at a place in Baltimore, and they would come in a beat-up green mini school bus, and she had a little bit of a mustache and an old mink coat and Spring-O-Lators [heels] and processed hair, and Ike looked so much like a pimp, and they were so great together. We were obsessed with her.

Do you have a favorite song of all time?

I've put them all in my movies. If you cut through the soundtracks from the beginnings of my movies, they've always been my favorite songs. They're usually rockabilly, country novelty, and really down-and-dirty rhythm and blues. Plus, I *love* rap. I just got Snoop's new [record]. I'm also *for* K-Fed. Who I really wanna date now is Kevin Federline. I hope he gets the kids.

There's hardly anything ever written about your love life...

Oh, I know.

Do you try to keep it that way? Are you seeing anyone now?

Let's say this: I "see" some people and they're friends, and they're regulars, and they're very great friends. Maybe they're...I don't know...friends with benefits?

Sure.

Know that term?

Absolutely. Do you believe in true love forever?

No...well, yes. My parents have been married for over 60 years, and they love one another very much. But I think it's not the kind of love they make movies about. It's a different kind of love than the passion you're talking about in a Douglas Sirk movie. So, do I believe in true love? Yes, but I think real love is caring about people and growing old and all that kind of thing. [Do I believe in] an insane love like when you first meet somebody and you're incredibly turned on and wildly in love for a hundred years? No! I don't think that happens, but it turns into something else that's probably a lot less taxing.

Is that kind of love something you're looking for?

I don't think I'm looking for it, no. I have a really good life as a single man, but I've certainly been involved with three major people in my life. I'm friends with all of them now. Though there were times when I wasn't. I've had my heart broken, like everybody.

Since your album is called *A Date with John Waters*, I was wondering what your ideal date would be like.

That's complicated, because I have lots of different types. They'd be funny, they'd be smart, they would've been arrested once in their life, and they would not want to go to a movie premiere with me. If someone says they've never seen my movies, it's like saying "I love you," to me. I always thought a glamorous date would be robbing a 7-Eleven with somebody. But not in real life! I wouldn't do that, but I love the idea of doing it and then running and then, like, having a couple of drinks and counting the money and having sex. That would be a fun night.

That would be the best.

Well, I hope you have a lovely Valentine's Day. Play *All I Can Do Is Cry*, and act it out alone in your bedroom!

Big Freedia (2020)

BUST Magazine, June 23, 2020 (last cover story)



As the foremost ambassador of New Orleans bounce music, Big Freedia is the rule-breaking, ass-shaking, noise-making pop star we need right now.

By Emily Rems

A LOT HAS CHANGED for Big Freedia since we first featured her in *BUST*'s April/May 2010 issue. A gay man who prefers she/her pronouns, Freedia (pronounced as in *Kahlo*) was making waves at that time as one of the major forces reviving New Orleans' club scene in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina through the medium of "bounce" music. An electrifying performer with a booming hip-hop flow; a flamboyant wardrobe that blends slick menswear with ultra-glam feminine hair, nails, and accessories; and a stage show with a reputation for whipping crowds into a sweat-soaked twerking frenzy, Freedia was just the force of nature the city needed to recover from nature's fury. And now that she has risen to prominence internationally as the "Queen of Bounce," her life-affirming, high-energy sound is the perfect prescription for a world in serious need of some cheering up.

Characterized by up-tempo beats, heavy bass, and a call-and-response lyrical style that obsessively dwells on ass-shaking, bounce is a style of rap that was born in the New Orleans

housing projects in the late '80s and early '90s. Freedia got in on the act as a backup dancer for one of the genre's transgender pioneers, Katey Red, starting in 1998, and went on to record her debut studio album, *Queen Diva*, in 2003. But participants in the nascent scene were scattered by the hurricane in 2005. Freedia was among the first to return home and get back to the grind. During those initial five post-Katrina years, she was an interior designer and party decorator by day and a bounce impresario by night, often playing 6 to 10 shows a week.

That same work ethic is on display when we meet up to do the photo shoot and interview for this cover story in Brooklyn just a couple of days before the entire country shut down in the grip of COVID-19. None of us knew the extent to which life as we knew it would halt. But Freedia was driven to make the most of her short time in N.Y.C., meeting up with Team *BUST*, making an appearance on *The Wendy Williams Show*, and guesting on *The Breakfast Club* with Charlamagne tha God in just two days before jetting back to New Orleans for the funeral of her cousin, which she was arranging via cell phone from her makeup chair just before the photos for this story were taken.

Still done up from her cover shoot in bejeweled eye makeup and long, blond curls, but otherwise dressed down in jeans and a T-shirt, Freedia joins me at the conference table at *BUST* HQ and we start reminiscing about when she first graced the pages of this magazine 10 years ago, just after the release of her second album, *Big Freedia Hitz Vol. 1*. "I used to be in the clubs seven nights a week," she says with a weariness that betrays her 42 years. "Yeah, every day of the week, a different club. I also decorated the clubs. I was always finding new ways to keep bringing people back, doing the same show, but flipping it around a million different ways, putting a different spin on the party. I've really worked hard to create this platform for bounce. I made New Orleans connect to me in a way where we're like best friends. In New Orleans, people would hire me for birthday parties, sweet sixteens, graduation parties, funerals, and weddings. I had everything on lock for a long time. I was that go-to person. If they wanted to get their club poppin' and they wanted to get some numbers in there, they hired Big Freedia."

What Freedia's club dates offer that others lack is a warm, inclusive, and safe-feeling environment where her robust following of female fans are comfortable dressing sexy in teeny-tiny shorts, shoving their asses in the air, and shaking them for hours while Freedia commands them to "drop it, drop it, drop it / work it, work it, work it." Any party where that is going on is one many men will gladly pay admission to attend, which pleases club owners, but requires some additional effort. "A lot of that success [drawing in women] had to do with me just having good crowd control," she says. "I've had boys try and act out and I would embarrass them in front of the whole crowd. I'd tell them, 'Don't be no creep! Let the girls have fun and shake! If they want you to touch them, they'll let you know, but you ain't gonna touch them while I'm on stage.'"

This being the case, it's no surprise what her answer is when I ask Freedia if she's a feminist. "Am I a feminist? Definitely," she says. "Listen, I love to protect everybody. I love to protect their space,

whatever they believe in, and whatever they want to do. Women, men, gay, straight—whatever people want to do, I'm down to support it.”

It's clear why she's been so beloved by so many for so long. But even once Freedia became known locally as the bounce queen of New Orleans, making ends meet was still an issue. “I was booking my own gigs, giving these people prices, and I wasn't making no money,” she says. “I'd get two, three, four hundred dollars, maybe five. But I had to do multiple shows on multiple nights to survive and pay my bills. Like, I might get a \$300 gig, but my light bill might be \$250 [laughs].”

Those paychecks started to grow, however, when two career breakthroughs came along that launched bounce into the mainstream and established Big Freedia as its undisputed worldwide ambassador.

The first was an article titled “New Orleans' Gender-Bending Rap,” that appeared in *The New York Times Magazine* in July of 2010 and featured a huge photo of Big Freedia and Katey Red. In the wake of that major story, Freedia scored her first national TV appearance on *Last Call with Carson Daly*, nabbed herself a prime slot at SXSW, and finally broke the color barrier. “One day, I was decorating a club in New Orleans,” she recalls of the summer of 2010, “and these two white guys was jogging up the street while I was pulling stuff out of my trunk. Then one of them was like, ‘You're Big Freedia!’ I was like, ‘Oh my God! How do you know who I am?’ At this time, I didn't have any white fans. It was just still local, Black, New Orleans. I hadn't started traveling. So, when those two guys knew who I was, I was like, ‘Girl, I am arriving already!’ You know? [laughs].”

The *Times* article also attracted the attention of cable music station Fuse, which tapped Freedia to star in her own reality show, *Big Freedia: Queen of Bounce*. The show ran from 2013 until 2017. And if anyone was born to have a reality show, it was the magnetic Freedia and her entourage. *Queen of Bounce* created an instant demand for her live shows outside of New Orleans and introduced fans to Freedia's inner circle—first and foremost, her mother Vera. “I was 12 when I told my mom I was gay, but my family knew when I was little. I was five, being a little queen and wanting to be Wonder Woman for Halloween. My family used to have meetings about it and they'd be whispering about it. But my mom supported me, she was my backbone,” Freedia says, recalling the days when she was a young Black boy named Freddie Ross just trying to figure out who he wanted to be. “My mom was like, ‘Well, you're too big to be this certain type of queen. You need to be your own queen. You don't have to put on heels and fake boobs and a butt. Do it your own way. I want you to be a queen and be the best fucking queen that you can be.’ And that's what I did. I went out and continued to be myself. I was a big, young queen with a purse, doing stuff nobody else was doing. They used to pick on me in school. They'd be like, ‘You fat sissy, you fat fag.’ And my response was to say something nice. They'd be like, ‘This bitch crazy. This bitch just said, ‘Thank you,’ when I called him a fag!’ Well, yeah. Because I *am* a fag, and I'm a proud one. You're actually hurting yourself 'cause you the fool, calling me names because you're insecure about your own damn self.”

“I did have to beat a few people up,” she continues. “And I got my ass whooped. But I fought because my momma would say, ‘You go out there and show them who you are. Stand up, be a man, and fight their ass.’ I was scared to death. I’m a church boy, I’m a sissy, I was terrified. I didn’t want to fight those boys and have my eye black or my lip busted. But, growing up in New Orleans, and being Black and gay, you have to fight. My mom made me fight back.”

It was Vera’s fighting spirit that became the focal point of Season 2 of *Queen of Bounce* that aired in 2014. In it, Freedia revealed that her mom was battling cancer, and the main conflict of the show became Vera’s desire to see her child’s career take off in venues all over the world, while Freedia, as Vera’s primary caregiver, felt the pull to stay closer to home. Vera passed away in April of 2014 at age 53 while Freedia was away performing. And the subsequent mourning period, complete with a traditional jazz funeral through the streets of New Orleans, was documented by the show as well.

Shortly after Vera’s death, Freedia released her third studio album, *Just Be Free*, and the show changed its name to *Big Freedia Bounces Back*, shifting focus onto her legal troubles and love life. In 2016, Freedia was indicted on felony charges of theft of government funds after she failed to report her rising income from 2010 through 2014 while still receiving a post-Katrina housing subsidy. She pled guilty, was given probation and a fine, and through it all, leaned on her partner Devon for support.

A shy, mumbly guy whose televised dialogue required subtitles, Devon has now been Freedia’s rock for 15 years. It’s a long run for any relationship, let alone one complicated by fame. “We had some really amazing times when we first started dating,” Freedia says when asked about their relationship. “We would be in every club together, hugging and kissing and dancing on each other. We’ve had great moments and we’ve had bad moments. We’ve had ups and downs. But we love each other and have been by each other’s sides through a lot. It seems like every time I lose somebody, he loses somebody, too. We are very connected in many different ways. Devon’s birthday is also a day apart from my mom’s. And they’re the two people I have the most love for. When I first started talking to him, he wasn’t afraid to be seen with me. No other boy I’d met was like that and that’s why I fell in love with him.”

The second breakthrough in Freedia’s career that raised her profile once again came towards the end of the reality show’s run, when Beyoncé called Freedia at home and asked her to add some authentic New Orleans flavor to “Formation.” “I did not come to play with you hoes!” Freedia can be heard bellowing over the song’s introductory bars. “I came to slay, bitch!” Recounting to her hair stylist on the show what it was like to get that call, Freedia told him, “I literally gagged. I knew when it came out because my phone started blowing up! One girl came up to me and was like, ‘Bitch! You almost made me pull all my extensions out!’”

It was the perfect segue out of reality-show notoriety and into pop stardom. Soon, other heavy hitters in music wanted to collaborate, resulting in memorable features for Freedia on Drake’s chart-topping 2018 track “Nice For What,” and on Kesha’s 2019 single “Raising Hell.”

Unfortunately, however, Freedia did not appear in the videos for these songs, an omission prompting many of her fans to give those lead artists major side-eye. But when I ask Freedia about it, she seems eager to set the record straight. “Sometimes things just don’t work out schedule-wise, and that’s what happened with Beyoncé and Drake,” she says. “When Beyoncé shot her video, I was on the road. And with Drake, they had already shot everything. My part came last to give the song some extra spice. Fans just think, ‘Oh my God! Y’all didn’t put Freedia in the video!’ Well, I wasn’t available for the first one, and the second one, I was added at the end. I’m fine with it—as long as the checks clear [*laughs*]! I’m forever grateful to Drake, Beyoncé, Kesha, and everyone bold enough to work with a gay artist,” she explains. “There are other artists I also want to work with, but I feel like they may not work with me because I’m gay. So, you know, I gotta take what I can get in this game.”

At the time of this interview, “the game” was playing out in Freedia’s favor. Her new EP, *Louder*, dropped March 13 to glowing reviews and the video for the title track was close to hitting 1 million views on YouTube. Her memoir, *God Save the Queen Diva*, was about to come out in paperback. Her documentary film, *Freedia Got a Gun*—about the death of her brother due to gun violence and her advocacy for getting guns off the streets of New Orleans—was about to premiere at the Tribeca Film Festival. And a summer tour with Kesha was a bright spot on the horizon. Then the coronavirus swept across the world and put everyone’s exciting plans on hold.

But if Freedia is in any way deterred by this global crisis, you wouldn’t know it by following her on social media. Maybe surviving Hurricane Katrina made her into an especially resilient performer. Or maybe it’s just her natural instinct to lift folks’ spirits when they are down. Either way, Freedia was one of the first pop stars to begin doing regular performances on Instagram once social distancing took effect, and has been “bringing people together through the power of ass,” ever since. On Friday nights, she performs to a backing track, either in an empty club or in her backyard, flanked by vigorously twerking dancers delivering a virtual dance party called “Big Freedia’s Friday Night Shakedown.” It’s a fun way to spend the night, especially for those still learning the fine art of making their butt cheeks clap. But it’s also a fundraiser for The New Orleans Disaster Relief Fund and a virtual tip jar to help keep Freedia’s touring crew fed until this crisis is over.

Then on Sunday mornings, she switches over to something more spiritual and broadcasts “Big Freedia’s Kitchen: Gospel Sundays,” from her home so fans can watch her sing along with gospel songs and cook authentic Southern Sunday brunch. On one memorable Sunday, she appeared makeup free, wearing a satin hair bonnet, banana-print shorts, and a bright yellow shirt emblazoned with a banana that read, “So A-Peel-Ing!” As two tiny dogs begged for scraps at her feet, Freedia cheerfully showed over 1400 Instagram viewers how to make steaks, omelets, breakfast potatoes, and cinnamon rolls, taking breaks to sing hymns she knows by heart from her time as a choir director.

She’s so sweet and caring and comforting, it’s hard not to feel better watching her do what she was clearly born to do—bring people together and make them happy. As Freedia sings out in praise,

shuffling back and forth purposefully between her stove and her ingredient-filled kitchen island, I'm reminded of one of the last things she told me during our interview, when I tried to probe her about how she can reconcile being a devout Christian with being an out and proud gay man.

"Nobody can mess with my religion. I know God. We have a relationship and that's just that," she'd said confidently. "God knows everything, even before it happens. So, he knew I was gonna be this way. I just do what I do. And I continue to give God the glory because all these things don't just manifest and happen in my life on their own. There's gotta be a higher being that's doing this. I gotta keep pushing because he's the one pushing me."

"There are a lot of gay people who go to church," she continued with a sly smile. "Most of the time, the choir director or the organist at a church is gay, and I was that one. I was the gay choir director and we had a gay organist and we were good friends. We've always been a part of church music, from Baptist songs, to gospel, and then into hip-hop, we've always been a part of it. So, you know, I'm just gonna keep on doing what I do."

Marc Maron interview (2023)

BUST Magazine, August 22, 2023 (Last *BUST* interview)



Marc Maron had a reputation for being cranky. This was partly due to the curmudgeonly tirades he'd go on sometimes while hosting his weekly podcast, *WTF with Marc Maron*, which began in 2009 and is still going strong. It's also partly because the 59-year-old frequently appeared in films and TV shows as a pissed-off Jewish guy with a short fuse—like in *Almost Famous* (2000) and *GLOW* (2017–2019). Mainly, however, this persona arose from the acid-drenched standup routines he'd been performing around the country since he started out in comedy 36 years ago.

But then, something truly tragic happened. In May 2020, Maron's partner, indie filmmaker Lynn Shelton, died of acute myeloid leukemia at age 54.

Two days later, he released a podcast in which he explained what had happened and emotionally cracked wide open in a truly brave and harrowing expression of grief that made everyone within the sound of his voice—especially those also grappling with loss—feel a deep kinship with this man who seemed to understand his listeners' deepest pain.

In the ensuing years since Shelton's death, Maron has metabolized his loss into a compassionately observational style of comedy that's perfect for the post-COVID era. And he is arguably doing the best work of his career. His latest standup special, *From Bleak to Dark* on HBOMax, is a

surprisingly beautiful meditation on sorrow that is also, somehow, brilliantly funny. “She passed away,” he tells his audience solemnly. “It was the most horrible thing that’s ever happened to me... and I’m sure to her.”

“This stuff about grief, and about Lynn passing—that was stuff I was really wrestling with,” he tells me via Zoom from his kitchen table in Glendale, CA. “After *From Bleak to Dark*, I don’t know exactly where I need to go thematically. I have an inkling, but I’m starting to find that being an emotionally stunted, childless man with a few cats, my life doesn’t change much— know what I mean?”

As if on cue, a handsome gray and white cat noses his way between Maron and the camera, obviously ready for his closeup. “Come on, Charlie,” he says to one of his three feline roommates, pulling him close. “Charlie’s an asshole all day long. In the middle of the night, he’s on my face. He’s sticking his nose in my mouth and purring at 4:30 in the morning. He’s just full, kitten asshole.”

It was actually Maron’s love of cats that helped him find intimacy of the human variety again after Shelton’s death. “Kit came around months after Lynn died,” he says of his current girlfriend who works at the Pasadena Humane Society. “She was a cat person and kind of nerdy. So, I responded to her email. Neither of us really expected anything out of it other than companionship in these dark times. But it just kept going. And over time, I’ve surrendered to it, and that’s where we’re at. She’s a very good person.”

When I ask Maron if he’s a feminist, his answer suggests that he’s striving to be a good person, too. And for him, that means improving his relationships with women. “I believe I am a feminist,” he says. “I’ve been a bad guy. But even when I was a bad guy, I didn’t see myself as not a feminist. I just had emotional problems. I feel like I am definitely a feminist now, though, because I’ve learned how to not be such a toxic asshole. I was so emotionally insecure that I did a lot of damage to myself and to women I’ve been in relationships with. I was volatile, insecure, jealous. There’s a toxic male spectrum that goes from insensitivity to murder and I think most men are hovering between insensitivity and mildly emotionally abusive. So, for me, it was about owning the pain I caused. More than anything else, I shifted to finally having the proper amount of empathy toward women, as opposed to just seeing them as people reacting to me.”