

Cinderella's Slippers

BY

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THESIS

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Summary

Cinderella's Slippers is an abandoned young adult ballerina novel that unexpectedly develops into a self-effacing “failure” memoir. The digressional tendencies of *Tristram Shandy* become the backdrop of a sardonic female version of Woody Allen mishaps in this coming of age close-up lens of repeating big mistakes. The author draws on her ethnic Jewish background to sprinkle humor over a complicated psychology as she ruminates over being a not quite successful New York City musical theater actor, fiction writer, singer, graduate student, and the role she most often returns to, the girlfriend

Past unresolved blunders and real-time foibles form a litany of unfinished business coupled with a nagging fear that neither project will be successfully completed. The writer begins embracing the content pulling her away from writing and everything goes – from self-fulfilling foot shootings to associative rants about her suicidal cat. Ultimately, the neglected fictional protagonist and the memoirist confront their dissatisfaction with the other’s retrospective projects in an awkward attempt to create a final scene together.

..the playwright gives us only a few minutes out of the whole life of his characters. He omits much of what happens off the stage. He often says nothing at all about what has happened to his characters while they have been in the wings, and what makes them act as they do when they return to the stage. We have to fill out what he leaves unsaid. Otherwise we would have only scraps and bits to offer out of the life of the persons we portray. You cannot live that way, so we must create for our parts comparatively unbroken lines.

Stanislavski, *An Actor Prepares*, 257

Prologue

Prepare for the dizzying effect of changing narrators, a fictional story bathed in the nonfictional moments surrounding the writing of it. This experiential disorientation is a children's game; you will be blindfolded, spun, and guided to the donkey, the moment before the tail is pinned. After an exhilarating twirl, I will gradually reveal a collection of fragmented fictional missteps and the memories accompanying their creation. I will fill in Stanislavski's broken lines of offstage text, the writer's backstory before writing, the moment before the reader feels a puncture of pity and fear. The ingredients of the writing brew are the force of this book.

Jena is my fictional alter ego, the star of an unfinished novel begun twelve years ago. I birthed her unintentionally. Accidents happen. Not every fiber of creation has a future. Not everything blossoms and grows. Some births merge into spreading fungi, a hangnail that hangs and cannot be ripped without cutting the skin. Leaving her unfinished highlights her cracks and authorial doubt, both the creator and the creation's infinite desire to be completed. Let us hang together with Jena for a while.

Until she grows too unwieldy and begins to pull the skin.

False Start

I don't know the moment before I got ruined. All the harnessing, critiquing, scolding by mentors, parents, teachers. I had so much potential. Raw talent. But now I'm not young so raw is just raw, not a prize. Now they tell me not to sound banal. Be a little sharper.

This is how you get ahead. This is why you go to school. To become an apprentice is the best thing that could happen. Let them mold you. And figure out which critiques to let in – which ones to ignore. If only someone would take me under their wing.

I spent four years in acting school, completed fifteen writing workshops, one screenwriting course, a public relations internship, a local television internship, an leftist magazine internship, thousands of ballet and jazz classes, four years of tap, two years of opera lessons with Conchita Antuano, a diva who wore oversized pink bows on a crop of thick, Italian black hair and sometimes cried during my renditions of Mozart's arias, one literature degree, one writing residency, and so far, seven years pursuing a PhD in English. Perhaps the time for being an eternal student has passed. This could be the moment before I produce something. But the moment before this very moment that I am attempting to create – the moment before I sit down to write – continues to take over the sitting part. Poe was onto something when he called for a piece of writing to be read in one sitting. I wish he had left similar directions for authors.

Black Swan Panic

It's my own fault. I sat on this piece of shit novel for seven years and someone else thought of it. And that fucking Jewish WASP Portman performed it. Maybe they

stole it out of the garbage. I've gone over this in my mind, and the most likely cause of similar plotlines is the cliché dancer tropes I've incorporated. I thought I was being original. But apparently, I write tropes: Crazy ballerina. Check. Insane parent. Possible check. The virgin thing? Hmm, that one is a bit disturbingly similar. A crazy parent who paints obsessive portraits of his ballerina daughter? Uncanny similarity that points to possible plagiarism. But there are differences you'll read. My dancer is not a cutter. I also deleted the lesbian scene. (Maybe I should bring it back). And my dancer's father has talent. He is a professional painter, not a stage mother who paints out of pure craziness.

What are the odds that after I ripped up yet another chapter that Darren Aronofsky happened to be digging through a Chicago area garbage can and taped together pieces of what would become his next big thing? I'm not post-punk or badass enough to be the plagiarizing Kathy Acker. He copied. He copied. Somehow Aronofsky would have had to bring the taped collage of my book to a special underground meeting in some speakeasy in the East Village with pre-selected writers carve out the best way to steal my idea and make a profit.

It's possible. Did someone hack my computer? Did I accidentally throw out a USB drive? If the story takes me another seven years, Black Swan might be a distant memory. But I have to finish this book in order to get the D in the Ph so I don't end up just a Ph in a creative writing program. And I have to finish soon. Phhhh. I don't want to be Phhh(uuck) D. But I'm not changing it now.

Making a Golem

Jena emerged from the following raw ingredients:

- Dust accumulations gathered from my apartment
- Clay pulled from an old Plato set

Golem + Psychological Profile

Jena keeps going. She can't stop. Unlike me, she pushes through her days and nights, forced into regimented, purposeless discipline. Tall, boney and blond, unlike my ragged auburn hair and voluptuous frame, she possesses the discipline and proficiency I lack. Her existence is a constant residue of static wavering in presence on the page, but her drive pulsates; it vibrates through my fingers as I press heavily on the keys. Devoid of inspiration, zombie girl calls me to continue writing in a negative trance. With a vacuous internal life, she continues the moment that I cannot and when she falters, when her story cannot finish itself, I fill in with the moments with my life. There's just the problem of sitting down...

Insert Picture Outline of Jena Here Catching Her Own Reflection

Jena's daddy used to paint her, and it screwed her up. Jonathan, her father, strove to catch her aura, sustain it, and imprison it. He saw light around her, colors emitting her being, the kind of esoteric glow you see before a young woman is taken by the world around her, the moment before she's ruined.³

Even when her father wasn't drawing her, mixing the paints on the palette, dabbling the blue onto the whites of her eyes and then the smallest touch of yellow for a hint of light reflected in the pupils, he was conjuring a way to place her on the canvas and keep her confined to a two-dimensional space of his creation. She's used to it now and catches her reflection in mirrors, a puddle, a piece of glass. Sometimes she glimpses the

³ In Chekhov's play "The Seagull," the character Trigorin, a famous writer, seduces Nina, a young novice actress. Before damaging her, he claims to have "an idea for a short story: a young girl, like you has lived by the lake since childhood; she loves the lake like a seagull, and is happy and free like a seagull. But a man happened to come by, saw her and, for lack of anything better to do, destroyed her, like this seagull here." (Act II)

outline of her face in the shape of a cloud. She sees fragments of herself everywhere. Maybe that's why she can't see anything.

Jena Fails The Stanislavski Method

Jena has highly articulate arches, her extensions are always ninety degrees; she can easily execute five pirouettes. Not only is her skill commendable for a ballerina, it's rare. She knows this, her teachers know this, and there's a block. She's technically a better dancer than all of her peers, but she can't perform.

As her insecurities increase, she threatens to murder this project⁴ but only with the ammunition of stilted fiction. How does this unfinished fictional narrative sustain a threatening force?

My acting training relied heavily on the Stanislavski Method. Attempts to apply his rigorous theatrical techniques to Jena's characterization have been lukewarm at best. Jena has botched the Stanislavski Method test in the following ways:

... "you should not try to express the meaning of your objectives in terms of a noun. That can be used for a unit but the objective must always be a verb" (Stanislavski 123)

Every objective must carry in itself the germ of action.

(Jena is passive)

Never lose yourself on the stage. Always act in your own person, as an artist. You can never get away from yourself. The moment you lose yourself on the stage marks the departure from truly living your part and the beginning of exaggerated false acting... (177)

(Soon after creating my alter ego, I lost hold of her. Creation is disconnected from creator= substitute acting for writing= false writing)

⁴ Literary characterization is very close to method acting.

Consequently we have three impelling movers in our psychic life, three masters who play on the instrument of our souls... mind...will... feeling. (247)

(Jena lacks inner life. Golems are mechanical by trade)

... the coincidence of emotion memories with the sensations called for by the part. The analogy which results from this coincidence draws the actor closer to the person he is portraying. At such times a creative artist feels his own life in the life of his part and the life of his part identical with his personal life. This identification results in a miraculous metamorphosis. (285)

(For the reasons above, Jena fails to be the leading lady of her own life)

The following fictional chapters are strained with a clichéd gloom, a certain kind of overwrought fiction performing itself. The narrative commentary such as “hedonism was his God” pushes the borders of satire; however, the text is a serious attempt during the earlier part of this project, my beginning writing years.

The Funeral

Five-year-old Jena stood by her mother’s gravesite a moment longer, lingering after family and friends had left the scene. A whisper of fall blew through the September air and pushed through Jena’s lavender sweater and skirt. She shivered as the wind swayed her small frame. Her father stood feet away from her, angling from behind a tree. He was always doing odd things like that, crouching and hiding around corners as if he figured himself a leprechaun.

She wondered if she could find her mother and peered down into the deep hole in the ground where the oak casket lay. Her father should have been there to explain it to her but instead he was creeping from behind a tree. For a moment, she thought about jumping down, opening the casket, dragging her out, and bringing her back to the hospital. Maybe the doctors had made a mistake. Maybe she was alive and struggling to breathe. Maybe if

she had jumped down into the hole she would be more alive than existing somewhere in the unknown, in her father's aesthetic eyeballs. She was a macabre little girl. If you looked a little closer, her white skin almost glowed, a ghoulish iridescent mark of something otherworldly.

"Sweetie, it's almost time to go," her father called, peeking from a few tangled branches.

Moving away from the gaping hole in the earth, Jena plunked down on the dirt parallel to her mother's grave and began digging. Her skirt and legs would soon be caked in mud. No one was there to scold her. The earth was moist and it was good to do something after standing so long amongst all those somber adults in black. Jena glance at the mud splattered upon her sky blue frock. That morning, her father had decided the child should replicate her mother's effervescence, long and flowing, and dressed the girl in light colors that matched the day's soft summer sky. He motioned for her to smile upon being hugged by gesturing towards the corners of his mouth.

"No one wants to be around a dreary face, even during a funeral," he had said. "It's terribly Goth, especially when you're blond."

Jena understood she should be soft and fragrant, like the depiction of children in the Renoir paintings along the stairway in the house, a submersion of femininity, nature, and delicacy. The relatives bought it, but the little white-haired fairy just wanted to be dirty. A distant aunt wearing a dark hat with a nautical brim had approached Jena before the ceremony.

"You look so beautiful today. Just like your mother. So calm, so serene."

Jena had wanted to spit in her face but smiled instead.

As she dug, the dirt violated her fingernails and hands. For a moment, she stopped to observe the destruction. The earth was almost wet as if it had rained; the dew had built up for the occasion, a sweet and sour mix of bonnets, hats, and dismay. Jena piled the dug up dirt next to her as the hole deepened and widened. Soon she had excavated almost two feet of dirt and she stood back to see the wreckage. It was deep enough so that she could push her way inside with a little effort. Her white patent shoes blackened as she began kicking until she could stand without wobbling.

Her father walked over to her with his hand over his mouth. He was wearing lavender as well, part of a pastel family that her mother had advocated for during her last months. His jacket and pants were light brown, and he sported an oxford and jacket saturated in light purple dye. He sighed and stalked over to Jena.

“Why did you do that? Did it make you feel good?”

Hedonism was his god.

“I am digging to get to mommy.”

“Don’t worry, sweetie. We’re going to be fine.”

“I want her now. Is she in the box down there?”

“Just her body is in the box. We have her spirit in here,” he said pointing to his heart. Even at five, Jena caught the cliché. A glimmer of light twinkled in Jonathan’s grey eyes.

“But maybe they made a mistake,” said Jena.

“Who, sweetie?”

“The doctors.”

“Honey, mommy was sick for a long time.”

“I know. It’s not fair. She was good.”

“I’m good too. Just wait there for a moment. Daddy wants to sketch you.”

“I just need to look in the box once to make sure. You have to help me. It could be a mistake.”

Jena peered down the hole, resting her eyes on the brown casket. She imagined if she closed her eyes and waited, something could be done to fix this.

“Just wait here, sweetie. I have not wanted to draw for weeks. It will help us eat whatever we want.”

He was in his manic state, a mood that would recur more frequently in the years to come.

“Just another moment,” he said, grasping a piece of paper and pencil from his jacket.

She didn’t move because she was afraid of having to eat frosted flakes three meals a day, so she froze in the small hole she had created. It began to drizzle and she hunched over shivering.

“Damn this rain. I’ll just sketch the basics and fill it in when we’re home. Rain never hurt anyone. This is good. This is very good,” he said, waving his pencil in the air.

He began sketching her contours, her face, and her feet in the hole.

“You’re being very brave. When I finish, we will have this picture forever and then I’ll make so many more pictures. We’ll never have to worry.

The Letter

It was 3:30 p.m. and her father sat at the wooden kitchen table waiting for her,

looking straight ahead with his large watery blue eyes. He rested his hands on an envelope addressed to Jena with an insignia in the corner of a male dancer lifting a ballerina in arabesque. His daughter walked in and threw her backpack down on the yellow linoleum highlighted in white snowflakes. She found her father in his mahogany bathrobe and striped pajamas, shoeless. He was drinking red wine in his favorite silver King Lear mug. His lips and tongue were stained cherry-red.

“Daddy, what are you doing?”

His eyes were puffy as if he’d been crying.

“Why aren’t you dressed?” she persisted.

He had been in and out of daytime drinking for years. It came and went, and although she worried at times, alcohol wasn’t a serious threat. It wasn’t his main problem.

She saw the letter being protected under his palms and decided it best to let him speak first.

“I’ve been very sad today, Jena.”

“It’s been ten years since mom died. I think you need to try.”

“Do you know what today is?” he asked.

“It’s April seventh.”

“It’s the day I proposed to your mother.”

Jena felt herself shaking, but she would control her voice. He was talking around the situation in that charming way again.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t know,” said Jena.

“You wouldn’t know, honey. Sit down.”

He gestured towards the chair. As if controlled by another force outside of her own will, she placed her body in the sitting position, staring directly at her father across the table. His blond ringlets were flying every which way.

“The thing is, there’s this letter that arrived in the mail today – today of all days.”

And he held it up in the air like it was a crime to receive a letter, as if she had no right to have any contact with the outside world. The letter was an intruder.

“Daddy, can I see it?”

“Your eyes look so slanty and hopeful – like your mother’s.”

Jena looked to the multi-layered snowflakes designs on the kitchen floor.

Christmas had never been joyful at the Wilson’s and the snowflakes were reminiscent of a false festivity. Every year she had wished for a single gift unrelated to ballet, but after gently removing the red and green shiny wrapping, she consistently found a pair of toe shoes, a leotard, a bun covers, a dancer memoir.

“Before you open this letter, I want you to think about what you want. What you truly want.”

He took her hand. His palms were dry and cracking and a little shaky. Her pale fingers became limp. And as if to extricate themselves from his grasp, they played dead. To further entrap them, he cupped the top of her hand with his other hand, which was becoming moist.

“We only have each other; we are the only family to one another.”

And he handed her the letter, watching her expression. He was always watching.

“Open it,” he said.

“Now?”

He nodded.

Jena knew her father had been depressed for many years, but in the last few months as the inevitable acceptance letter was expected, his moods had become more volatile. She often heard pacing in the wee hours of the morning, and he had become even more excessive in his food, his drink, and his spending.

Jena opened the letter and deferred her scholarship to The American School of Ballet for another year, hoping he would take notice of her suffering and give her the green light to escape. He never did.

The Phone Call

I was accepted to Tisch School of the Arts drama program after creating an independent study in high school and living a monologue for five months. At age seventeen, it was a bit of a stretch to lament about a boyfriend's jock strap being "mangled and manipulated" in the wash, but somehow, I maneuvered enough umph to act the hell out of the piece regardless of my inexperience with jock straps, boyfriends, and monologues.

"I'm surprised," my mother said after the phone call. "They called and they want you. You're not very trained."

This was true. I was equally surprised.

I wonder why NYU didn't tell me personally. If I didn't take the opportunity to learn the craft of acting at one of the best theater schools in the country, I'd regret it, my mother explained. Regret is frightening at that age. Your entire life clinging to the

margins of a sad poem because you didn't go to drama school. So I went. I could decide if I wanted to be an actor later.

Holding onto Fiction

I've been told that parts of fictional sections are novice writing. They are. Jena was constructed at a younger point in my literary career and the text feebly warming up around her reflects a labored, sentimental style similar to gothic, young adult literature. I'm holding onto the fictional sections to reveal a full portrait of how a certain kind of text is created out of a particular moment. I could not have written the memoir scenes without the process of my first failure. Dear Jena, I have faith that my mistakes with you lubricated the birth of my memoir.

A Day in the Life

Three weeks later, Jena regretted deferring her scholarship to be with the moody narcissist who had no business raising a child. He once admitted, "I always wanted a child to play with. Now that you're growing up, I have no idea what to do with you." And he would laugh and throw his hands up in the air.

This night he had another of his depressions, and she no longer possessed the energy to calm him. His pacing the hallway had interrupted her sleep for six nights, and she was irritable. She had sung him lullabies, told him fairy tales, and comforted him with kind words into the wee hours of the morning like she was his mamma. This was the kind of thing he would ask her to do, and he pleaded with her until it was done. The past few nights he had been inconsolable.

She had taken all of the pills from the medicine cabinet and hid them under her bed in the morning before school when the charming bastard was sleeping, but he must have had a secret stash somewhere. That was going to be her one contribution for the evening. She thought taking this precaution would have given her repose, but there it was again -- that damned pacing and whimpering. Decidedly, she had locked her door and played her Mozart CD on repeat, to go over her ballet routine in her mind. Tonight he would suffer alone. She had a math test and then two dance classes, point and choreography. Her ballet teacher had pulled her aside out of concern for nearly dozing off in class, and this was the kind of conversation that could earn her a bad reputation. Jena knew if the late nights continued, she would be stamped as “the troubled dancer girl.”

Jena was obsessive about her ballet routines. She was the best in her class and would remain so. The best for a town of only 14,000. At the time, she didn't understand her geography was elevating her talent. The scope of the world was not yet evident.

Repeatedly going over the steps helped her prepare for total control of her movements. She could contort her body in ways that guided gravity; mastery was the goal. If she could picture producing the movement precisely, she would have the ability to mirror the exact rendering from her mind to her body. Normal girls fantasized about the hottest guy in class or going to Senior Prom; Jena fixated on using her body as a perfect instrument, which she imagined would lead to acknowledgement, fame, and independence. She would leave Traverse City and make it as a New York City prima ballerina. She was model beautiful with all the stylistics of a repressed WASP, which was very in: light eyes, white hair, pale skin, and a perfect, straight nose. Boobless. With her

skinny physique, she could afford wear slinky shirts and not look slutty, an important touch. Her looks and technique would get her somewhere and then her life would follow accordingly. Rehearsals and ingénue roles would fill her every moment. If while marketing herself at parties and signing autographs men came with the territory, she would deal with it. Eventually, she would attain close friends, but for now, her focus was pure technique. She would become the essence of technique. Perfect life= molding body into the perfect pose.

Lying on her white-laced comforter, Jena conjured images of stretching before rehearsing her role as Cinderella at Carnegie Hall. She bent into a full splits on both legs, laced up her orange tinted toe-shoes, flexed and pointed her arches, and flowed into a port-te-braux. Her approval seeking understudy – the slightly rounder, shorter, and less apt version of herself – powdered her nose and applied one more coat of lipstick for the last time before she appeared on stage to make her debut. Instead of being a rival, this girl was more of an admirer, a younger sister willing to revere and protect what she one day hoped to become. Reviewers with small pads and pens filled the front row anticipating Jena's dazzling debut. The review read:

Jena is stunning. Her ballet is athletic, unique, and awe-inspiring. She's the youngest ingénue whose technique is truly magical, other worldly.

A special seat in the left balcony was saved for Baryshnikov. But as the introduction began, Jena became paralyzed, unable to move, catatonic. She could not move from her dressing room to the stage.

She jerked awake and exhaled, rubbing her eyes. The yellow hallway lights from under her doorway revealed he was awake, the godforsaken peacock with his feathers all

a dither. Her digital clock read 1:30 a.m. Her father had stopped seeing a psychiatrist and hadn't answered his calls. She had heard Dr. Franz' last ominous message a week prior.

“Jonathan, it's Dr. Franz again. No doubt you've received all my messages. I'm going to assume that since you failed to show the past two sessions that you are terminating. This is not advisable. Take care of yourself. Please.”

The doctor had refused to prescribe more Xanax, so he had stopped going and instead resorted to alcohol and over the counter medicines, food binges, and all night stints with the television. Jena had seen this phase before; the cycle repeated itself about every three months, but her father had never stopped therapy. He would apologize, vow he was going to become healthier, and then appear on the mend long enough for Jena to anticipate his next attack. He was pleasant from three in the afternoon on, a few hours after he rose from slumber, until about 9 p.m. Then the darkness would cover him and last until morning. First it would begin with an obscure comment. “It's odd when the gulls land on our lawn and just remain there.” He would then pontificate on something more abstract like how small humans could hardly compare to the infinite universe, sigh, remark on the vastness of the stars, and then fall into some sort of existential crisis that wouldn't leave his mind for hours – sometimes days. The whole masturbatory progression could involve a form of substance abuse or a tearful monologue, but if she was lucky, he would paint in a frenzied distraction. But it was only luck if he didn't insist on requesting her as his subject.

Jena darted under the covers and pulled them over her head, focusing on her choreography. How could she extend her arabesque to a full ponche and ensure her torso was somewhat lifted? The requirement was intense balance. She thought of ways to gain

more focus by adding Omega three's to her diet and drinking more water. She turned into a perfect ninety-degree arabesque promenade when there was a bang on her bedroom door. She shuddered.

“Jena, I know you're avoiding me. I want to talk. I need someone to talk to,” said her father.

“Daddy, go to sleep. It's late. Please,” said Jena, sitting up with her knees to her chest, pulling the covers closely around her frame.

She forced an image of her encore as a stagehand brought her a bouquet of dark red roses. He knocked again.

“If you go to sleep, you'll feel better in the morning,” she called.

“The truth is I can't sleep without my damned Xanax.”

“We'll call your therapist in the morning.”

“It's not working. The guy is a quack.”

“You think locking your door is going to keep your problems out, living in your little bubble? It doesn't work. You can't shut me out. I'm your father.”

Jena sensed that he was more manic than usual or possibly drunk. Perhaps he had found the hidden pills. Maybe he was in real trouble this time. Should she call the police or an ambulance even? But then if the police came and found that he had taken something, he would surely be labeled an unfit father and then where would she go? Foster care? These fits didn't last too long, although lately, they had been more frequent. He continued knocking. He was pushing her too far. Jena, Jena, it's time to flee the coup.

“Jena, I need to talk to you.”

“Daddy, please leave me alone. I need to sleep.”

“Why should you sleep if I can’t?” he asked.

Jena threw on her jean jacket, pink socks and white tennis shoes, opened her window and climbed into the barren garden. It was almost October and the wind from Lake Michigan slapped her face. Lonely crickets chirped and a rabbit scampered across the sidewalk. Her feet crunched into the dry leaves as she ran down the street, away from the house five blocks to the water. Stars lit her way in contrast with the night’s blackness. She heard her father yelling her name and quickened her pace. She would escape until his turbulent mood had lost its power; it always did.

The roads were desolate save for one lone car driving slowly with its brights on, a necessary precaution because of a deer problem in the area. Jena dodged into the street before the car passed her on the road; a Jetta without plates nearly crossed her path. When it came to a screeching halt, she dashed into nearby bushes. A figure of a man stepped out of his car. His shadow was long and narrow reflecting against the car’s blinkers alongside a gravel path lit by the glow of the moon.

“Little girl? Hello? Are you okay? Hello? Are you hurt?”

Jena could feel her heart beating wildly and she was holding her breath to ensure no noise would lead the stranger to her. He walked closer to the shrub and crouched behind it, away from the road where his car was flashing its blinkers. He popped on a flashlight and shone it in several different directions.

“It’s not safe, you know, to be out this late alone. Hello? Are you in some kind of trouble? If you’re hurt, we should get you checked out.”

Jena wondered which fate would be her demise, a potential crazy man on the road or the crazy man she knew. The man was tall, almost six-foot-two. He wore a long grey

trench coat, a brown hat, and square glasses, a getup reminiscent of a 1950's detective. His voice sounded soothing and concerned, and out of sheer desperation, she wanted to answer him. Only townies ventured out to the water at this time of night and by the looks of his unmarked car, he didn't belong. She rarely spoke to strangers, but in this vulnerable state, she found herself uncharacteristically curious. If her life would end now, she was ready.

“All right, well, I'm heading out now. Please be careful, whoever you are.”

The flashlight clicked off and she heard footsteps moving away. She emerged from the bushes before the man reached his car, wanting to be found.

“Mr.?” she said.

“Hello? Do you need help? Did I hit you?”

The man walked over to Jena. She stood with her shoulders back, ready to confront the strange man.

“I'm okay,” said Jena.

“Why are you out?” he asked.

It was difficult to discern the man's age; he was possibly in his forties although round sacks pulling skin under his eyes could have been the result of age, hard living or a lack of sleep. His hair was dark and cropped neatly to his head. As he bent his neck forward, a pair of thick dark brows arched as if to assist his vision. His beady eyes widened while resting on Jena's open, pale face. He was engaged with her youthful fear, as many men had been and would be.

“I – didn't want to be home,” she said.

“I see,” he said.

“What are you doing driving around at this time of night?” asked Jena.

“Well, I’m a bit of an insomniac. Nothing terrible. Just every few months I get stuck on something in my head. It takes me a day or two to work it out.”

“Do you have family?” he asked.

She shook her head. She thought of Cheryl, her father’s red-haired sister from California although she had only met her twice. Cheryl or aka “the bloodsucker,” telephoned when she needed cash. Now that her mother was gone, the family income had receded because her father painted and sold his work when he was “in the mood” so Cheryl no longer phoned. Her aunt was prone to crying fits, so Jena did not miss her calls. Cheryl was rumored to possess a thirty-year-old son who was being beaten by his girlfriend. So much for a first cousin. Otherwise, her maternal grandmother resided in Charlevoix, and refused to come to the house because of her father’s “selfish disposition.” Sometimes Jena traveled there for a few days but the adults would have little to do with each other since her mother’s death.

Jena thought better of sounding too alone.

“I have some family, but I don’t want to go there now,” she answered. It was a half-truth.

“Well, we’ve got ourselves a situation then. You can’t be out here alone.”

“I was going to wait a few hours until things- relax- and then head back.”

“Head back where?”

“Nowhere good,” said Jena.

A dog howled and the night echoed silently. Jena pointed her right gym shoe and cracked her neck. There was no light except for the stars, and the waves murmured.

“May I offer you some advice?”

“I don’t know,” she said. All the advice she had ever received had been wrong.

“Whatever is going on, it’s not good. You know that. That’s why you’re out here. My guess is that you can’t change the situation. I strongly suggest you find a way out, however you can do it. How often do you end up at Lake Michigan in the middle of the night?”

“I shouldn’t even be talking to you. I don’t know who you are.”

“I think this situation is beyond pretense. But if you must know, I’m a doctor of sorts.”

“I should go...”

“I used to be a school teacher but for some reason, lately, I keep finding people who are in trouble, like you, and I help them. I’ve been writing their stories, what I know of them. It sort of helps to make peace with the past. I’ve had some struggles of my own. Would you like to see the book I’m putting together? Right now it’s sort of rough. We could get a cup of coffee and figure out what you’re going to do. Make a plan of sorts.”

“I can’t.”

“I understand,” he said.

“Why aren’t you teaching anymore?”

“My methods were a bit – controversial. Private schools are funny that way. You’re there for thirty years and then one day, poof, they hire a new board president, a few parents don’t like your ponytail- I used to have one – and you’re let go. But this isn’t my story today.

“Look, I have a letter in my pocket from someone I met a few weeks ago,” he added.

The man pulled out an envelope addressed to a Mr. Stone.

“Go ahead, have a look.”

Dear Doc,

Well, I made it in one piece to Santa Fe. I found a roommate and a bartending job. No gigs yet, but I think I'll get there. I've been more inspired so maybe it's the warm weather. I don't know. I'm almost finished with a new song and it's not half bad. I'm glad we met in the bar that night. I guess I just needed someone to listen. I did like you said and didn't ask permission to leave. I just jettied out. At first I thought it was cowardly to just leave a note and scam but now I think it's the strongest thing I ever did. Eventually she'll see I did both of us a favor. I'll send you a tape of my song [Oh my god, I've been writing this story so long that technology has changed since I started] when it's finished. I hope you're sleeping these days. Waiting for my song and smiling a little more.

Jake

“You think I'm like him?” asked Jena.

“These people, they were like living dead,” he said. “I was there at the right place and the right time. I don't think a young person like you can survive this sort of scenario for long before fading away. I gave them permission to let go.”

She gazed suspiciously at the man whose bright brown eyes seemed like mere reflections in the dark.

“Is there somewhere you need to go? Maybe I can help you get there. A bus station or something?” he said.

“I wasn't planning on leaving – I'm waiting to hear about something.”

The wind began humming, and as she peered into the man's dark eyes, his black pupils widened. As he inhaled, his body seemed to fuel itself and expand with the distant sound of loneliness, reminiscent of a singular bird's cry, arousing a feeling Jena remembered – maybe from a dream – but couldn't articulate. She backed away from the man. There was something off about him, but she couldn't place it.

“Thanks. I'm going now,” she said and sprinted off into a nearby forest preserve where no one would find her. Out of breath, she headed towards the wild center of the woods through dozens of Oak canopies. Dashing onto the winding gravel path, she sprinted through the darkness, running by hooting owls and scurrying rodents crawling about the damp, mossy grounds. The same lonely wail echoed in the trees – possibly a coyote. She hoped nature would not avenge her disruption. The tall pines stood steadfastly, stoically announcing their presence as the wind swayed their branches.

She stopped suddenly spotting a wooden bench intertwined with creeping ivy. She would sit for a moment and decide what to do. Maybe daddy had calmed. How would she perform in dance class tomorrow? Perhaps she could miss school but that meant being alone with him and discussing the evening's events. She would be forced to apologize or tell him that everything was okay again. But it would happen again. She was starting to think sensibly. The strange man had taken an interest in her and now she was interested in her own life, if only for a moment.

She would get out of Traverse City, waitress at Windows of the World, an expensive fine dining restaurant on the lake, save, and get the hell out of town. She would start her life over in New York as a dancer; she had outgrown the dance program in

Traverse. New York, the artist's utopia, would save or kill her. But the strange man was right; she was the living dead. Her father would have no choice. She would leave.

It was close to 4 a.m. and Jena left the forest and tiptoed back home, taking care that the strange man wasn't following her by sporadically looking over her shoulder. The air was thick with silence. No doubt her father had relaxed a bit by now. The front door was open and her father awaited her, groggy eyed, sitting like a waxed statue on the living room couch. It was almost morning and vengeful chirping birds reminded the world that night was slipping away. Jena stood over a velvet green chair opposite him, hands cupped around the back of the chair. Fight or flight, Jena. She was an alert deer who would not trail off into the dark road again.

"Where have you been?" he said after several moments of silence. "I was terribly worried. I don't know what I would've done if something happened to you."

"I was out. You're losing control again."

He sighed.

"Jena, I would never hurt you. I was a bit delirious, but you must know, I would never, ever do anything to hurt you. You know that, don't you?"

He was charming all over again. His wide smile spread quickly; he had splurged on an extra whitening at the dentist. His yellow curls were still golden from the summer although a few additional wild grey hairs had sprouted by his forehead. If dimples could bounce, the corners of his mouth were like a basketball game.

"I don't know what to think anymore," said Jena feeling her armor rust and crackle into pieces.

"I know this is my fault. I'm a terrible father, a failure."

You are feeble; you are weak, she thought.

“No, no, it’s just that when you get like that- I don’t know what to do. It’s so late when it happens. You seem so lost and angry.”

“I am angry.”

“Why? Because of mom’s death?”

She was stepping into murky swampland, but she needed to know.

“I am an artist. From age five, I was a prodigy. Do you know what a prodigy is?”

“Dad, I know this.”

“Just listen. You haven’t heard it all. I was a prodigy like you are with ballet. But I never had to work at it. It was just this incredible skill I possessed. I inspired everyone. Did you see Jonathan’s latest drawing? He’s a boy genius. That’s what they’d say. Everyone loved me. I was adorable, a darling little boy, and the affection of so many people. Not bad looking either. You got your looks from me. In any event, I got better with time. When I took art classes, my teachers couldn’t instruct me; I always surpassed them. I made my way in the art world quickly. By my late teens, I was making a name for myself. Then when I turned 20, I met your mother.

“A relationship and a family put a lot of strain on an artist. There are certain demands that come with it, unavoidable demands like time, focus, and money. My art suffered. Not all at once. Slowly, very slowly at first. It was no longer acceptable to live on meager earnings, to stay out all night with my fellow colleagues carousing, sharing revolutionary ideas”—

“Why are you telling me this?”

“There is a point. I fell out of my rhythm and took on a day job doing meaningless tasks. I promised myself that if I took on easy odd jobs, my mental energy would be saved for my work. But it wasn’t happening. I painted less and less. I fell into my first depression at twenty-two and since then...”

His voice trailed off.

“You’re blaming mom for everything?”

“Your mother is the best thing that happened to me. You know she was a unique creature, more beautiful than anything I could ever create. Maybe that’s what killed me; I don’t know. Ha, I could never match her. You two look so much alike; sometimes it’s uncanny. People would stop to look at her on the street. I was so proud, and would never regret having her in my life. Your mother was so full of life.

“What I’m saying, you have to be honest with yourself and know your limitations. I have never known mine. After my first breakdown, I didn’t know if I would paint again. I carry that with me all the time, the fear that I won’t be able to live up to the way I was, the way I worked, and what I produced. With every painting comes a catatonic fear. I should’ve known that would happen given my weak constitution. You make choices in your life and have to realize what you’re going to give up.”

“And the pills and the drinking? What are you giving up there?” Jena challenged.

“You are my joy, my hope, my light. I’m sorry that I’ve let you down.”

“No daddy, it’s all right. I’m not disappointed.”

She peered over at her father’s face. A blue, iridescent hue from the sky shone harshly on his wrinkled face. His somber lips were turned downward. He had been ruined before she had come into the world. That would not happen to her.

Daddy Issues

⁵I met Dr. Frank when my father pulled me out of my fourth grade history class. Suddenly there was this thing that was so important that he felt the need to walk into my class and drag me out to see a quack. He was the crazy one, not me.

My father, the allergist who lost karaoke contests once a month, crept up behind my teacher in his velvet jogging outfit and loosely swooping fanny pack to inform Mrs. Ehlert that he was taking me out of class. My temperature increased as I glanced at his hair that was mostly all gray and thinning, flipped to the wrong side – a sure sign that he had been rushed in the morning. Disheveled was his middle name, but today he must have taken extra care to look especially spastic for my classmates, I thought, looking to the ground as we shuffled about my teacher’s desk like beggars.⁶ I could feel drops of sweat creep down my armpits as I followed him into his newly leased light blue Lexus. He refused to buy a new car because cars bored him after a year or so and it made him feel like he was saving money to lease a car, even if he really wasn’t.⁷ I squirmed into the car’s leather seats and Dad turned up the volume of some flowery Mozart CD that was

⁵ My mother recently found this chapter in the attic, (why I left it there is possibly some form of cognitive dissonance) and said my father would be very upset. I promised to look over the chapters and be more reflective, potentially rewrite them so they were not in the voice of a caustic thirteen-year-old girl, but it seems that when it comes to my parents, and especially my father, I am still a thirteen-year-old girl. Do these footnotes help? I don’t know what will change the way I remember the past. It is critical, cartoon-like, and not loving enough. If memory is a stain, I have not found the right detergent to erase – or at least – to scrape parts of the gumminess stuck onto everything to reduce my thirteen-year-old self-serving memory. It is sticky, gross, ugly.

⁶ It is probably transparent that I don’t want to be hated by my family, and also, that I am striving and failing at painting a fair portrayal of the way this day occurred. And if I was self-conscious about the way my father looked then, I was also deeply dissatisfied with my own appearance. Brace faced, a few pimples, a very thin nose and face, and a bone structure so small forcing an overtly angular almost metallic presence; these are not the features of a beauty queen. I was closer to an underfed bird with large, seeking eyes, a long neck, and a certain awareness that the problem of a particular female sharpness would stay with me for a long, long time, a threat to young boys and men alike.

⁷ He probably did save money by leasing, but at the time I thought it was foolish. Now possessing an older Honda Civic and recently having to put \$1600 into the darned thing, I understand why leasing is ideal.

chanting nauseous birds.

“I’m nauseous, dad.”

“When you can afford your own car, you can pick the music.”

“At least turn it down?”

He swerved onto the expressway, passing two cars ahead of him on the entrance ramp, nearly killing me in the death-trap passenger seat.⁸

“Where do all these God damned people come from? This place has so many fuckin’ people,” he said. “And by the way, what the hell are you wearing?”

I was draped in my usual shredded short jean shorts and tight tank top, wearing no makeup with my greasy brown hair pulled into an erratic ponytail.

“When you pull your hair back like that, it makes your nose look big,” he said grinning. Although my stomach dropped a few notches, I did not react.⁹

“Where the hell are we going?” I asked.

He didn’t respond. It was his little game ever since I had turned eleven, pretending not to hear. His excuse for ignoring me was that he had kids because he thought they would be like toys – something to play with.¹⁰ “Teenagers are difficult,” he would say when I was a teenager, shrug his shoulders and walk into a different room. He still walks into the other room when I annoy him.¹¹

⁸ I’m sure I thought, “It’s possible I could die,” but he probably wasn’t near killing me. Mom, you know you don’t like it when he drives aggressively either.

⁹ He did say this phrase to me at some point; I’m not certain it occurred that day in the car and most likely, he did not say it then. But somehow, it fits here. The memory wants to fill in what the memory wants.

¹⁰ My sister has run with him, biked, played tennis, and hiked. I have danced and biked with him. Was it enough?

¹¹ And I do annoy him. Sometimes I say, “Dad, do you think the shape of your head has changed? It looks like a peanut today.” Or, “Dad, something is hanging from your nose.” Or, “Dad!” and then when he responds, I don’t say anything. Other times I say, “Dad, what’s the water temperature?” because I know he knows the water temperature on most days. I should say, “Dad, why don’t you call more? Dad, are you listening to me? Dad, why don’t you read fiction? Dad, why didn’t you understand my interview on

“Mom is going to kill you when she finds out you pulled me out of school. I had a math test that I studied really hard for,” I said.

He was unfazed.¹² He never knew when I had a test and hadn’t attended a single conference.¹³ It was surprising he knew where the school was.¹⁴ Like a maniac, he stayed on the shoulder of the road the entire way to Frank’s office, a mere 20-minutes that felt like eternity. It was only in the last five years that I learned driving on the shoulder was illegal when stopped by a police officer; I thought it was a lane for being in a hurry.

“Sydney charges three dollars a minute. Can’t be late,” he said.

In the eighties that was a lot of money.

If an officer stopped him, he would talk his way out of a ticket by claiming he was heading to the emergency room to see a patient.¹⁵ As I pondered if it was possible for him to be a bigger putz, he turned up the Mozart another notch and let out a loud, curt fart. I tried to open the window, and as if in anticipation, he immediately turned on the childproof locks. Wisely, I thought it better not to mention the stench for fear of

Bookslut? Dad, did you ever envision your life as a single man? Dad, how much money have you saved exactly? Dad, how do you motivate to stay in shape like you do? Dad, why do you spend so much time alone these days? Dad, have people let you down to such a degree that the only solace you can take is in mom and reading history and nature and biking and gospel music? Dad, what is the real reason behind your quitting so many synagogue choruses? Dad, this footnote became so long that it merged onto the next page and now I don’t like the way it looks anymore because I have oh so many questions so many questions. Dad, how do you remember all the constellations and the names of plants? Dad, why did you stop paying attention to me when I turned twelve? Dad, do you think I’m a failure or a success? Dad, do you really think all of my boyfriends have been weasels or just plain scared of life? Dad, how is it that you’re not scared of life the way every man I meet is? Dad, how is it that you face responsibility over and over again? Dad, is there any chance of you reading this book and not ignoring it or reading it too hard so that the words stick to your ribs like cholesterol, the bad kind that you take Lipitor for? Dad, this is my love letter to you but it’s just so mangled and unkempt like a wiry birds nest in an unfortunate urban setting that it will probably read wrong to you and blow away, broken yolks and sticks and mesh because I have read you all wrong. This footnote is dedicated to you dad. Because I don’t ever tell you and you rarely tell me, I love you.

¹² I don’t know this.

¹³ Another exaggeration. Sometimes he struggled with remembering the names of my teachers and friends.

¹⁴ This one might be true.

¹⁵ My father speaks officially to official people to get his way. It works.

retribution and simply held my breath and glared.¹⁶ He smiled, pleased with himself.¹⁷ Finally, we stopped and I followed him into a small, brown medical building. I halted at the door.

“Tell me why we’re here or I’m not going in. You’re being a dick.”

The situation called for rude language, I think.¹⁸

My parents had talked of Dr. Frank for years, but so far, I had never met him. Whatever he did to them, I didn’t want to know.¹⁹ My mother was always yelling at my dad for not doing something and he continued not doing things, like helping in the house or picking me up from ballet class.²⁰ Dad squinted his already slivery eyes, which made him look like a face with only lips and a nose. He looked at me with those hard, tiny pupils of his, as if he thought I could give him an explanation for what had gone wrong with our relationship. Was he confused? It was a rare moment when we made prolonged eye contact. Maybe he had indigestion. (I had observed a jumbo sized empty bag of potato chips in the back seat).²¹

“Your mom wants us to work on getting along. You are causing problems in our marriage.”

Frankly, I don’t give a damn, I thought. Besides, I knew if this Frank guy was as good as he said he was, he’d be onto his game in no time.

We buzzed into the square brown building and were invited to sit on a nasty grey couch. Instinctively, we chose to sit on the farthest corners of the couch, away from each

¹⁶ My mother seriously objects to mention of my father farting, but I don’t think it dehumanizes him. Farting performs the aftermath of eating, a normal human function.

¹⁷ Thinking on it, my father rarely seems pleased with himself.

¹⁸ I’m not sure any situation calls for being rude, really.

¹⁹ Total hyperbole. I did want to know, actually, but I didn’t think I’d ever find out.

²⁰ He was probably working.

²¹ This still happens.

other. Frank spoke first.

“Hi,” said Frank.

“You’re my parent’s shrink?” I asked.

“Does she know why she’s here?” he asked my father.

“I’m here because my dad felt it was appropriate to take me out of school without telling me why,” I answered.

Frank sighed.

“Is this true?” he asked.

Dad wiped his glasses with a torn dirty Kleenex from his pocket until they squeaked.

“Oy, Dan, you’re such a turkey. Why do you do this crap? How do you feel about your father?” asked Frank.

“I don’t know. He never talks to me.”

“Do you know why he brought you here today?”

Dad shifted his legs into a pretzel.

“I guess because my mom will divorce him if he doesn’t treat me better.”²²

“Do you hear that your daughter doesn’t think you care about her?”

“I care,” he mumbled.²³

²² I don’t remember if I said that, but I was thinking it.

²³ This chapter is somehow unsatisfying. I know he cares, but I also know that we don’t always communicate in a way that is satisfying.

Daddy Issues Two

I used to come home from grammar school to my father and sister wrestling in the hallway on the second floor while calling each other silly names. He was holding her down with her arms over her head, and they were both yelling.

“What the hell are you guys doing? Dad, get off her!”

“Mind your own business. I was told to do this,” he answered.²⁴

During the rough housing, my mother was in the bedroom with the door firmly shut, watching soap operas or reading a book.²⁵ After mouthing off, there were times I was hit or punished with yelling. I would grab my book bag and run to a friend’s house to finish my homework, sometimes working on projects late into the night. Sometimes my father would follow me in his light blue Lexus, parking lights on, gliding quietly, slowly through Northwest Evanston as I darted through front yards, bushes, and trees – racing to a friend’s house to get away from the noise. A few times, he would knock on my friend’s door, and I was forced to return.²⁶

I would feign deafness when he pushed on my friend’s doorbell, and my stomach would tighten, as my friend’s mother would call for me, “Your dad is here to pick you up!”

Her quiet attic with white carpets, beige walls, and a pastel couch set up a quiet, controlled environment. Studying calmed me. I knew that when I turned in my

²⁴ In the 70's, the hold down method was used for children as a calming technique. My parents had also participated in EST where my father was encouraged to perform his inner child, and he ripped the room apart during a role play game. Ah, the 70's.

²⁵ Sometimes my mother would shut the door and become hermetically and safely sealed.

²⁶ I once thought his following me a kind of stalking. Now I’m reconsidering if he was worried about my well-being. I don’t know the answer.

homework, I would get the right answer and a confirmation that I was smart and good. Projects temporarily stop chaos.²⁷

A Poem of Almost Abandonment, Almost Closeness

Once my father took me to San Francisco for a father daughter vacation, and when I did something that he didn't like, he threatened to leave me there.²⁸

He didn't leave me there but he did walk to a large park where I couldn't find him for twenty minutes.²⁹

When I was twenty-eight, my car was booted, (my third parking ticket hadn't been sent to the correct address) and I had a job interview the day I went in to pay the tickets. The city refused credit cards, and I called my father for help. "Don't bother me. I'm busy. It's your mess," he said into the phone before offering the dial tone.³⁰ A Chinese couple observed me crying and lent me \$300 in cash. I remember returning the money in the back of their small nail salon on the North Side of Chicago one week later and thinking, "Working class immigrants are nice, like angels."

²⁷ The year I turned twelve, my mother began diagnosing everyone in the family with ADD, excluding herself. She was encouraged to do this at the Jewish day school she once taught at for thirty years, and received an award for great service due to diagnosing the most students that she hung on her bedroom wall. She is now a retired schoolteacher. She wants to diagnose me with something, but I will not let her slap a label on me. To keep her quiet, I once ingested Adderall for a week, which hindered my concentration greatly. It's true that no one in my family can find a purse, glasses, or phone as they're leaving the house. ADD, distractibility, absentmindedness, whatever. Call it what you will, but we're a bunch of spasmodics who are not very good with the physical world, that is, stuff.

²⁸ I most likely needed to go to the bathroom or demanded to stop for food. Or we didn't agree on the agenda for the day.

²⁹ Is it appropriate for an adult child to blame abandonment issues on a father that merely threatened to abandon?

³⁰ I don't know if his reaction to my car problem was a delayed reaction from my running out of the funds after I graduated college. I wasn't aware of the amount in the account and slowly went through the money over five years, but once I was out, I had no savings and had to return home, tail between legs, head down, etc. You will read about this later.

When my sister and I fought in the car, he would stop and pull over to the side of the road to “take care of us.” My mother would walk away and he would “brain us,” pushing his fingers into our temples to make us think.³¹

“You look like me in a dress,” he would tell me.³²

After a breakup, he says, “Go out and have fun. Don’t think about it.”

When I am upset about something, he’ll look at me and say, “What are you gonna do? Worry about it and drive yourself nuts?”

When I was truly sick, he would call the best specialists or take care of me himself. My dad is a pediatrician and allergist and the best diagnostician I’ve ever known.

He explained the backstory of all the constellations when I was a child at our summerhouse in Northern Michigan.

He once took a dump on the side of walking trails during a hike in the forest and wiped his ass with a used Kleenex from his pocket. I would also do this.³³

³¹ When I brought up the issue of his being too physical, he claims my sister and I were putting everyone’s life in danger and potentially provoking an accident by yelling, scratching, and biting in the back seat.

³² Some people say I look just like my father. I equate this to possessing manly features or being “all nose.” Apparently, I was so ugly when I was born with black, slicked hair, slits for eyes, and being “all nose,” that my grandmother cried and ran out of the hospital. I don’t know if this is Yamshon folklore or the damned truth, but I have carried the weight of this ugliness through my bubbling laughter.

My father's brother was killed in a car accident when he was a boy, and his parents made him plan the funeral.

A few years ago, a therapist instructed my father to call me once a week for a brief, cursory check in. It was decided that was the sort of connection we should try. My family attended five double sessions, and the \$300/hour therapist doled out some practical advice:

“Just give her a call and let her know you're thinking about her,” said Lucy the therapist with the short hair and ambiguous gender/sexual affect.

My father crossed his legs and cracked his neck.

“Ok, I'll call her.”

“Great, it's a deal,” said the smiling shrink.

Worse than not talking to my father is observing him attempt to force conversation. For about a month, I would receive the obligatory call.

“Hi, it's your dad.”

“Yeah, I know. We're not in the stone ages. Caller ID actually works.”

“What's new? You're still in school?”

“Yeah. You know that.”

“When are you going to finish?”³⁴

“I don't know.”

³³ Recently, on my way to picking my dad up from the airport, I had a burning urge to pee, so I pulled into an old lot with abandoned housing projects in the background and pissed myself crazy onto dead urban grass.

³⁴ He continues to ask me this question.

“What do they tell you?”

“They tell me I need to get published.”

“How do you do that?”

“No idea.³⁵”

“How’s the book?” he asked.

“Ok, you’re in it. I’ve read some of it to you. You won’t like that part.”

“I don’t remember you reading it.”

“Several times, dad.”

Once my mother asked me to return with them to the therapist. I refused after seeing no results.

“For spending all that money on therapy, you don’t really follow directions,” I explained to them.

But he tries. Sometimes. My sister tries harder with him than I do. Sometimes she punches him in the gut or waves in his face. They play sports together. I need to keep trying.

A Fictional Childhood

Jena was six-years-old and at the beach in her pink tutu bathing suit with the flair at the waist, the kind with little netted holes in it, which made it puffy around her thighs. Her white hair was tied in a high ponytail and surrounded by a large pink ribbon. Her father was distractedly flipping through pages of a fashion magazine while her mother slept in the sun; it was just weeks before her mother’s death, and she resembled a malnourished alewife, kind of grey and deboned. He threw down the magazine, tossed his

³⁵ I have a small handful of publications now. Yes, it’s taken me that long to write this.

yellow sun-streaked ringlets with a flip of his head, and winked at his daughter. Jumping up wildly, he brushed the sand off his thighs and feet, and motioned for her to come towards him while grabbing his easel, paints, and brushes.

Shhhh, he motioned with his finger to his lips.

She followed him to the other side of the beach and they turned around a sandy bend and walked behind a dozen tall rocks to a clearing of spongy greenery.

“I’m asking you for a very special favor. You might be my muse today, sweetie. Let me paint you.”

“Ok. But why are we all the way over here?”

“I don’t like it when others are watching.”

“Not even mommy?” Jena asked.

“She wouldn’t understand.”

“I want to help. But why can’t mommy know?”

“She would be jealous.”

“Is it something bad?” she asked.

“No, just the opposite. You are an aesthetic! I hardly have to direct it. It’s just – there. Move your body. Spin, twirl, dance, whatever you want. Explore the space. This is your private space. You can do whatever you want.”

Pushing through gravity, Jena used her body to dance through the air, leaping and caressing the grass, giggling and singing. Stomping and jumping. Pointing, flexing toes, rolling around in muddy circles. Face dusted with dandelion hair, mustard cheeks, darkened brow, panting breath. All the while, he sketched the movement, with fiery blue twinkling eyes, his sharp chin buoyant, light stubble bouncing. It was to become the first

of a sequence of paintings he hid in the basement before they sold to the public – after her mother’s death.

“Daddy, are you watching?”

He had momentarily looked into the sun and inhaled. He turned towards her.

“Yes, sweetie. I will always watch you. I will always be here.”

Feedback Loop

This false start was my attempt to maintain distance. I’ve chosen to keep this text in order to illustrate a form of associative logic.

One of my professors told me the dancer story has no legs. A feat without legs. Writing in the third person was supposed to free me up. At this point, I just need to take a bucket full of words and throw them on the page. Where they land is where they land. It was almost unanimous in workshop that this kind of process text should be deleted. I don’t think there’s anything wrong with revealing some unmagical writing.³⁶ Laying bare is Russian, oh my soulful ancestors.

A comment written on my manuscript by a short brown haired girl³⁷:

I don’t find this writing as interesting as the actual scenarios.

Another slightly lighter haired girl added,

³⁶ Women fart too.

³⁷ I’m being a bit too coy with the brown hair, the red haired one, etc. It’s a reference from Chekhov’s *The Seagull* when Trepleff, the new playwright fears his audience and imagines his critics as he envisions their hair colors.

For me, this book is working best when the authorial intrusions exploit and explore the ideas/conflicts embedded in the narratives, rather than simply noting their existence, or

(Smart comment but I'm not doing that thing she wants me to do)

The language falls down entirely, and it comes across as “first-drafty” and, frankly, unpleasant. Those sections just don't *work*. And this current submission is mostly complaining (especially the first half). Making it even worse is the fact that it's so jumbled, skipping all over time and place, and constantly changing format, and not making much if any effort to ground the reader, or to develop any of the material. Again, I think it's charmless, and a total mistake. And I'm sorry if that offends you, but I'm being 100% honest. Remember that I've defended other parts of this MS. This submission doesn't come close to living up to that

The worst ripping so far is as follows:

I don't think this current draft is working at all. And I say that as a friend and as a fellow writer. I think this current version, and this current direction, is *a big mistake*. Also, I think not giving complete sections is always a mistake—I didn't get why material was missing from it. Consider how disorienting that must be for the new classmates who haven't seen previous excerpts...)

(If I'm a bit disoriented, everyone else has to be. The old standby form over content argument)

Ok, the same ding-dong wrote a little more worth including. Please observe how much face time I'm giving this guy and in fact, everyone else in this chapter regardless of my whining about them being ass wholes.

But I'm not going to talk about this current submission all that much, because suffice to say I don't think it works at all...I think it's a total mess, and I think that most of the writing fails to be all that compelling. Which is a total shame, because *that wasn't true at all of the excerpts you were showing us last semester*

Last one:

(He was the only colleague who didn't ream me after the previous submission).

#%* you all.

False start:

They were always leaving. Somehow it must have been her fault. Getting left. She'd been through men like thin pieces of toilet paper; like heavy stools with the crap bleeding onto her hands and she would grab for more³⁸. Still, after years of trying, she was unable to get it right. She would wipe her ass with them, her wet, greedy little ass, and then the paper would dampen and shrivel into a smelly little ball. She had convinced one of them to move in with her, but it hadn't lasted long. After three months, it was obvious it wasn't going to work. He had left his broken dresser in the middle of the living room to reinforce his agony, and she had glared at it for three weeks before helping him pack his things and get the hell out.

³⁸ Phillip Lopate instructed me to eradicate the dirty-shit-toilet paper metaphor. "It's as if you're trying to be profound by using debased, low level language that's gross," he told me. I have a problem with authority.

Did she force them out? It wasn't what she had actually wanted.

Emotion Memory

Once in acting class, when I was crying and crying during some emotional moment of storytelling, Aliza, my acting teacher, stopped my moment of expression from continuation.

“How old do you feel right now?” she asked me.

“I feel like I child,” I said through tears.

“Can you find that mature woman inside of you who I know is there?”

I nodded, wiped my face and nose and stopped. The flooding stopped, and I swallowed hard. Holding onto breath from a tugging in my mid section. I looked around and realized *an intense moment was happening that was my fault*. I was interrupting the flow of the class. So I stopped. But stopping is not the same as being a grown up. There were so many moments where I froze and didn't keep going for one reason or another, with the intensity of my desire to succeed overtaking the very thing I was trying to produce. And so there was very little production. I'm writing this book to figure out why I stopped and how to continue. But I'm stuck stuck stuck stuck stuck stuck fuck.

Forgetting Drama School

Freud says memories are like staircases, so they must all be somewhere. Maybe he's right, but still, I choose not to remember for a long time after something gnaws at me

until it's gone, buried deep somewhere in the staircase of my ass.³⁹ When I want to choose to remember the levity of my experiences and descend from the top, I can't. Maybe that's why memoirs seem so sad. People hold onto hurt more than the good stuff. It always feels harder to go up, but that's what we do.

I remember being good at acting. The feeling of purpose. Every actor assigns an overall intention to a performed scene, a reason for existing.⁴⁰ Learning lines, songs, tap dancing, solos, people just saying, 'good job.' I haven't heard that in so long. Everything has been too hard. Teachers called me talented. They were mean but they still said, "you are good" in one way or another. I could cry on a dime and my singing voice, although sometimes thin at the top, appealed, an openness that I'm trying to remember/relearn. I might be ruined. My body as a vessel was available for work, for creating. That's what I can tell you. But I'm not a businesswoman, and I did not know how to market myself. What is behind this refusal is something I'm trying to understand.

The Heidi Chronicles

A moment where acting made sense. The Buddhist, blond haired Aliza, head acting teacher at NYU's musical theater program, had taken an interest in me. Aliza would stop me after class to offer additional critiques, assure me of my unique contributions, or simply to squeeze my arm, wink at me, or offer a hug. "You've got it, kid. Keep working at it. You're smart, damn smart, and the profession needs strong, bright women like you," she said. I don't know if she had found her spiritual center through Buddhism or if she was high on coffee and cigarettes, but her low, husky voice,

³⁹ (The anal stage)

⁴⁰ My intention is to discover my intention.

tight jeans and narrow tank-topped upper body comforted me through the tumults of being a fresh faced nineteen-year-old in the New York City jungle.

Aliza assigned me the role of Wendy Wasserstein’s Kate Quinn in “Uncommon Women and Others.” Unlike practicing sixteen bars of a Lloyd Webber tune or regurgitating eight counts of *Chorus Line* choreography to accentuate the highs and lows of show business, this play meant something to me, taking place in 1978 at Mt. Holyoke College when the feminist revolution was ripe. Courtney was my assigned scene partner; she was so pretty that my jazz dance teacher, Bob Rizzo, referred to her as the girl with the “light behind her face.” Courtney was a spirited and focused girl who was always smiling, a good actress across the board, a real triple-threat although at the time it wasn’t clear if she possessed a forte. She worked hard, and we rehearsed three times a week for months before putting up the scene in class.

I played Kate, a lawyer-bound overachiever who overshadows Leila, a quiet, bookish girl played by Courtney. The scene begins with Kate snuggled in her dorm room, reading a trashy romance novel. When Leilah walks in, Kate pretends to have been reading *Genealogy of Morals*. Leila kindly requests an assignment for a liberal arts course at Mt. Holyoke while Kate lampoons her with questions like, “If you can’t leave your room in South Hadley, how are you going to get along in Iraq?” (Kate has dreams of joining the Peace Corps) “Leilah, you don’t think I’m a good person, do you?” Kate’s relentless speech allows her to win the scene, but the audience realizes that if Kate stops speaking for a moment, she will lose.⁴¹

The scene worked because I don’t remember it. None of it. Not performing it and nothing about rehearsal. After putting it on its feet, I felt light, unaware. That’s what

⁴¹ Oh, do I understand this.

acting should be. Amnesia. But at some point, I would always remember that it was only a performance and believed I wasn't doing anything thoughtful. Maybe I was wrong and the profundity was fully playing out Wasserstein's intent, making it come alive, and having others believe.

Double Portrait

After being assigned a scene from "Loose Ends" during my NYU acting school days, we were asked to construct a short autobiography about the playwright. I skipped the library and found the writer's name in the phonebook. It was 1994 when there were hard copies of things everywhere, like phonebooks and real telephones. Still, I was surprised the author was listed. The fact that he willingly picked up on the fourth ring at his intimate studio on East Fourth Street gave our first encounter an extra thrill.

"Hello," a resonant and slightly affected man called.

There was a pause inside the word hello, a questioning on the second syllable "oh" that was simultaneously mocking, apathetic, and delighted. I wondered if this was the way real writers spoke.

"Hi. My name is Lyndee, and I'm doing a scene from "Loose Ends" at Tisch. I'm writing your autobiography for acting class. So" –

"So Lyndee, you decided to call me?"

"Yes."

"Interesting."

I had him at hello, and he hadn't seen what I looked like. It wasn't that I possessed model good looks, but I knew at least one thing about how men responded to

me – I was charming and probably sensuous. I had to hook him or he would never do the interview. Lubricate the conversation. It was the nineties and globalization hadn't solidified, so you could still afford to be earnest without being accused of performing something.

"I love your play. We're all crazy about it. But it's complicated. We're intimidated," I said.

Another pause. Another thrill. He used the rhythm of speech like a conductor, holding the rests as long as he liked. I wish I could learn to do that. To be comfortable with silence is like knowing God.

"Which scene are you doing?" he asked.

"The abortion scene."

Pause again.

"Pretty heavy material for a college student," he said.

"We have our work cut out for us. I'd like to talk more, and I have a few more questions – if you have the time. I'm happy to do a phone interview, or if you're interested – we could meet."

I had been a successful telemarketer, so I was willing to take risks on the telephone.

"Yes...well..."

Potent silences – ripe with something. It was the first time I had experienced a man with that kind of literary power – both intimately and professionally. He used words sparingly while I bubbled with them like an overabundant fountain, hoping a few good drops would come out of an exuberant, overflowing waterfall.

“What’s your phone number? he asked. “I’ll check my schedule and give you a call. I’m sure we’ll be able to work something out.”

A week later he called, and we arranged to meet at a downtown café near his studio.

I approached a not so young man, somewhere in his mid to late fifties leaning back in a black-wired chair, legs crossed openly. He wore light brown sandals, khaki shorts, and a non-descript worn t-shirt as if ready for travel. His small brown eyes sharpened like alert daggers and a wry smile peaked tentatively from the corners of his mouth.

“Lyndee, I presume.”

He stood to shake my hand. There was a smooth puffiness to his fingers and my small spindly hand was instantly enveloped by his palm’s warm grandeur.

I wish I could remember what I was wearing. What I can recall sporting in my twenties involved large hoop earrings, bright clothing, often pink or purple, and sometimes, an off the shoulder t-shirt to emphasize a Jennifer Beals’ spirit. Sometimes I wore large brimmed colored hats. Pink lipstick. Italian black shoes resembling men’s wing tips. Red faced and sweating, I asked about his youth, how he became a playwright, how he liked working with actors. I spoke quickly and directly, unobservant of the time, scribbling his every response into my notebook until my knuckles ached. He was slow to speak and prolifically ordered volumes of coffee. Between responses, he might have said something like “Nice earrings” or warned, “Your shoe is untied” to which I would have replied, “Thanks, I’m into the gypsy look,” or “I don’t care; they don’t stay tied anyway.” It’s okay to be flaky in your twenties, to almost trip and fall. God, I miss that.

When my interrogation of “Loose Ends” ended a few hours later, I had learned he wrote the screenplay for “Hair,” “Ragtime,” “Moonchildren,” and “The Ballad of Soapy Smith,” a short-lived TV pilot called “Once and Again,” and the cataloguing of success skipped on. Aside from learning titled accomplishments, he had redirected my questions back to me, eluding answers about authorial intent and focusing the conversation on my acting methodology, what I presumed the main conflict to be in the abortion scene, and how I viewed male/female relations post second wave feminism.

“How do you approach the abortion scene?” he asked, shifting in his chair, crossing his legs once more like a beat in one of his scenes.

It was hard to sound smart about something so serious.

“We do a lot of improv before things fall apart so when the moment comes, it’s devastating,” I said, trying to pause before the word ‘devastating’ for effect.

“Yes. That’s a good thing to do. But what do you think is driving Paul and Susan apart? Put another way, is someone culpable?” he asked leaning in.

I wondered if Michael was actually Paul and if he wanted to be implicated or scolded. *He must be Paul*, I thought. *He is Paul*, I knew. The ragged, deflated idealist twenty years later. Post Peace Corps. He fit the prototype of a past tense romantic in his neutral, safari getup and minute trace of positivity that wafted away reluctantly like one of his exhales. But it was still before September 11 and the Twin Towers hung majestically in the sky like proud phalluses. Giuliani hadn’t taken over the face of the city and some artists still could afford to live in the city center. Pot day was not yet Disney day and you could, if you wanted, whack off at a forty second street porn show and no one would stop you. And I was one step away from something extraordinary as I often

felt in my mid-twenties in downtown Manhattan.

I remember the cadence of his resonant voice and the simple rhythm of his short string of sentences. My words, on the other hand, are blurry in memory. Every attempt to focus on that downtown café and the world around me of trendy waitresses, pastries, and ambient music wriggles out of focus. Only a small, narrow frame encloses his face.

My words continued rushing out, uncontained.

“I mean, it was wrong that she didn’t tell him about the abortion,” I started, “but I don’t think it was entirely her fault. There was always something too distant about him and non committal – I don’t know” –

He angled his head as if he doubted me, but his eyes narrowed enough to reveal he was listening. I still hope he was listening.

“Something ambivalent about Paul the whole time,” I continued. “He never seemed sure about her...like he couldn’t just – be in the moment with Susan.”

“He married her,” he said.

“Perhaps. But still, I think it’s a hard thing to carry around. For a woman to carry around.”

“You sound like you speak from experience.”

“You haven’t met my father,” I said.

“Do tell.”

“The king of mixed messages. Once he pulled me out of second grade to take me to therapy to work out our issues. It was like a kidnapping; he wouldn’t tell me where we were going. Once we got there, he cleaned his glasses with a piece of Kleenex for most of the session. I never know what the hell is going on with him. His only response was,

‘Your mom wants us to work on getting along. You are causing problems in our marriage.’”

My face was in flames. I knew I shouldn’t be sharing such things, but I couldn’t help myself. I couldn’t stop talking.

“Do you really think you were getting in the way of their marriage?” he asked.

“No, it wasn’t me. I don’t know. No. Total projection of their problems.”

“So you don’t believe they have a good marriage?”

“I...I don’t know. Some parts are okay, I guess. It’s work for them, especially my mom...But they like to do things together. Cultural activities: festivals, traveling, and they each have their own set of friends so they’re pretty independent. They hold hands sometimes, so maybe that’s something. I really don’t know. You ask a lot of hard questions. Why don’t you ever tell me anything?”

“Ask away,” he smiled.

And of course, that is the moment when you can’t think of anything, when someone gives you permission to ask.

“I’ll think of some good questions,” I said.

“No pressure,” he said.

Was he mocking me?

“Interesting interpretation of the play,” he said.

“I don’t think it’s an interpretation. I’m gonna grab it.”

“You have it on you?” he asked, smiling. “Oh, like a good student, all annotated.”

“Always,” I said, running my hands through my hair after fishing through a deep backpack full of books and crumpled papers.

I had the character intentions written in the margins of Susan's lines.

To entertain, to disgust, to wake up, to enrage, to relax, to turn on.

"Here. Page seventeen," I said in argument mode. "Paul isn't sure if he wants to spend more time with Susan because he doesn't feel he has anything to show for himself after two years of the Peace Corps."

Then I sucked in a vast amount of air to exaggerate Paul's masculine voice, the moment he begins pulling away from Susan.

"So he says, 'I can't. I mean, yeah sure, I could. I could. But I can't. It's ridiculous. I mean look at what I have after two years. A bunch of stories and a ticket home. I have to do something now. You know, where I end up with something I can...something that doesn't just go away, you know what I mean?'"

"It's like he's making excuses so he doesn't have to get involved," I said.

"I see," he said. "I never thought about Paul that way."

"Really? I mean, come on. Even after all their years together she asks, (I paused, adjusting my posture to what I imagined was Susan's, upright and confident),

"'Am I enough for you without a baby?' and when he says he doesn't know, I think that says everything."

"She lied about having an abortion, Lyndee."

"I know, I know," I added. "This is so depressing. Maybe we should talk about something else."

"What is?" he asked.

"The idea that an entire play leads to a failed relationship."

"That happens sometimes," he said.

“It doesn’t have to.”

“Have you had many failed relationships?” he asked. “Or relationships?”

“Enough to know that it doesn’t have to end like that,” I lied.

I waited for his cue to leave. He stood slowly and mentioned it might be nice to meet again. I was elated.

The mark of a good interviewer is the ability to shut up. I did not have that skill. I still know very little about the man, but I had the privilege to be in his company a handful more times.

I understood it was almost impossible that his interest was merely platonic but it wasn’t determinedly sexual either and thinking myself a good girl and knowing I would not take things further than an intellectual flirtation, I told myself spending time with him was not only acceptable but a way to engage in more worldly affairs and elevated conversations than my surrounding twenty-something actor friends were capable. Breaking into songs like "It's Been a Real Nice Clam Bake" doesn't widen a young woman's worldview.

If only I could stop blushing and sweating. Sitting with him was like the longest audition of my life. My fingers dripped waterfalls, and I’d have to press the wetness into the thighs of my jeans.

We didn’t meet often, and it was always for a stroll or an animated café conversation about theatre, art, or life. I investigated his writer’s lair in the East Village a few months after initial interview. The façade was an unremarkable grey but inside revealed the secret space of markedly deep browns, the colors of a man and his work. It was a sparse space, aside from an array of books, a steel refrigerator, vacant cabinet

space, and a large writing desk.

“Hello, Lyndee,” he said during my first visit to his workspace on East Fourth Street.

He used my name for emphasis and power, possessing every word he spoke, pressing on the consonants, interrogating the vowels. I would never say his aloud. I can hardly write the words here.

“Hi,” I said.

I was burning up again as he led me on a short tour of a wood based studio space. This time I might have worn a black mini and multi-colored tights to announce myself, a double performance of my youth. His apartment was large and long for New York standards, and my attention was immediately drawn to a vast writing desk, wide and stately, composed of dark hickory accompanied by a broad, comfortable leather cushioned chair. A few quill pens shone luxuriously in an ornate case. This was a writer. This was how a writer worked.

“Your desk is unbelievable.”

Michael knew I had writerly aspirations.

“Lyndee, if you want to write, you need a good desk. A firm desk. A place that is yours. You’ll see.”

I still need a good desk. I don’t know why I won’t buy one, but I won’t.

“I don’t think I could make that kind of investment. My dorm room is the size of your desk.”

He laughed. Or maybe he smiled. Perhaps he was plotting, but his face held no expression. I have studied his expression on YouTube interviews to make sure I’m

getting this right, but the same twinkling energy I felt in the room with him is gone, only a trace of possible arrogance and affected speech.

A large oval looking glass hung adjacent from his writing desk. I might have quickly glanced at my red face and threw my long hair into a rubber band I tore from my wrist. I wondered if he caught a glimmer of his reflection while writing. I wondered who he was when he worked.

“You look lovely,” he said.

Our conversation continued as I ferociously shot out questions that revealed some vulnerability tied to my youth. What probably came in his presence was that no, I didn’t have a boyfriend and no, I didn’t want one, and yes, my family was sort of neurotic like I was, and yes, for some reason, he found me interesting and strange in kind of a lovely way that I’ll never understand. I was just a Midwestern Jewish girl who knew nothing about art or life or New York City. I was passionately pursuing the idea that a conversation with the right person at the right moment could get me somewhere, that maybe if he liked me enough, I would like me enough, and all of that love would roll around and get big enough to make me want to be a real actress in a real world that I would want to be part of.

During one of my rants he suggested, “You know, you seem to be one of the very few who really takes this life thing seriously.”

I never knew what he meant.

One evening he invited me to see an Off-Broadway opening of one of his plays. We walked to the theatre together, and I watched from a distance as he freely schmoozed with people who looked like important artists. They were older and some wore hats. He

introduced me to one or two.

“This is the director. Sarah is in *Cats*. Melanie is writer for *The Voice*.”

And so on and so forth.

I didn't request any auditions. I didn't ask to submit my short stories. I don't remember if he paused when I only said a brief hello to his artist friends and strolled back to our seats. It was his moment, his night.

His gait possessed an animalistic freedom. There was a glide to his walk as if he floated about without legs or feet making it impossible for the observer to navigate how he arrived from one place to the next. As I waited in the back row for his presence, I saw his eyes scan over dozens of seats and then identify me as his object. For a moment, he hesitated and then, like a bull, stepped over several rows of auditorium chairs landing gracefully in the seat next to mine. This image remains with me as something I aspire to do – gracefully step over obstacles with eyes fixedly on the object.

Our intermittent meetings stopped the last time I entered his writer's lair and perused a photograph framing a teenage boy and a plain, shorthaired graying woman with a hard smile. The boy and the woman enveloped him in their arms. Suddenly he was an ordinary man in a picture.

“Who is that woman?” I asked.

“Oh, didn't I tell you? That's my wife. She's a corporate lady”...

His voice trailed off. He looked out the studio window, an airshaft leading to a wall of bricks, a dead wall reverie.

“Your son?” I asked.

“Yes.”

“But where are they? You don’t talk about them. They’re never around.”

“I thought I mentioned it. They live upstate. Our work demands us to be in different places. Lyndee, marriage is complicated.”

My body deflated. Was I just prey? He had purposefully never mentioned his other life.

"This connection that we have is unusual," I blurted, a last ditch effort to salvage the unsalvageable.

"After all this time, I'm glad you're saying this. You're acting like a grown-up now," he said.

Although I had no intention of an affair, I also understood our acquaintance could go no further. For years after that moment, even when I returned to Chicago, I tried to entice him into reading my writing with emailed updates infused with story titles and detailed accounts of my schooling. Nothing impressed him, not even my admittance into a PhD program. I suppose he knew I wasn’t a real working writer. Once I asked him to submit a piece to a graduate magazine where I was drama editor. He would eventually send a brief greeting, but really, he never responded. To this day he has never read a stitch of my writing.

Years later he told me he wrote a play called “Side Effects,” the last play in a trilogy called “Loving Longing Leaving.” He suggested he created a “Lindy” character because “Your name is so unusual. I have never heard that name before,” and in his usual way, his voice trailed off and left a space. A rest in the music of his speech that I am still working to capture.

I neglected to read “Side Effects” for many years until recently when a group of writer friends urged me to do so to clarify this double portrait. I learned that “Lindy” is rendered as a Midwest teacher who speaks in poetic tongues and opts to attend graduate school in her late thirties. Dissimilarly, she has an ongoing extramarital affair outside of a dysfunctional marriage to a wannabe politician throughout the course of the play. More disturbing is her bipolar diagnosis, volatile mood swings, and inconsistent pill popping. Lindy cannot be me –

The playwright’s afterword explains the creation of Lindy in three detailed pages. It should resolve my questions; kill off the feeling that I am soulfully connected to this character by deferring her persona to another woman. He claims to have met a young stage manager years ago “pursued by all the available young men in the company. She wasn’t notably attractive – more wholesome – but she had a sleepy sensuality...”

It wasn’t that I possessed model good looks, but I knew at least one thing about how men responded to me – I was charming and probably sensuous.

He asks the girl what her professional plans are because she “obviously [had] talent.” He suggests that the girl angers and walks away.

I didn’t request any auditions. I didn’t ask to submit my short stories.

He explains that later he meets her, much changed, “her manner charming and polished, not a trace of the girl-next-door quality I remembered.” Later they meet for a drink, and he says, “That is, *she* talked, and I asked occasional questions. Mostly I sat dumbfounded, not so much because of any specific events she narrated; it was more her measured but feverish urgency, the compulsion of her thoughts, her need to talk, and by

the manner of her speech: sudden bursts of revelation following by long silences, like an athlete rallying for the next round.”

I knew I shouldn't be sharing such things, but I couldn't help myself. I couldn't stop talking.

The mark of a good interviewer is the ability to shut up. I did not have that skill.

He used the rhythm of speech like conducting an orchestra, holding the rests as long as he liked. I wish I could learn to do that. To be comfortable with silence is like knowing God.

The experience of reading a character that could be your former self is a strange one – and after you've rendered a similar version of that part of yourself in writing, uncanny. It's as if I was watching myself unfold through his words, and yet, the creeping doubt that I had not made an impression pushes me to challenge that Lindy is not Lyndee and that I am not who I think I am.

But I push on in my search, doggedly observing the repetition of her name. I press on that this unnerving repetition in scene must echo a resonance of the real, that she *could be* me, that she *must be* more than simply a two dimensional character. Or is my focus on the repetition merely a longing to be more than a fiction in my own head? That he was really there with me in some way and that I was more than a prop for another story?

The play begins with Hugh, Lindy's husband, locating her in the dark.

Hugh: You're here. (no response) Lindy?

Lindy: Lindy's here.

Hugh: Sitting in the dark.

Lindy: So it would appear to those who can see me.

The force of the play is Lindy's strength and ends cruelly by Lindy rejecting her husband and antidepressants. She runs away with a "New York artist."

In Michael's last homage to Lindy, the playwright continues describing his interaction with the phantom stage manager.

"I was completely submersed in the rhythm of her life, and for the time we spent together I lost all sense of myself...What struck me as she said good night and drove away...was that I just had an evening with a woman that felt far more erotic and sexual than the act of physical love. I felt I had *experienced* her life – *inhabited* it. This was a new and surprising sensation, and it held a mystery I couldn't quite grasp: how the intense intimacy, the *eros* inherent in a person *verbally* opening themselves to another could feel more sensual than making love with them. None of this presented itself as an "idea" for a play. As life goes, the encounter was more a puzzle to work out in my mind, something to do with the paradoxical nature of human interchange; that we can make love with little connection to our partner, but then talk to someone in a way that feels closer than sex."

The puzzle is twofold.

The play bombed. Ben Brantley from *The New York Times* suggested "It was as if the combustible Lindy, she of so many and such unpredictable moods, had written the script for *Side Effects* in her own image."

One day I'll have to ask him about that.

False Start

My plan for my new and improved book is to juxtapose my life with my process of writing fiction. Ha! Here is my contract with you. The atrocious prose gets **bolded**...

One very kind reader told me that certain hyperbolic language wasn't necessarily problematic; it just reads like "exuberance."

Don't meet me at a cocktail party and tell me you've always wanted to write a book. You don't want to write a book. And next you'll tell me you always thought you could be an actor.

Oh my god, I found another false start⁴²:

Ok- here it is. I'm going to subject you to it even though I promised not to-

Not Fiction

I began a memoir because the fiction about a screwed up ballerina can't finish itself. That's because it's a piece of shit. Not exactly shit. More like kind of crappy. How the hell can a book finish itself? Apparently I'm in the business of personifying books.

How original. Stop it evil demon naysayer. Out damn spot, crazed Olivia, no Ophelia. Or, er- no. Olivia is the five-year-old in my Sunday school class who is difficult at times but always charming. I should remember that writers must pick and choose what text they decide to keep. My **new** plan for my **new** and improved book is to juxtapose my life with **my process** of writing fiction. Ha! Shut up. **Juxtapose is such a masturbatory word, one that pretentious graduate students use when they can't find a better way of saying something. Really, juxtapose is not a complicated word or concept.** Cool is a meaningless word. If a freshman in comp class had turned in a sentence like that, I would've circled the word '**cool**' and written word choice problem in

⁴² I won't subject you to the same section of "They Were Always Leaving." The shit metaphor is truly unpleasant.

the margins. I have a word choice problem that **doesn't fit** in the margins; this problem is serious and needs more space.⁴³

My friend told me to classify this novel as a hybrid, so that's how I'll talk about it. But like he says, "What is up with these Americans who always feel the need to talk about it?" One day, I'll have enough experiences to write something else because I'll be a more interesting person, and this first novel should not be as quaint as an Aristotelian catharsis, so please let it not be, "Oh, you're writing about yourself? That will be therapeutic."

So far it's not.

I don't know what matters most, what order to put the scenes in, how ruthless to be (towards myself and others), how raw or upbeat a tone in contrast to the events, and who are my best readers in terms of praise or criticism. Then there's the problem with application. What scenes should go where? Does this process sound therapeutic to you? Again-don't meet me at a cocktail party and tell me you've always wanted to write a book and how your idea is so original. You don't want to write a book. And next you'll tell me you always thought you could be an actor.

Another start:

They were always leaving. Somehow it must have been my fault. Getting left. I've been through men like thin, cheaply made pieces of toilet paper and with heavy stools, the crap bleeds accidentally onto my hands and then I grab for one more to wipe

⁴³ Bad, bad writing.

up the mess the last one left. After years of trying, I'm unable to get it right. I wipe my ass with them, my wet, greedy little ass, and then the paper dampens and shrivels. I've been told that this metaphor is unpleasant, but I'm going to use it anyway. I am a gross person.

Being left is very similar to being the one to do the leaving.⁴⁴

Good Thing Going

*It started out like a song
It started quiet and slow with no regret
And then one morning I woke to realize
We had a good thing going*

*It's not that nothing went wrong
Some angry moments, of course, but just a few
But they were moments no more-
We could have kept on going*

These days I prefer to look at my failed relationships like a Frank Sinatra song in a mediocre musical. A relationship is an energy, a small wind that picks up between two people that may lead somewhere, die down, **or turn into a destructive storm**. Sing it out, I tell myself, sing it out. It's not your fault if it doesn't work out; it's not something you can control. Singing makes me feel better. **But I also do things like read books in the genre of self-help chick lit, e.g. *Why Men Love Bitches***. (Recently when my current boyfriend, probably soon to be ex-boyfriend, knowing me- that is, at least by the time I finish this chapter....anyway, he found the darned piece of trash at the bottom of my closet, and I claimed to be reading it ironically and for its incredible humor).

I am not going to be able to continue **bolding** all bad language. It's tiring. And I won't finish. How many times have I deleted and added and deleted and added this

⁴⁴ I don't know this.

chapter? It doesn't want to go away. It's proof of my former sketch. It stays. I'm sorry it's thematically and syntactically dull. But it stays.

Seriously?

I found another similar version to the same objectionable false start. Didn't finish novel yet because I was seeing Shlomo at the time and dysfunctional relationships can be very distracting.

Falsest Start

Recently in workshop I was told that this voice undermines my project. This is me, so it seems that I am undermining my project. If its possible to underperform your memoir, it looks like I'm capable. If that's true, then the kernel of who I am, the very essence of the expressive part of me, the me of me, is inherently wrong. I am wrong. I am not myself. Hearing this repeatedly can ruin you. Where is the me?

Another writer suggested that because I'm female, I should have the ability to express myself more charmingly while complaining about this project. I asked him,

“Shall I put a hat on it?”

If I could begin this

Imagine there is a hat on



He mumbled back, “a hat on it.”

chapter with a hat on it, I would.

every one of these words to tip

your favor most charmingly and femininely in my direction.

Golem in New York⁴⁵

As she walked into class, Jena Wilson mentally repeated her memorized list entitled “Notes on New York City Ballet Performances.”

1. Lead ballerinas probably weigh 2-3 lbs. less than I do. ** 50 calories less per meal one month before the audition.
2. There are few blonds, and I don’t want to stand out too much or appear too pale. Shall I dye my hair brown?
3. Their extensions are weak; I am solid.
4. No one is beyond 3 turns. I can easily do 4, sometimes 5 when I’m 100% on my leg. *Add a fifth turn at end of the routine to ‘wow’ them.
5. Makeup – in performance, makeup is heavy. **Wear a darker pink lipstick in the audition and a lighter pink in class for practice.
6. Sensuality -- ***! This is a serious problem that pertains to with what Romeo says I’m lacking. I’m not sure what it means directly.

Romeo clapped his hands and began class with his usual quip. “Get those *patapons* up. You must not let gravity take hold of your little *patapons*.”

Jena readjusted the wrinkles in her light pink leotard that were pinching into her the crease of her hips.

Did I shrink these or am I getting fat?⁴⁶

Jena didn’t think that she could really allow herself to actually get fat, but she understood it was a question that she should ask herself. She had her weight under control. She glanced at Cassie who returned her look boldly. There was that big, stupid stare of hers. She was probably just trying to psyche her out. Yes, Jena, of course she

⁴⁵ This text fuses language and dance. Jena couldn’t commit to this fully, and as you will see, this early to create an active character marks the beginning of a growing contempt with her presence in my imagination.

⁴⁶ Ballet dancers believe they’re fat even when they need a protein injection, but in this case, her weight comment is an authorial choice to comment about the world of ballet; it is not necessarily character driven. (Oh, if in the early footnotes I only realized to what a degree that Jena resists being flesh) Jena knows she’s not fat; it’s a game she’s playing with herself as she puts herself in the shoes of other dancers. She’s playing a part, a mind game, a person she thinks she should be-meaning a person worried about her weight but really but is not. (perhaps a justification for an incoherent omniscient narrator and a flat character. Is this critique too early in the book?)

was.

“Jena, please go to the middle barre where I can see you,” said Romeo.

She had placed herself strategically at the back, behind the other girls because she was feeling off her balance this morning. Romeo had his own agenda. He wanted blood.

Suggested by my dissertation director: the interweaving of the two genres within one chapter. I don't like it, but I'll experiment with it in parenthesis: (This happens to me all the time. It's hard to attend even a basic ballet or jazz class anymore. When I attempt to hide in the back, even when wearing the most hideous, unprofessional shiny navy leotard with puffy sleeves and ill-fitting shoes with my hair wildly falling every which way, I still get called to the front and then receive too many corrections, too much attention. Sometime the teacher might make me do it alone to make sure I have it. And I'm horrible at remembering combinations anyway, so it's terribly awkward. I'm not even that good anymore, but just good enough where the instructor spots my natural talent and decides, 'hmmm, that would be a fun one to mold.' But I don't want to be a professional dancer; I don't want to be molded. And I don't attend enough class to really get better. I don't like this paragraph. I'm not doing this combination thing again. I hate this! The chapters should be closed, closed. This is not a post-modern vomit. I will accept footnotes, dammit, but only footnotes.

Great, he's going to be on my ass all class, Jena thought.

She peered around the expansive, white Studio B; the room where she was destined and where she would never fit in. Its mirrors reflected, ever so subtly, that she was holding back, not giving something of herself. Studio B's wide stage-like white walls and sparkling mirrors beckoned, questioned and pleaded, “Who are you?” And before

waiting for an answer howled, “Dare you compete with me!” The mirrors told stories of missteps, flushed faces, and mockery. Between the cracks, along the edges before it met its end where the white walls began, hid cracked dreams and shards of hope, toppled on each other as pointy pieces of broken glass. Every day ballerinas gazed into the all-knowing mirror and in some way or another asked who would be the fairest of them all. But in this Grimm’s fairy tale, the mirror lied, changed its mind, and painted mirages. In the last few weeks, she found herself gazing into its glossy allure as her audition for a company role in the *New York City Ballet* became more of a possibility and less like a dream.

(She should have asked the fairy godmother to grant her a new pair of glasses because those were broken ones. My eyes are broken too).

This next chapter is Jena’s interior. Since she’s not a real fictional character, her interior is merely external. I didn’t know this at the time. You may skip it.

Before Dance Class

She had peeled off her street clothes, tight jeans, and black t-shirt in the corner of Studio B, while the other students chatted and joked self-consciously at the bar. Having mirrors everywhere makes people jumpy, she thought. Jena didn’t fret about her physique. She was flat as a pancake, appropriately so for a dancer, besides tiny obtrusions that she thought of as cherry pits, as if to politely remind the world that she was female. Sometimes she wondered why there was anything there at all. Her legs were unusually long and slender, and she possessed a long hipless torso while standing upon narrow feet like stretched like long oars, ready to row.

Jena had sat her bum on the cold marble floor and tied her pink toe shoes. There

she spent a few minutes, in her usual way, surveying the room, placing her eyes on the girls who would be asked back as apprentices or company members and who would go home empty handed. Jenny, no. Not enough grace and hardly any discipline. Jenny's wild, untamed hair was often piled into a ball of frizz on her head; she wasn't polished. Sarah, possibly, although she was too tall to be taken seriously, and in conjunction with glistening silver braces, a travesty. Lola was sensual without a firm grip on technique. With Cassie, there was some competition there; she was strong and unaware of being watched. Her legs were rooted into the ground like stubborn tree trunks and every move was executed with assuredness. Cassie maintained a strong presence although Jena was uncertain if she possessed any depth of artistry to intrigue audiences. But that could be developed. No one else in class was worth worrying about.

Jena had spotted a defeated Mrs. Moreau, placed in exile, sitting in a small chair in the corner. Mrs. Moreau was the very French 5'1" mother of 15-year-old Solange. For such a petit woman, she was exceptionally foul-mouthed as she scribbled furious notes in the hopes of making her daughter more competitive. The week prior, she had screamed out French obscenities at a mortified Solange during the center combination, a disruption too much for Romeo, who, like Mrs. Moreau, possessed a great deal of self importance. Romeo threw her out of class after the first *Tu est merde*, Solange! Since the Frenchy episode, Mrs. Moreau was tolerated as long as she quietly jotted down notes while sporadically cursing under her breath. Jena wondered what it would have been like to have her own mother sitting there, in the background, smiling contently and watching her daughter in admiration.

Throughout the pleas, Jena embodied a quiet swan, bending with the music and

flowing downward in a thorough stretch. Although her joints stiffened, she worked through the pain and cajoled her muscles into a softer stance.

Don't forget to breathe and you'll be flexible in another ten minutes.

By the grand-bat-mas, Jena was reciting the combination in her head. Class was going as planned.

Grand-bat-mas quasai, four to the front, four to the side, don't change the first one, angle in for the arabesque, four to the side, first one, no change. Plie and three pirouettes. I'll do four to keep myself on top. Did Romeo see? Yes, he must have.

No, Jena, he doesn't care.

"Other side, ladies," said Romeo.

I'll do five turns if I can focus and stay on my leg. I did it! And he says nothing still? Grand-bat-mas, quasai, front, side back, side—what do I have to do to get a little attention?

Jena didn't understand that the summer program at School of American Ballet was not the place to be fawned over by teachers. In the past few weeks, she had been sure Romeo had been taking a special interest in her dancing. If he had not been correcting her and admiring her work verbally, he had certainly been watching her, encouraging her with a glance, a smile, or gesticulation about how to improve with his hands.

"Kick higher, Jena! Why are your hips so tight today?" called Romeo.

Lola and Cassie snickered and rolled their eyes. Cassie, the loud, assertive girl from Texas and Lola, the carnal know-it-all – would they be the next Cinderella or Fairy Queen? With only a handful of prestigious roles for young ingénues at reputable companies, it was hard to determine how a choreographer or director would spot that certain something.

So what, maybe my hips are tight. There is a rare few who can do five turns. Romeo may choose to ignore it today, but the School of American Ballet will not.

Although Jena was excelling in class, she was a defective china doll performing amateur tricks for an unresponsive audience. This was the point in class where Romeo would often assure her with a nod, and although it was only a small concession, it acknowledged her hard work, fierce control, and discipline. Today, although the other girls darted their eyes towards her precise and graceful positions, Romeo only criticized. Growing up in Traverse City, constant critique meant teachers were paying attention. At this point in a dancer's career, it was more of an absurdity.

She spent much of the *adagio* – particularly balancing in arabesque and bending into a deep ponche – with Romeo screaming, “I’m not feeling it, Jena! The music is telling a story. Give me something, anything!” No matter how she angled her head or softened her arms or gracefully eased into a full splits, it was useless. She was executing the steps correctly, better than others. Cassie’s arabesque was barely adequate; her knee was slightly bent and Jena caught the sloppiness of a slightly flexed foot in the mirror. Lola couldn’t remember the steps; she was all over the place. That Sarah girl picked something out of her teeth. The mirrors laughed villainously as sweat trickled down the middle of her back. They called, *Your body is reaching positional perfection, but you are failing! You are a failure!*

Now Cassie was leaping boundlessly off the floor; she was in her element, the jumps. Jena was an all around better dancer, but Cassie gained wings as she sprang from the ground. She flew effortlessly into the air like a wild, graceful animal. Or, Jena told herself, like a frenetic pogo stick. So she wasn’t the best jumper, but high jumps were for

men; everyone knew that. There was no niche for a “jumper” ballerina. A useless skill for braggarts with no capital. It was merely – athletic. She smiled broadly, imagining the little pogo stick bouncing around the dance floor.

“Is something amusing you, Jena?” asked Romeo.

Immediately her stomach dropped a thousand staircases. Romeo stood with his hands on his hips, waiting for a response, dark eyes darting through her, the cowlick in his thick black bang dipping meticulously to the left. Her fear of social confrontations had converted to a long line of lonely Saturday nights and lack of birthday party invitations throughout her teens.

“No – I was just amused at how high Cassie –I mean, it’s really extraordinary for a girl to jump that high. But the thing is, it’s not necessary. It’s a lot of extra work where it will never be used. Overall, it’s a waste of energy.”

“Well Jena, you seem to have an awful lot of opinions. Why don’t you try the combination again, with Cassie this time. It’s no good for our dancers in training to save energy. Here is where you start paying.”

“No thank you.”

Jena smiled in the way that she usually did, angling her chin and twinkling her eyes like she had learned to do with her father when she wanted something – or when she wanted to get out of something.

“In ballet, there’s no such thing as no thank you,” Romeo declared.

The mirrors glistened and dared Jena to dance. She stood directly behind Cassie, facing her strong, muscular back. As the music began, she could feel her heart pumping gallons of blood, a dance of its own, if you will. Romeo nodded to the pianist, and then

began Mozart's light-hearted trills.

Okay, just focus, she thought.

She confronted the mirror and in return, they cackled a shrill, ghostly laughter. Her father's tragic face flashed in her mind, smiling sadly. In the periphery and into the glass, she saw her colleagues anxiously awaited her failure.

Moment Before Dance Class- Another bloody interior attempt

While dancing, Jena jostled her memory to figure out what had set Romeo off, the eccentric Italian choreographer with two different colored eyes, a brown and a blue. Before class, he had stood grinning at the elevator's entrance, blocking the closing door with his foot. It was then when he asked to see more of the real Jena. She would have to find out how to identify the missing Jena factor and tackle it. She hoped to separate it from the other part of herself that he saw and didn't like, similar to a molecule to be placed under a telescope, magnified and studied. *I hope we see a little more of the real Jena in class today* echoed like a repetitive drum beat. What could it mean?

She would not, under any circumstances, return to Traverse City. Neither Romeo nor any other egotistical teacher, director, choreographer, whomever, would force her to give up dance and go back to her old life. She was learning that working hard wasn't enough. Being the prettiest didn't matter. Sleeping with a director was out of the question. Jena was still a virgin and would not be broken in by a guy older than her father, some balding director with a paunchy stomach. She had heard of Baryshnikov and his infamous affairs. Maybe with someone like Baryshnikov, someone that good. But she had to be in love, or at least, attracted. That would be the line; she would have to be

attracted.

The moment before class, Romeo had pulled all three girls, Jena, Cassie and Lola, into his chest as they entered the small rickety elevator up to class.

“Hurry, hurry in. Now I’ve got all my girls,” Romeo had said as he drew the three girls into his firm upper body with his strong, muscular arms. Cassie and Lola giggled, and Jena, wary of being touched, recoiled ever so slightly, straight-faced.

“Cassie, are you ready to get a company audition?” asked Lola.

“I’d better be,” she smiled. Her grin was wide and bright, like a crazed circus clown. Everything about her was big, her dancing, her presence, her domineering stares. Cassie’s body was stronger than hers –more rooted. But Jena had discovered that Cassie brought a quality to dance that was too obvious, deficient in artistry and for lack of a better word, bare and low-class. As they had headed to class, Romeo winked at Jena. It was the same thing her father had done so many times. It made her feel odd when men winked, like she was missing some kind of insidious joke. Had she behaved provocatively without knowing? Is that what was enraging Romeo?

Jumping into the *change-mas*, her deep arches felt like dragging heavy weights into the air, attached to now dense calves that once seemed slender and graceful. Gazing at her alignment in the mirror, her arches were adequate, her jumps high enough, arms were soft; there was nothing lacking in technique.

Losing herself in the looking glass, a closer gaze elongated her body, stretched her face, and mimicked a picture of a tall, monstrous blond being pulled by puppet strings. She was being thrown around the room as if she had no control of her joints. By the end of the routine, Jena was unable to execute two pirouettes and after three sets of

eking out one-and-a-half turns without finishing facing center, she clumsily landed in third position, not a controlled fifth.

“Again!” called Romeo.

Cassie looked at Romeo.

“Not you, Cassie. Jena must do it alone.” He smiled showing much of his teeth – revealing a few fangs – front to molars. “It’s practice,” he said.

Jena repeated the combination and bit her lip until it bled.

“Graceful ballerinas do not bite. We are all swans; we are all ninety pounds when we dance.”

Jesus Romeo, she thought, I don’t weigh much more than that.

Jena’s blond wisps were plastered to her sweaty cheeks, and she tucked them behind her ears. Even as she felt her body collapsing, she pushed her limbs into the necessary angles demanded by the combination, forcing positions with the violent sounds of the pianist crashing her fingertips into the white keys.

At the very least, I’m not going to be off beat.

A sharp cramp developed in her right side and increased as the music crescendoed. Try and breathe into it and it will go away.

Sweat dribbled between her shoulder blades and into the crease between her eyes. Her bun fell out. She continued dancing and gazing into the looking glass. Contempt like fire spread between teacher and student. Now she was no longer a girl, but a magical, robotic doll who would continue for hours into the night. Jena knew how to step outside of her aching body and perform. She could detach all feeling from movement and coerce her body beyond its limit, a zombie game.

Glissade assemble, glissade jete, coupe assemble faye assemble.
 Tour jete, four, well, three, no, almost two pirouettes, land in fifth, pour-te-bras.
 Glissade assemble, glissade jete, coupe assemble faye assemble.
 Tour jete, five pirouettes, land in fifth, pour-te-bras.
 Glissade assemble, glissade jete, coupe assemble faye assemble.
 Tour jete, one-and-a-half pirouettes, land in – third, pour-te-bras.

“Enough Jena.”

“I’m almost finished, Romeo,” she called.

Glissade assemble, glissade jete, coupe assemble faye assemble.
 Tour jete, one pirouette, land – somewhere – keep going, pour-te-bras.

The doll ran out of batteries and unwound back into a girl. She would have continued and she could have – but Romeo’s sharp clap drew the dance of death to a close. Silence cloaked the room. The last shrill piano note punctured the moist, humid air and resonated as a lingering reminder that the girl prodigy had been dethroned.

After Dance Class- Interior⁴⁷

The moment class ended, drenched in sweat, Jena threw her clothes onto her sticky body and dashed out of the room. As the dank elevator descended, she heard sounds of the old wires screeching down to street level. Out of breath, she rushed onto Seventy-Second Street, vowing to focus purely on her upcoming audition for a company role and not on Romeo. Jena perused the outdoor produce section of the grocery store and inhaled the sweet aroma of peaches, plums and apples.

It’s not a good idea to load up on sugars if I want to look spectacular in my light blue leotard. She sighed and walked into the subway entrance.

As she stood on the platform heading downtown, she perceived women and men

⁴⁷ As I write these fictional scenes, Jena disappears further into the background. You may skip this chapter.

walking by glance at her. She stepped onto the 'N' train heading downtown. In the car, Jena felt a knock on her shoulder and recoiled.

“Miss, someone urinated on the train, and I'd hate for you to step in it. It's coming this way,” she warned.

A pale gray-haired woman with sharp blue, squinty eyes pointed to the ground, and Jena quickly stepped over a stream of pungent liquid but not before a dollop of yellow soaked into the corner of her thin street shoe, dampening her ankle. She was alone with the woman in the subway car. The old woman smiled at her as if she had a terrible secret and showed a mouth full of several missing teeth.

“Uh, thanks,” said Jena and looked outside the car as the train passed her stop on Fourteenth Street.

She held her nose and exited the subway at Eighth Street without looking back, and began walking briskly through the sunny crowded streets mono focused on cleaning her ankle with soap and water in her bedroom sink. As she crossed Eleventh and Broadway, a middle-aged homeless woman grabbed Jena's arm and began to scream, “Help me, I need help!” Jena shook herself free as the woman with a pockmarked face raised her shirt and yelled, “See this? I'm not wearing a bra!”

She wasn't able to avert her eyes from the misshaped sagging bosoms and ran home to her residence, signed in with her ID, and began thoroughly washing her ankle and hands at the small porcelain sink in her miniature concrete room. The old bright-eyed woman on the train, the deranged homeless woman on the street, and Romeo's dark eyes lingered like a frozen projection. She shoved all the images down, way down to the realm where she strategically placed the terrible events of her life into miniature boxes,

and went blank.

She faced the white walls surrounding her. Sometimes the Katherine House was more like a mental hospital rather than a home for young female artists and wayward women. She had been living among the women of New York who had fallen beneath the cracks since the middle of July. Some were artists like her who couldn't afford regular rent. Others were women in crisis, getting off drugs, runaways or escapees from violent boyfriends.

Stone, gray squares covering the room's floor felt cold against her feet. The skinny twin bed cuddled a light blue and white quilt her mother had knitted for her at age three. To save space, the bed was shoved far into the corner, leaving only a small portion of squares to walk about. Jena pulled out the dancewear stocked under her bed in neat plastic bins. There would never be enough drawers in this setup for all of her multi-colored tights, leotards, dance shoes, hairspray, bobby-pins and pink-laced bun covers. Grabbing a large bunch of tights and leotards, she hugged them to her chest. This is why I'm alive. This is why I'm alive, she reminded herself.⁴⁸

Reflecting on Jena's Colleagues

A golem can't relate to other characters because they are of a different substance. These creatures may manipulate for some time, but a solid connection to the material world is impossible. Jena's insecurities are reaching a plateau, and as I come closer to establishing any kind of arc, she threatens to murder this project with an ongoing circularity of despair and passivity. You can't write with that junk clogging your creative arteries.

⁴⁸ I want Jena to believe that ballet is her reason for being alive.

Look at Clarice Lispector, who wrote *The Hour of the Star*. The author was ill with cancer as she wrote her last novel, and the French feminist Helene Cixous suggests a direct autobiographical murder between author and fictional protagonist:

One does not really know who wrote the book or who killed whom. One does not really know whether Clarice Lispector wrote the book in haste because she thought she was going to die or whether the book put an end to her life. Because of this strange connection between writing and dying, writers feel a strange desire for death. They feel like dying. But it is something they cannot say. I cannot say, "I feel like dying," because it is forbidden.

Lispector's narrator blames the protagonist for his own authorial death, playing the victim role as writer and creator: "Macabea has murdered me...Do not be frightened. Death is instantaneous and passes in a flash. I know, for I have just died with the girl. Forgive my dying, and yet it is the only thing one should say (Cixous 18).

I will not allow Jena's negative trance to drain this project. I will write away from her for now. She isn't feeding any new material anyway.

The German

Shortly after graduating from Tisch, instead of auditioning, I took up with a German architecture student whose sun sign happened to be in Virgo. The German commented, "There is a right way and a wrong way. If you are lazy, you will fail." He believed in an un-nuanced class system that one could spot on sight based on the tone of someone's voice, clothing, neighborhood, and schooling. Which explains why he only had one pair of Armani jeans. As a restaurant manager and architecture student at the New School, one pair was all he could afford. One frickin' pair of \$120 jeans. Crisp and

washed every three days, the luminous pair hung delicately on a thin-wired hanger, folded into a perfect half next to a series of white pressed collared waiter shirts and two pair of black waiter pants. He shared an ant-sized one bedroom with his lawyer-bound brother on Park Avenue that at the time cost \$1500, which wasn't cheap in the 90's. They slept on ten-inch wide air mattresses in a narrow room next to one another. As if they were gay brothers. But European (and especially German) men often come off gay so it's forgivable when they claim to be straight. They must have slept on their backs in the narrow bedroom, but I dared not ask. It was the opposite of sexy.

I met Otto on the Upper West Side where he was manager at Mendy's Bar and Grill, possibly the only Jewish sports bar ever to stay in business, a paradox for obvious reasons. I was the token female employee at Mendy's, most likely to serve as the sugar on top, the only female foolish enough to work there, as the kitchen was several yards from the dining room. Add that obstacle to jumbo heavy plates, bowls and cups and a family style menu, and I often found myself bending into a grand plie (ballet style) and slowly tipping over before reaching my destination while a perplexed group of modern Orthodox customers pondered if I was fit for the job. No, I was not. The other waiters, an Indian, a Mexican, and of course, the German, (we were a contemptuous Benetton commercial...remember those sweaters?) would run to save me and the food from collapse. The poor scrawny Jewish girl, with hair helplessly maneuvered into a scrunchy, lacking arm strength. They kept me on because I was nice and cute enough, bubbly, and mostly pleasant.

When the black hats would come from Brooklyn, they always asked for me. A sports bar seemed to be their only exposure to life outside the shtetl, which involved

women with wigs and possibly sex through a hole in a sheet, although despite my Jewish roots, I'm not fully versed in all the traditions, especially going up the tallest Orthodox ladder of things. While getting plastered on strawberry daiquiris, they would finger their payas while whispering lewd comments to each other. (I guessed the comments were lewd but really, they could've been biblical puns, for all I knew). Bobby, the headwaiter, lamented about returning to India where there was space for farms and "undisgusting people." He would smile at me and say, "It's your table. They asked for you again. Go now, they're getting impatient." I believe it thrilled him to watch the corners of my mouth droop. He would gesture to his mustache, caress the skin above his upper lip, and raise his eyebrows, a less than subtle suggestion that I should wax; I would feign confusion. Following Bobby's coercion, I would groan and meander to the group of twelve men in black and bask in their girlish giggles until closing. At Mendy's, all tips were pooled, so it wasn't really worth waiting on these woozy school boys, but there was nothing else to do but stand by my raily German hovering over a ladle of hot matzo ball soup in the restaurant kitchen.

"Otto, you should eat," I would coax him. "You're too thin."

"I'm eating; I'm eating," he would reply sucking up the hot soup in the midst of summer.

It was free and the salt gave the otherwise bland liquid a bit of flavor.

I was also getting too thin. An already small-boned girl of twenty-three, lifting heavy trays and running around a large restaurant was trimming me down. And Otto, as manager and full time student, couldn't find enough time to eat let alone tend to a disheveled girlfriend. After a night of soup sipping and scarfing down small bites of

corned beef between customers, I didn't have much else to do but wait for the German to return to the Upper West Side living room I called home, which was about two-hundred feet separated by a small Chinese divider. I was living with Jordana, an unemployed Modern Orthodox woman of forty-two who sometimes forgot to pay her electricity bills and had made a lot of money on Wall Street in the eighties. Something bad happened to her career and she recounted something about evil gender dynamics and a boy's club although I don't know quite what it meant. Jordana believed I was a psychic, and I played into these delusions until her eyes would widen, and she'd put up her hands and beg me to stop.

"I see three gypsy women here to protect you. But one is mischievous," I would say.

"Did she finish my Kosher wine last week?" Jordana asked. "I swear the bottle was almost full before Shabbas and then it was like a greedy Elijah stopped in on the wrong holiday."

"I believe one of the gypsy witches drank your Manischewitz," I would answer in a low, sultry voice. "It was not Elijah."

There were times Jordana and I placed scarves on our heads, blasted Shlomo Carlbach chants, and danced around the living room conjuring spirits.

I chanted, "I feel the witches. They're here now." And more often than not, it was the only weekly exercise she experienced.

"I'm shvitzing," she'd say.

"I feel their presence is trying to unblock the bad energy in this apartment. Sweat it out," I said. I'm not sure why I wanted to make her sweat so much.

Jordana used Prozac, her parent's checkbook, and the kosher sushi restaurant on Amsterdam Avenue to get through her days. And I used Jordana as my audience without a real career and pretended to be an actor without actually auditioning. "I'm an actor," I would tell people and it seemed to suffice. No one asked questions. Everyone was in New York to be an artist even if they weren't doing anything about it, and it was okay, as long as you were under thirty. When I wasn't dancing around the white-carpeted living room, if Otto had been working a shift and I didn't work that evening, he would come over and fuck me with his crooked penis,⁴⁹ and I would grit my teeth and bear it.

"Did you like it?" he would ask.

I'd shrug my shoulders.

Otto's well-structured face grew on me. It was something to look at, and he seemed to care for me. About eight months into our relationship, he developed a nasty habit of photographing our outings under what he titled "The Big Apple Experience" and proceeded to send evidence of his well-cultured life to his parents living in some obscure town near Munich. Near could have been forty-five minutes or two hours from the large city where his people had killed my people. Once I subtly touched on the subject:

"Do you come from Nazis?"

"Some," he said.

That was enough for me; he would never leave the fascist category in my mind even when I later learned that he had converted to Judaism and that somewhere a grandmother had Jewish blood and hid the shameful fact during the holocaust. When he

⁴⁹ Lopate couldn't understand what "made the sex so bad." I realized I failed to mention the penis shape was more of an inversion, like a question mark, not simply crooked. The issue is, the Otto character would have made a damned good husband. My newly de-virginized vagina did not easily take to this 'question mark' shape without serious effort.

was going down on me, I'd stare at my pubic hairs creating an almost perfect line with his upper lip and imagine he was Hitler. Even a close shave or wax couldn't erase his genocidal past. Perhaps even more than the imagined mustache was the matter of fact fervor in how he fucked me that conjured up the Gestapo.

I would lie there, staring up at him in confusion.

"I don't think we're really doing it," he said.

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"Having sex is in and out, you know," he said gesticulating with his hand. "And you're not moving."

Even after I tried moving, it was more of an up and down movement, not in and out, maybe to avoid the question mark inversion rupturing my ovaries. Or maybe I was doing it wrong. Easy things always come hard.

Otto's connection to his camera was deepening but protesting didn't help. Making faces and ruining pictures only disappointed him. One day during a trip to the Met, he began searching frantically through his man purse.

"Shoot!"

"What's wrong?" I asked.

"I can't believe it. This is just great, just great, ach, damn, just great."

"Stop repeating yourself and tell me what's wrong."

"I forgot it."

"What?"

"The camera," he said.

"It's no big deal. You can't take pictures inside the museum anyway."

“You don’t understand. My parents. I think they’re letting people take some pictures of some statues. I read it in a *New York Times* article.”

“You can’t be serious. This again? It’s becoming a regular fixation.”

“They want to know what I’m doing. Make sure I’m being cultured and staying on the right track.”

“You can call or e-mail them if you’re so worried,” I said.

“No, they like to experience New York with me. They don’t travel, and this gives them a sense of what I’m doing. They don’t get out. We have to go back and get it.”

“The museum is closing in an hour. There’s no time. And what’s all this about them not getting out? I thought you said they’re so cultured.”

“They don’t have a lot of money. They lost it in the war.”

“Ok, that’s scary,” I said.

“We are of blue blood descent,” he added. “We are Kohans with certain expectations.”

“You mean like from the bible? The original priests?”

“It’s complicated. The point is, they expect me to read the news, for example, unlike some people.”

“The news is depressing,” I said. “Your blooded lectures are boring,” I said.

My mother was a regular news fanatic and ecstatically tore out clippings and mailed them to me; her zest for information was evidenced by the paper’s jagged edges. She was too excited by a controversy to take the time to use a scissors – favored current events coincided with the greatest outrage. She’d circle the juiciest bits in a thick red pen that she used to correct eighth grade papers at the local Jewish day school. I don’t believe

I have ever read one more than one quarter of a single clipping, but that doesn't stop her crusade to get me informed.

"It wouldn't kill you to know what's going on in the world," said Otto.

"Maybe it would," I said.

"Tomorrow when we go to Central Park, I'm going to take double the amount of pictures to make up for today and make an enormous Heimlich family album online."

"Just don't Photoshop my head with Brittany Spears' body, ok?"

"What do you mean?"

Otto didn't joke, and he didn't get it when others told them.

The German had many talks with me about my lack of direction. His parents claimed I wasn't made of the right stock. Those broke blue bloods had a lot of ideas about living and with whom their youngest son should associate. Despite my upper crusty upbringing and history of attending solidly snobbish academic institutions, I was clearly "floating" in their eyes. My red blood was winding me to the skies of spacy land. Cheers to the Germans; they were right. And the Hemlich's did not float; they worked. He shouldn't remain with an aimless waif forever. He worked too hard. And the responsibility of sending money home to Germany coupled with the prospect of providing for me, a girl with at least half a brain who refused to use it, was too much for his good sense.

"You can't be a waitress forever," he said while we were waiting for a shift to begin. It was 3:45, and we sat in the back of Mendy's dimly lit dining room while the waiters were throwing breadsticks at one another. Most likely the Mashgiach was in the kitchen teasing the busboys by holding freshly cut tongue and flapping it in their faces.

“Why can’t I be a waitress forever?” I asked switching off from scrutinizing a half polished nail to playing with a piece of dry skin on the side of my nose.

“Because you hate it. And this place is a joke.”

“So,” I said.

“You have a degree from a good school.”

“Whatever, it’s a BFA in theatre. Big fuckin asswipes.”

“You know I hate it when you curse. It’s so unladylike.”

“Then find a lady.”

“You can do a lot with that degree.”

“Let me remind you, it’s a musical theatre concentration. I can tap dance.”

“So what are you interested in?”

“Theatre, I guess.”

“But you never audition.”

“That’s not true,” I said.

“When was the last time?”

His soft brown eyes rested intently on my face, a habit that either meant he cared or he had too much intensity and had to spill it over on someone else. I began pulling at wild pieces of my dyed blond wisps and stood up.

“I hate these conversations. They’re so boring,” I said.

“Just answer the question,” said Otto pulling at my arm, forcing me back into a chair.

“Jesus, stop manhandling me.”

“I’m sorry if you don’t feel comfortable talking about it.”

“I’m fine talking about it. I think I auditioned...well...hmmm, a few months ago, remember, oh yeah, right, that Summer Stock thing?”

“Your face was still painted as a mime from a birthday party job, and you didn’t bother to wash it off.”

“It was performance art. And I felt awkward because an ex-boyfriend was there from college. I was distracted. But it wasn’t so bad.”

“You told me it was terrible because you faced the piano player and auditioned from your side profile.”

“Yeah, it was crappy. I was embarrassed by the face paint.”

“Why didn’t you wash it off?”

“Not sure.”

“That was months ago,” said Otto.

“If you don’t change the subject, I’m going home,” I said.

“You have to do something with your life.”

“Boring, boring, boring!” I began pacing in Mendy’s dining hall. There were no customers. Otto followed. I touched the velvet tablecloth, plopped into a booth, and threw my head down on a menu.

“What about your writing?” he asked, touching the back of my head.

“What about it? I just do it for fun. Maybe one day. I don’t know. It’s not your problem; don’t worry about it. Please, you’re not my father, all right?”

On Marriage and Intimacy

Most of the married couples seem placated, like they've just experienced a fatty meal, with bloated eyes, souls covered in thick woolen blankets, leaving them itchy and sweaty but satisfied enough to continue the routine. That prospect is almost as frightening as carrying around a huge bowling ball for nine months, pushing it out (or getting it extracted) and then being responsible for the little shit-kicker forever and ever.

Once I thought I was getting close to the disturbing scenario above (marriage) when I convinced one of them to move in with me, but it didn't last long. After three months, it was obvious it wasn't going to work. He left his broken dresser in the middle of the living room to reinforce his agony, and I stared at it for almost a month – a cheap wooden middle drawer that had been pulled out and placed on top of the busted bureau. This sentence seems familiar. Oh my god, that dresser again. When I was done yelling about the dresser, I helped him pack his things so that he could get the hell out. What is this obsession with broken dressers? What would Freud say about a repetitive and intimate holding place like a dresser? Why did he leave the dresser out for so long?

*Add picture of dresser here*⁵⁰

Foot Shooting 1

1. Dissed the *New Yorker* *Who does that, anyway?*

For a brief time post college, I dated an editor named Jeffery Cohen. He was tall and thin, about 6'4, the way I kind of liked my men back then. A little nerdy. Very Jewish.

⁵⁰ I had a few men bring the dresser to the alley and forgot to take a picture.

He worked for *The New Yorker*. He seemed like the kind of guy I should date, and I immediately felt at home with this cerebral, wiry man. He attempted discussing writing, and I would abruptly change topics.

“What kind of exercise you like? How about Ethiopian food? Get along with your mother?” I asked.

After firing a series of open-ended questions, he’d sigh, answer, and gaze confusedly in my direction.

“You are a strange girl,” he said. “I really like you.”

He would call from a payphone down the block. I think he wanted me to perceive these awkward communications in a romantic light, like in a spy or Lifetime movie.

“I’m on the street corner. I can see into your window. It’s sort of like I’m stalking you,” he’d whisper.

“Whatever, Jeffery. You can’t see shit. I’m on the twelfth floor.”

“I’m wearing a long, black trench coat. I’ve been drinking.”

“No, can't see you. You don't sound drunk.”

I peered out my window from my Upper West Side apartment from the living room I inhabited in the apartment of a gorgeous Yemenite who enjoyed cleaning floors by tossing water out of a bucket in her thong and telling me I needed more exercise. I saw perfectly shaped butt cheeks many a time that year.

“You have such a pretty face,” she’d explain. “Such a shame you don't lose five to eight pounds.”

If I squinted and angled to the correct degree, I could make out the shape of a lean man in a payphone booth, but two booths were connected, so I couldn't say if it was the little devotee for certain.

"Can I come up? I need to see you," he said.

"No."

"Why not?"

"Don't want you to."

"Ok, heading home."

It's not that I was doing much with my life, but I was unwilling to put effort into a less than anti-climactic relationship. Without a goal to marry and little ambition to do the work to become anything great, this guy, although charming, was a little more than a distraction, and he was starting to border on creepy. Not enough to make me hate him, though. Jeffery had seen too many creeper movies, and he was trying to be creepier than he was. What creeped me out most was his trying to be creepy that wasn't working. A failed creeper is almost creepier than a real one. Even though he wanted me to feel the masculine mystery of his being older and more established, he wasn't equipped for the role. His voice was average, not deep, and his exasperated, slightly neurotic breathing did not emit dark and mysterious. We hadn't fooled around, so the extra need in his voice was odd to me.

Another time he had approached me about writing, we were probably sitting in a dark café on Bleecker or walking around the outskirts of Washington Square Park. I didn't let him take me to nice restaurants on real dates because I didn't want to give him the wrong idea.

"Let's just be super casual," I'd say.

We strolled around the city, never ending up anywhere, which is sort of the way most of my lukewarm relationships went at the time, still being a virgin at twenty-two.⁵¹

"Would you like to write something for me?" he asked.

"What do you mean?"

"You know, a piece. For *The New Yorker*."

I sat down on a bench near the arch and stretched my calves. I still have the habit of stretching and lunging around men I'm mildly interested in. And I had the idea that I hadn't completely given up dance as a profession. It was kind of my bored mating call and performance of dance.

"I don't know much about politics, so probably not," I said.

"You could write about art. You're into theater, so you could do that."

"Uh, well, lemme think..."

"Why not? Have you ever read the magazine?" he asked.

He lightly tapped my right shoulder, and I stared down his hand as if I was trying to make it fall off. Then he put his long, spindly arm around my torso, and I let his awkward appendage dangle around me momentarily before scootching to the other edge of the park bench.

"Stop," I said.

"Ok, ok."

"I'm kind of busy figuring things out. It's probably not the best time."

"It's a good opportunity," he said, moving towards me again. I stood up and exhaled for effect.

⁵¹ Ok, even after being a virgin, there has still been quite a bit of wandering.

I remember thinking that trying to impress me with dumb name-dropping like *The New Yorker* was the worst thing a man could do and how infuriating it was that he couldn't read the room. I glanced at Jeffery's slender, long nose, and searching eyes. I felt sorry for him.⁵² Couldn't he see that I was a wandering minstrel waiting for the defining moment when everything clicked? I didn't need his magazine or guidance.

“My hostess job is really draining. And I'm kind of taking a break from auditioning, so writing about theater would be – inauthentic.”

“I see. Why aren't you doing theater, again? I thought you said you trained for the acting world. I think I asked you this before, but you didn't really give an answer.”

Considering myself an important artist on a quest, I widened my strides as we began walking around the park and then I paused.

“Every time I go to one of those cattle calls, there are like five or six other girls who look like my sister, and it turns out, they're singing the same song, reciting a similar monologue, but just a little bit better. I wait four hours to perform for thirty seconds to a few exhausted or bored directors with hats and sunglasses stuffing their faces with tuna fish. It doesn't feel right. It doesn't feel like art.”

Then I circled around a tree and began a ballad about being a housewife, a song from *Working* to distribute my vocal talent and dramatic ability to go public. Auditioning for a musical for an arts editor made it so much easier to really be in the moment.

"I don't mean to complain at all...but they make you feel like you're two feet tall when you're just a wife. Nowadays all the magazines make a bunch of beans out of family life!"

“Lyndee.”

⁵² Oh, the irony.

I began moving my hands from my heart to the air in a pleading motion. My voice begged on:

"Hold on, not done...*What I do may be dumb to you but it's not to me...cuz I care you see....dadaadah....doing all the things-- that a housewife does*" ...

"You have a really nice voice. I don't understand why you don't audition." He stood up to hold my hand, and I darted behind a tree, giggling. We began walking out of the park.

"Don't lecture me."

"Ok, fine. I'll drop the theater stuff. But you expressed an interest in writing when we talked. Do you want to write?"

"I don't know. Maybe I'll think about it. I kind of prefer the first person anyway, not all that academic stuff."

"Ok."

I never did write that article for Jeffery, and I don't know what happened to him. It was the nineties, and he's no longer findable. He once took me to a *New Yorker* party, and I met a mix of writers. The women wore long flowery dresses and hats and the men dressed in suits. I wore large hoop earrings, a short mini, and an off-the-shoulder t-shirt, Flashdance style.

The New Yorker has rejected me three times in the past two years. In one case, an editor forgot to send the rejection slip, so I reminded him, and a year later, I received the form letter.

2. Rejecting Ford Modeling Agency

It must have been seventy-five degrees. I can be cute or ugly depending on the day. I'm not model pretty, but if I could figure out what to do with my hair, I'd look a hell of a lot better. Recently I permed it, and now I have the straggles, constituent of individual frizzy waves without congealment. The hair situation is an ongoing problem. If I worked out more, my body would be great. But I'm a little lazy, so my mid section has a bit of chub, nothing terrible, but I'm only medium to low motivated in the physical appearance department. I'm pretty good about moisturizing. Depending on the weather, I'm able to force myself to the gym about two or three times a week, but that would be an "up" week.⁵³ Some months I skip the gym completely. On most days, I settle for mildly attractive or at my worst, like I said, a little off kilter on the continuum to ugly.

But one day in May of 1998, I gazed into the looking glass and everything fell into place. A gentle stillness breezed around my upper torso. A mildly humid day forgave my unruly hair and induced extra texture. A soft glow inhabited my cheeks from walking in the early sun hours. I threw on a sundress and glided along the sidewalk, aware of people smiling towards the careless light around me. I was shining in the prime of youth. I believe I was the most beautiful I had been in my life that day. I wonder if anyone else has ever had that feeling...I have not been able to replicate it until now.⁵⁴

I entered Follonico, an Italian restaurant once located in Gramercy Park renowned for its brick oven pizza.⁵⁵ Working at Follonico meant interacting with a very short,

⁵³ I have lost about eight pounds in the last few months nearing the end of this dissertation. I'm not sure if this is good or bad.

⁵⁴ In writing.

⁵⁵ Attempted to google it. Man, it's closed. I'm getting old writing this thing.

mean-spirited chef and his even angrier live-in girlfriend manager⁵⁶ along with doting on table eleven for a regular named Rick, a daily lunch diner, an alleged balding big-wig in the publishing industry although I never got beyond, "Afternoon. How are you?" Anything beyond his ability to eat Italian pizzas could be folklore.

I entered hostess position and scribbled fragmented poetry onto small pieces of scratch paper to pass the time. It was too early for lunch and the menus had already been wiped down. The phone stood silently at attention while my ash tinted hair continued flowing and tickling the middle of my neck.

After an average busy lunch and assisting the staff in removing top white tablecloths, I spotted a tall and stately white haired gentleman gazing in my direction from the bar. He was surrounded by a few men, and was chatting up Louise, the very prim, long haired bartender who smiled shyly at customers- always with her mouth closed revealing a very cute left dimple. No doubt they were speaking about wine in some detail, one of the many nuances about Italian food that I knew little about. The man approached me slowly, walking with the kind of broad confidence saved for important people.

"Hello, my name is Jon."

"Hi, I'm Lyndee."

"Lyndee, you have a very interesting look," he said staring intently into my eyes and then assessing my figure methodically.

"Thanks."

"It's unique. Have you been in front of the camera before?"

⁵⁶ The word on the street was their recent move into a 475 square foot studio did not bring them closer.

I wondered if I would ever be able to represent a company or speak in such a relaxed rhythm.

"Sort of. Not a lot. I mean, no, not really."

"Would you like to?"

"Maybe."

"What do you do?"

"Well, hostessing keeps me pretty busy," I said.

I didn't want to sound bored by my restaurant job. I was a woman with a hostess career.

"Have you ever thought about modeling?"

"No, not really. I'm not really a model type," I said. "I'm kind of cerebral," I said stupidly.

"Oh, well, that's too bad."

He paused. Another pause. There are so many things I could have changed in a pause.

"Have a nice day."

Later that afternoon, my immediate manager, Joe, with two different colored eyes, and a man I made out with from time to time, partly because I found his ankles really sexy, approached the hostess desk.

"What did he say to you? Do you know who that was?"

"Not much. Just asked if I'd done any modeling," I said.

"He owns the Ford Modeling Agency, only like one of the biggest in the world. What did you say?"

“I...I told him I was a hostess.”

3. Did not Send Demo Tape to Electra Records

I was working for Ballas Clothing in Soho.⁵⁷ The nature of my work was criminal. I convinced very short men that long silk suits (and extremely long jackets) were a. in fashion and b. that they looked good on those little guys. The suits came in beige, a dark blue that resembled navy but featured a slightly lighter hue, and the oh-so-odd pastel green. I’m not sure how I did it, but under the tutelage of Collin, the cockney English manager with crooked teeth and morals, I went through silk like a worm out of business.



While working for Ballas, I sold about \$800 worth of merchandise to a record label exec named Clarence. I found him online the other day, and his job description says “Host at commercial talent agency,” but I think he works for Nascar because his profile claims he “Works for NASCAR” and all of his posts are about car racing. Fun guy. Why did I stop dating him, exactly? Look at him now.⁵⁸

Clarence claims to remember me, but then stopped writing.⁵⁹ We went on a few dates in the nineties, but I was a virgin and did a lot of squeamish laughing. At the time, I was training as a singer and working as the lead singer for a girl group for three middle aged producers who claimed to have “lots of connections.” We would meet in a downtown studio and sing somewhat catchy but mediocre R&B tunes acapella. In

⁵⁷ Ballas is gone too. Ffff.

⁵⁸ Apparently, the record label crash in the early 2000’s drove many of the higher ups into the car business. Hmm...

⁵⁹ This abrupt gap in communication could be due to my abusive line of questioning: Why aren’t you married yet? Do you want a family, etc. etc.

addition to the girl group, I was recording with a British music producer, but at some point, after I made out with him and refused to take things further, he sold all of his belongings and went back to Britain. We made a demo tape of dance music, kind of Madonna/Brit style. I wish I could find that tape; one song "Take It Or Leave It" was sort of brilliant, he rapped Pet Shop Boys style with his adorable accent, and I grizzled with attitude about being a glamour girl. Back to Clarence. On one of our dates, he mentioned being a big promotions guy at Elektra, but I never mentioned my demo tapes or wanting to pursue a music career. I wonder if selling silk was enough for this worm.

(Find Demo Tape)

Four Shots: Hightailing Gregory Hines

I fancied myself a bit of a bohemian and liked to perform it at all times, including moments of travel between one place to another. So now is the time to admit stomping around the sidewalks of downtown Manhattan in my tap shoes. These taps were black flats, not the high-heeled cute ones. And I was kind of dancing, not just walking. Synchronizing with the sidewalk, feigning no awareness of others watching but keeping a fish eye out for voyeurs was the very purpose of the sidewalk dance. Why would any young woman in her twenties force *Madwoman on the Sidewalk: The Musical!* on unsuspecting pedestrians? I liked the scrape, scrape, felap scrapey sound and believed I could do anything I wanted while catching a side-glance. I was an artist with a permanent audition called life and continued to improvise my script. Once a musician friend said he saw me walking down the street, singing loudly and stomping around. He did not stop me because he was bewildered. I think he actually used the term frightened. I used to

“practice” for auditions while wearing my Walkman and frolicking through the downtown streets, howling serious ballads with great feeling. Those crazed walking tours were my only auditions.

On one particular afternoon, I continued down my usual path for lunch at a nearby deli during a break from imposing silk suits on short men. This story is hard to tell because it makes very little sense, but if you can suspend your disbelief and not try to figure out why a Midwestern girl would stomp around in her tap shoes on the streets of Soho, you might also go along with the fact that I used to conduct short tap routines for the Latino deli servers in exchange for free servings. Initially, when I noticed the deli was adorned with a large wooden (dance) floor, I began tapping for those guys weekly. That day, I had forgotten to wear my taps, but I went to the counter to see my usual friends and say hello. I must have looked around to see if anyone had noticed me, whatever the hell that means, it was just something I was always doing, and then continued with my order.

“I’ll have the tuna,” I said missing the usual clickdicketyclick.

“Girl, where are your tap shoes?” said one of the guys.

“Forgot em.”

Gregory Hines walks in stage left. The uncanny feeling of not wearing my tappers on the day the tap master is three feet away shakes me to the core, more proof that my life is *totally* a movie. He is behind me and orders some kind of cold noodle thing with tomatoes. I know the situation is too good to ignore, but I don’t have the right line. My breath quickens. I know I have to say something...Hines is behind me, and they hand me the tuna, smiling. I glance over to the tap master. I’m on.

"Hi," I say," burning all over.

"Hi," he says smiling.

I walk over to the cashier with Hines trailing behind carrying some edible item in a plastic container. I reach for my wallet, and it's not there. I dig into in my pockets and then back to my purse. Nothing. Since I don't usually pay for lunch, maybe that's why I don't bother with a wallet, I wonder.

"This is embarrassing," I tell the cashier.

"I'll buy the young lady's lunch," said Mr. Hines. "Hi, I'm Gregory," he says offering his hand.

"Nice to meet you," I say, smiling. Here is my chance.

"I loved White Nights. It was so romantic."

"Thank you."

"Thank you for the lunch," I say. "I don't usually forget my wallet," I said. It was a half-truth.

"Don't mention it," he says and offers a genuine smile. Gregory Hines is genuinely smiling into my eyes.

"I also forgot another thing today," I say.

"Yeah, what's that?"

"My tap shoes," I said.

"Really?" he says, dancing eyes watery and large like always. Slinky build and fluidity just as you'd expect it. His clothes don't reveal a color because he is a boundless energy beyond the material.

I had peaked his tall and angled attention. All smooth waves up and down. He possessed a gliding strength, rays of confidence gently radiating a light and heat all

around me. How often I had longed to just be in the midst of a power like this – but rarely had the chance. If I could have bottled up his naturalness, I would have caught it and swallowed it. But fireflies don't live in jars. Now that it was here, I was awake. More than awake. Alert and ready for my life. That's how powerful men who throw a little attention on a hungry girl do it; they make us feel things that we don't let ourselves feel. Or is it that the world takes that feeling away? I still crave that feeling.

“I usually tap here, and they give me free food. But I didn't wear my taps today, of all days,” I said again, hot and laughing.

“Huh,” he said, probably trying to process what I was saying.

“She does wear her tap shoes!” one of the deli guys chimed in. “When she comes in, she does a little dance, and we give her some food!”

Mr. Hines chatted with me a little, but I was so feverish, I can't directly recall what was said.

I perform a few barrel turns, shuffle off to buffalos, and a simple flap ball changes in my sneakers, and explain that I'm studying acting.

“You know, you have something. Some talent. What's your number? I think I can help you,” he said.

But I wasn't listening. I was too alive to pay attention. This man was twinkling a little power on me. I rattled off my digits and shook his hand. Gregory Hines asked for my phone number.

Two weeks later, my phone rang in my Greenwich Village apartment. It was him. I could tell by the slightly breathy, raspy tone.

“Hi, Lyndee?”

“Yes, who’s calling?”

“It’s Gregory Hines.”

Pause. Long pause. Holy shit. He called. The best I could do was act nonchalant. Not too desperate. Too alive again. No words. No words. No time. No space.

“Hi there. How’s it going?” I asked.

“Good, good. Listen, I want to help you. How much tap have you had?” he asked.

Panic. I really wasn’t a highly skilled tapper. I had some talent; he was right, but only because I was a good dancer. I only knew *some* tap, but not a lot.

“Not a lot. Maybe a few years at school. I’m not primarily a tapper.”

“I see,” he said.

I was screwing up. I knew I was, but I couldn’t help it. I didn’t want to lie and make an ass of myself. In an effort not to overstate, I always understated. Way understated to the point of disappearing into a small, unfocused spec. Showing up for some audition somewhere and then falling flat would have disappointed everyone. It is so much better to tell the truth, isn’t it? This is the crux of a real problem.

“There’s a woman named Deloris who teaches at Steps, and she’s a friend of mine. I told her about you, and she said she’d look after you, and I could check in.”

“Is it a very difficult class?” I said, not attempting to hide my anxiety.

“It shouldn’t be too bad. Here’s her number.”

I think I wrote the number down. I don’t know if I did. Maybe I lost the piece of paper. I don’t remember if I asked Mr. Hines for his number. I never called. Icouldn’t.

Monologue Class: Just Shoot Me

It's two years since I've graduated from Tisch School of the Arts, I'm dating the German, and "professionalizing" my acting career through a monologue course at TVI Actors Studio. Essentially, it's a place where actors feign learning but are really paying to be seen by casting directors who teach classes. So in a sense, it's an ongoing audition. I'm still in New York thinking that if I keep taking classes, I'll get better at my craft and audition like other actors. This is the time before I seriously considered becoming a writer, about seventeen years ago.

People often find me online as the femme fatale star of a kitschy B feature film, *Kill Me Tomorrow*, translated in a zillion languages. Patrick McGuinn, (Son of Roger McGuinn, lead singer of the Byrds) directed the campy horror movie, and I wrote a few strange monologues for my part as murderous witch. I enjoyed working on the film with him, and at the time, I didn't think anything of it. I didn't know who McGuinn was until I looked it up recently. I left New York before the premiere screening in a downtown movie theater in the village, and I lost the tape. I smile and tell people I never made it in the business. That's what happens to actors most of the time. They work so hard, they want it so badly, then somewhere, the dream takes over, and if they're lucky, years later with backaches from waitering, too much drinking, and living in shithole after shithole, a barrage of roommates that they find from advertisements, they get some kind of break and their career takes off. Even if it doesn't, it's fucking noble. They are always trying.

But I wanted knowledge and the visceral experience was secondary.⁶⁰ I wanted to understand the craft. But knowledge isn't always power and there weren't enough classes to drag my cerebral butt into the limelight. An eternal student does not an actor make. But

⁶⁰ What I wouldn't kill for any kind of visceral experience right now.

I enrolled in TVI, an actor-casting director purgatory for the student not fully prepared to flee the nest. And in turn, for an overpriced course, the goat is that some big name that happens to be your teacher might notice you. Unfortunately for me, I was noticed.

Barry Moss, a well-known Broadway casting director and musical theater coach at TVI, favored my rendition of Ado Annie's "Can't Say No."

"You can sell the hell out of a song," he would say after I sang.

But when it came time to perform for his producer friends and agent cronies, my throat magically closed. Tada, smashed shut! I argued with myself for ten whole minutes and then promised I would follow up. Since he had taken an interest in me, I thought as much to show him the respect of letting him know I wasn't coming. Surprisingly, his assistant put him on the phone after asking who I was.

"Sweetie, you can do it another time," Barry assured me. "You're really good. I'm available anytime for you."

Barry had been casting musicals like *The Scarlett Pimpernel* and *Les Miserable*. Earlier in class, I had expressed interest in the part of Eponine, and he said I was too tall.

"Well heck, Barry, I'm skinny enough," I said.

I was waitressing and taking numerous dance classes per week, so I was boney at the time. His pianist Ken had pulled me aside a few times after class, gleaming with congratulations.

"Barry really likes you; you should take advantage."

I never called back to sing. I don't know why.

After the Barry Moss debacle⁶¹, I tried to fix things and enrolled in a monologue class taught by a different casting agent. Paul something or other. Nobody likes talking to a speck on the wall, but it's a necessary audition skill and a monologue demands wall talkin. This was my last class to help prepare me for a real actor's life; I was making sense and being practical now despite my discomfort. Finally.

In class, I wasn't getting the monologue. The words stuck to my tongue and wouldn't fall off. I couldn't get out of my head that talking to the wall while an audience stared at me was disconcerting; playing with real people made so much more sense. Why, why, was I doing this? Because my dear, I would argue with my brain, for the audition process, a good monologue is expected. I had practiced at home, imagining I was speaking to past boyfriends, hot movie stars; I even improvised a scene by talking to my best friend. But it was a dead, dead space. Paul grimaced as I said the lines, "I want to go to the moon with you." I was making him nauseous; he was clutching his stomach. He interrupted me in front of the class.

"Okay, sit. I don't know how else to say this. You're acting like a slut."

Paul was overtly gay, and I wasn't convinced he had experienced a slutty woman in any way or if he had the right to use those terms anyway. But I wasn't exactly experienced either.

He sat higher and sucked in a heap of air while pulling his hands through his thick grey hairs that were separated into chunks by expensive gel. How do I know it was expensive? I just do. It was textured. If he had a cigarette, he'd be smoking.

"How should I – not seem – slutty?" I asked.

⁶¹ It's 2014, and I'm almost finished with this book. I looked for Barry online because I began writing a musical and regretted letting him go as a mentor. He passed away three days before I attempted contact. I sent his partner my condolences.

The room buzzed with an added silence that had not existed before. The other mediocre acting students stared.

“I don’t know, it’s sensual, not sexual. Get it?”

He raised his eyebrows and straightened his white silky t-shirt. I didn’t answer. I had been twirling the hair at the end of my ponytail and smiling a lot to get some momentum on the word moon.

“You look confused,” he said.

“Well, she’s not a virgin,” I said.

“She might be.”

“Well, I don’t think so. The text mentions her other boyfriends.”

“That choice isn’t helping you,” said Paul as he lowered his chin.

“Okay – but she’s struggling with her father’s misogynistic impulses towards her mother.”

“What in the world does that have to do with anything?” Paul asked.

“I think she doesn’t know what it means to be a woman, so I thought of her as kind of testing the boundaries of her sexuality...”

“I’m not sure where you’re going with this.”

“She’s trying to assimilate into American culture now, so I was thinking she’s going for an independent approach from her parents – kind of a diasporic challenge.”

“She’s a nice girl and she wants to get the guy. She’s innocent. That’s it. No discussion really. You’re reading into it.”

“I don’t know”—

“That’s it,” he said, slapping his hands to his knees. He stood up.

I sat at attention on the old wooden chair, and no one moved. I was alive again – very alive, but here power was threatened, not offered. The room's white walls and floor gleamed with a stifling iridescent brightness. The acting gods were beckoning to take me away.

“Hmm?” I asked.

“You’re going to have to leave,” he said.

“What?”

“You have to get out of my class. You’ve been questioning the process from day one,” said Paul, escalating his voice to a dramatic crescendo. “You think too much. Your eyes are always giving me that irritating searching look. You’re not throwing yourself into the part; you don’t throw yourself into the world of the play. Just forget it. Acting is not for you! There are plenty of other professions. Be a doctor, a lawyer, whatever floats your boat. But you can’t get up and direct a scene, analyze it to death, and be in it. I can’t take it anymore. It’s been weeks of this bullshit. I’ve had enough. You have a decision to make.”

No one moved. A girl in the back who had been regurgitating “Star Spangled Girl” with a bad southern accent coughed and flipped her yellow, hair-sprayed hair. Maybe she was crying. Maybe a ball of mascara dripped into her blue tinted contact lens. Slowly I returned to my seat in the audience, grabbed my notebook, and headed for the door. Paul’s eyes widened as I glanced backwards. I don’t think he had expected me to leave. I don't know why I did. Maybe I should have fought, but that was the last time I seriously considered pursuing an acting career.

I could add more commentary here. I could try to figure out why I left. That is my job, and it is what the form begs. Foregoing retrospect at the conclusion of this pivotal foot shooting moment is chicken shit, a pina colada without rum, like the cornflake without the milk...⁶² Any words syntactically collected would be lies, darts grabbed while blindfolded. It would be another author forcing language onto the page in a moment where logic breaks down and the world stops making sense. In the same way we fail to echo the contents of our dreams after waking, I cannot find/provide you with/replicate a good reason for walking away. I can merely attempt to capture the essence of how it felt. I'm so sorry.

**Blame My Family and Simultaneously Prove a Frailty of Self
Ranging on a Continuum from Neurotic to Slightly Disturbed**

By 1999, I had been a wandering Jew in the desert of New York City for three years, and the 30k in my Schwab account had really petered. At the exact moment when my savings were vanquished by the Manhattan's thirsty desert, I developed a profound stomach flu. It was a tacit agreement between my father and me that I would never know the actual amount in the account; (although I had some idea) the money was line itemed in his ledger as "eldest," as in daughter. No questions asked. With a pack of \$500 headshots and enough food in the refrigerator, I somehow *preferred not to* audition similar to Bartleby's failure to copy documents. It was not preferable to wait for hours simply to sing sixteen bars to a line of bored directors and casting agents shoving turkey sandwiches and slurping coffee before blurting out "next." Sometimes they wore sunglasses. I think one was sleeping once. The cattle calls always featured a dozen or so

⁶² Orange Juice Jones: "The Rain," come on, you remember, "I saw YOU and HIM walking in the rain. You were holding hands, and I will never be the same." It's the rap part, you remember! (1986)

girls who looked similar to me and sang the same songs loudly through the door of the audition room with more force and determination than I believed I ever could. Sometimes they'd psych me out in the bathroom, making fake kissy faces into the mirror, exuberant hellos with pursed lips. One day I stopped going altogether.

But the idea that I “stopped going” sounds like I really went at all. It represents the idea that a change took place, and my failure to show up was so much more subtle than the idea of stopping. I had participated in less than a handful of auditions since graduation and found the process abhorrent. Detailed research stints involving finding the best book store, scanning every monologue book, every page resembling a potentially funny leading lady, every popular play read, and combing through hundreds – and then thousands – of speeches to show my range of humor and pathos dragged on and on. No piece was quite right. Being a virgin didn't lend itself to taking on roles of emotionally distraught women who had given their bodies and souls to their boyfriends or husbands or friends or Jesus God, whomever. My high-pitched voice and Midwestern accent did not resonate. I wasn't quite the leading lady type but also failed at faking more diverse female roles like Mamet's tough working class characterizations. I couldn't mirror the behavior of a drug addict when my idea of drunk was still too many gulps of Manishevitz. I hadn't lived. The only role between street woman and heartbroken woman is the infamous ditz, which for some reason, and to this day, is considered a humorous role, and my feminist tendencies wouldn't allow such exploration. (although I sported an iridescent blue unitard, an off-the-shoulder t-shirt, and colorfully mismatched socks).⁶³

⁶³ I fit the “ditz” role more than I was willing to admit.

Then there was the song problem. Sixteen bars was neither enough time to reach the emotional arc nor did the duration provide a true sense of a scene. Once I opted for an inappropriately depressing song when auditioning for a cruise ship:

*Once upon a time a boy with moonlight in his eyes
Put his hand in mine and said he'd love me so
But that was once upon a time. That was very long ago...*

I think I got as far as “once upon a time” before I heard the dreaded and flat toned “next!” And I can’t imagine how it was on the other side – to watch a skinny virgin bemoaning her once upon a time that clearly never happened.

The only other option was the “spunky, quirky ingénue,” a type I was coined by all my acting teachers. I understood I had to be exuberant and excited every time approaching a role like this. It hurts my neck arteries to think about how I tried to force out so much zest and motivation to perform quirky and fun yet leading lady in love, something I had never experienced.

*Haircut simply terrible
Necktie, the worst
Bearing just unbearable. What to tackle first?
But you've got possibilities though you're terrible square
You've got possibilities, underneath there's something there!*

I had a certain forced force, but not necessarily the believability. At least, I couldn’t convince myself to really, truly want to change Clark Kent into Superman. I just didn’t care. Nerdy was sexy to me anyway, and there was nothing remotely in my life that connected. Why bother trying to change a man when men didn’t matter so much? I also

worked much better feeding off a scene partner, not emoting to that damned speck on the wall.

Dance auditions were more of a problem because although I possessed a fairly strong dancing technique and stylistic ability, I struggled to remember combinations. So I talked myself out of auditions by reading more plays, taking more voice lessons, and looking through mass amounts of sheet music without deciding on anything, promising myself that when I found the best material and ideal role, I would show up. Until then, what was the rush? On the side, I participated in dance classes, often hiding in the back of the room until the teacher realized I had some talent and pushed me to the front. The front of the room was where I revealed my directional issues and inability to remember the steps. Why couldn't I blend in the background?

I remember the day I ran out of money. It was a typical day. I had slept until noon, grabbed some eggs at the corner deli, and tossed down some coffee as I waited patiently for my part-time waitress job at 4 p.m. while looking over a stacks of monologues and sheet music in large disheveled piles on the living room floor.

“Your account is almost depleted,” said a Schwab account representative.

I had been draining the account dollars for a solid four years since graduation by working part-time jobs, taking various theatrical training courses, and sharing living rooms with single, middle-aged women on the Upper West Side by way of *Village Voice* advertisements.

“Oh!”

“This is a courtesy call.”

“Thanks. Would you mind telling me how much is left?” I asked.

“Well- let me see...hmmm—I’m sorry miss. It looks like the account is in your father’s name, and I don’t have permission to give you that information.”

Had I heard a hint of confusion in his voice?

“Is there a way to find out?” I asked.

“You can get the information from Dr.” –

“My dad.”

“Oh, your father – can call in (had he cleared his throat?) and find out the balance and tell you. Or he could write a letter with his signature authorizing you as a co-owner of the account. He gets the statements every month.”

“Oh, I didn’t realize. Well, never mind.”

“Is there anything else I can help you with?” he asked.

I wondered why, after a conversation was clearly finished, service people must ask if there was something else they could do for you. Were you actually supposed to think about it? Was it a moral imperative to provide additional questions? Really, I wanted more money, but I couldn’t say that. I wanted to act in a play without auditioning but that wasn’t possible. I wanted this Schwab crony to call my father and scream, “Sir, this was not a good idea, giving your daughter an unknown lump sum and then offering her no access to the account. Clearly she doesn’t know what the bleeping bleep she’s doing.” Or maybe Mr. Schwab himself could personally ask my father, “Why did you allow her to major in acting, unfit to do anything in the real world?” But no, he just had to ask the empty, meaningless question: *Is there anything else I can help you with?* It is decidedly so that the Pavlovian regurgitation of obsessive questioning trumps the

customer who desperately desires to hang up. To this day, I loathe this last scripted question.

For the next several weeks an acid buildup in my throat correlated with the dissipation of the last hundred dollars in my account. I had trouble swallowing food and keeping it down. The German was helpless and encouraged me to visit Upper East Side doctors who proceeded to pump me full of antibiotics. Minus twelve pounds, I was disappearing; my teeth began protruding.

“Just eat this banana,” Otto said, sitting on one of my two twin beds that we pushed together in the living room I rented from a middle-aged woman’s one-bedroom apartment.

“I can’t. I feel sick. No appetite,” I frowned. “And I can’t live on \$200 a week. It’s just not working in New York for me. I’m not fit to do anything,” I said.

“You could work as a secretary,” he offered.

“Otto, do you know me? I’m afraid of copy machines.”

“That’s true, not very organized. So what are you going to do?”

We both knew I would bow my head in defeat, pack up my crap, and go home to daddy.

I peered around the Upper West Side living room. A long ornate wooden table that I would never use for Shabbas dinner or any kind of formal party confronted me. Her wine glasses from Jerusalem in the shapes of tears I had only held briefly; I wasn’t a drinker. I hadn’t read the Jewish books: *Exodus*, *Herzog*, and Maimonides. She was a conservadox, and I attended services at B’nai Jeshrun, the so-called conservative synagogue kicked out of the movement for sponsoring an Aids walk. It was in a church,

and she mocked me for attending. I wasn't auditioning, I wasn't a real Jew, so what was I doing there?

"He knows the best doctors. I'm just not getting better here," I said.

"Let me come with you."

"No, you have to finish architecture school. I need to figure things out," I said.

He didn't stay to help me pack because he said it would be too sad. Since I didn't own any furniture, it was easy to ship my clothes home and relocate to my parent's house in Evanston. We planned a long distance relationship.

Psycho-Somatized!

This is not empathetic, frightening, or suspenseful. So much for the writer/reader contract, Screw you, Jejeune. I'm not a lawyer. And I'm not French. I don't make French contracts with readers or any other untrustworthiness.

For the next several weeks a mere case of indigestion converted to a ball of unrelenting acid rising to my throat until I couldn't swallow. Funny how suddenly realizing you're broke can make you sick. I continued to barrel antibiotics into my body until the day I left New York. My diagnosis was GERD, Gastro esophageal Reflux Disease, and was easily treated by antacids, but New York doctors are reliant on neurotic young women like myself who happily lap up false diagnoses. At one hundred pounds, money and stomach depleted, I packed my things while the German stared in confusion. I returned to Chicago for a consultation with my allergist father who referred me to a Gastroenterologist. Dr. Vainder performed an endoscopy, an invasive procedure that

involves a camera down the throat, and I was sentenced with GERD, which basically is just really bad indigestion.

Dr. Vainder was a local family favorite because all of us have a little GERD. (I'm sure before my grandmother passed she gave one final belch). Aunt June, beloved grandmother Henrietta, deceased Uncle Dan, related by marriage but still a GERDEE nonetheless, my sister and my father, all have GERD. My mom takes the medicine just to fit in with the rest of us. Talking to a member of our family includes a sudden "Grrrr, Eeek, Bulp." We are a nervous bunch. *How can you give back to society? What is it that you want out of life? How are you really doing?* These are the kind of existential questions that generally make people nervous and should be asked in private. (that was the blame the family part). Because of the trauma I have undergone by this familial style of intrusive examination, I am ill equipped to answer direct questions but according to my current photographer boyfriend, I fire them out ceaselessly upon others.

With the German breathing down my neck, the funding situation in crisis, and my negligent audition situation, I began to comprehend that the WASPS are better off; they are smart to avoid this line of questioning. A typical conversation with my family at the time occurred in the following way:

"Hi, mom. How's it going?"

"Oh fine, your sister is driving us crazy traveling around the world. Your dad keeps telling her to stay put, but you know she doesn't listen. She's got some kind of amoeba on that darned island and is threatening to bring Tojo back to Westernize him. We're going out there to bring her back. What's with you?"

"Is she okay?"

“She’ll be fine. They don’t have vegetables over there, so she’s really constipated. Your father’s got to get her away from bamba boy.”

“What did you call him? I’m pretty sure that’s racist.”

“Well, anyway- what’s new with you?”

“Nothing. I’m taking another acting class. And voice lessons are going pretty well. I’m working on a few arias,” I said.

“Oh. So the acting is going ok?”

“I guess so.”

“You know, you could always come home,” she would offer.

(No pleasantries- straight to the jugular).

“What would I do there? No, it’s not a good idea.”

“I just heard a new David Sedaris story. He reminds me so much of you. Maybe you should try and get a few things published.”

“I really haven’t written anything.”

“Hmmm.”

“What?”

“Nothing.”

“That sounded like disapproval.”

“Just thinking.”

My mother is not a thinker. Her silences communicate.

“How’s the German?”

“Otto, mom. His name is Otto.”

“Right. Well, is he still having that ulcer issue?”

“I don’t know mom. He’s got a lot of pressure with school and work. Dad, is that you? I hear breathing.”

My father often listens to phone conversations without announcing his presence, an irritating anti-social habit. The allergist with allergies.

“What’s doing? Are you done with that hell hole of a city?” he asked.

“Not yet dad. It’s not so bad.”

“It’s a rip off. And your mom tells me you’re miserable.”

“I didn’t say that,” I said.

“Your grandma has been sick. Maybe you could come for a visit. She misses you.”

And so on and so forth.

By the time I had packed my things to return to Chicago and get healthy, I developed tremors in my hands and feet— or they were possibly asleep — from worrying about my “condition.” These spastic motions invaded my body anytime, unannounced, unplanned. The German was greatly grieved that I was leaving and vowed to be true — even with my spasms. During my reconnaissance, he came to visit me after fleeing the bad doctor city and broached the topic of marriage.

“Did I ever tell you the story about my ring? I found it snorkeling,” he hedged.

He was confronting me in my new space in my parent’s attic, a sort of punishment during the purgatory of my life with a ring he pulled out of his Armani jean pocket that glistened like a creamy blue moonstone. It was cold up there and smelled of mold. A wasp nest (bugs, not Protestants) snuggled itself by the skylight and resonated a distinct

buzzing song in the background of my dreams. A squirrel was rumored to be trapped between the walls; something was definitely rotting.

“Those fucking squirrels. I’ll get every god-damned last one,” my father would say.⁶⁴ I knew my family wouldn’t take to the German and that the German wouldn’t take to us. He was polite, loyal, and just a little crazy – but in a totally different way than they were. He would be impressed by the house in what he would decide was an upper crust bourgeoisie neighborhood and my father’s light blue Lexus with the leather interior would entice him. It would be their manners that would confound him. They would wonder what I was doing with a stiff and somewhat stunted fellow but would happily entertain the thought of making me someone else’s problem. I had screwed up my life this far, so one more smashing of a sandcastle would hardly be relevant.

But I couldn’t approve of ring talk. It sounded ugly and unromantic in a German accent and somehow, frightening. I had no job but I did have a case of the hiccups that had lasted a week. The Zoloft the family psychiatrist put me on was causing zombie-like behavior with bouts of diarrhea although my worrying persisted. No money or job = anxiety. Marriage was not an option. I couldn’t imagine the German lifestyle consisting of delicate chinaware, severely organized dresser drawers, (drawers, those drawers again) appointments instead of dates, and robust, highly productive children.

“No, you didn’t tell me about a ring,” I suggested to Otto. “I don’t think it’s the right time to discuss this sort of thing.”

His retelling of his ring finding excursion is hardly memorable but something about coming upon a glassy substance during some deep sea-diving trip with his lawyer

⁶⁴ Father’s squirrel obsession/squirrel abuse with a city trap and bb-gun may be illustrated later.

bound brother and saving it for “the one.” The German was very, very nice. Not bad looking. Tall, thin, stately. He had an attractive, boney face. And he was kind. His head was skinny like a plate. He paid extra special attention to my life when I wasn’t. I had nothing, no hopes for the future and my only access to resources was an ability to find good doctors. And with that, he left Chicago, returned to New York deflated, defeated, and rid of me. Of course, there were some messy phone conversations and a later return to NYC because reality isn’t ever as clean as the written word. One case of oral sex that wasn’t terrible when I was thinking of getting back together, but for all intents and purposes, it was over. Let’s push forward.

Frankly Fucked Up in E-Town

I had encouraged my father to believe I was mentally deficient, but I was unable to live up to frail Anne Frank persona in the attic and would soon be forced to work. Female upper middle class leisure without any actual leisure = mental absurdity. Without World War II or the threat of anti-Semitism, especially in the neo-liberal Evanston college town of hippie yippies, I was shit out of luck.

Being Frank

I used the family psychiatrist, a man who charged \$3 a minute, (my father’s equation) a great expense in the nineties. Frank used Anna O strategies, and I talked until he rolled his eyes and told me to shut up. In the corner of his office on Riverside Circle, a lone gray couch beckoned, a representative of one of those bugger couches from the fourth grade that the class freak wiped his cooties on. Frank had some of my father’s

money issues, both being wealthy men who preferred to walk about in rags. I noted a glimmer of light peeking through his dirty ivory blinds as I slouched into the edge of a grey scratchy exterior of what looked like cushions from war-torn Europe. The pillows at the center didn't quite match although they were in the grey family. Related greys.

Frank was not a young man. Businesslike but a bit off in a nondescript way, he looked a lot like Freud except his eyes were closer together. He lacked a German accent, but not the intensity of what I imagined was a similar speaking style – slow and deliberate. Taking long pauses between thoughts and staring penetratingly at me, he sized up my body language in a way that suggested, I'm watching you watch me watch you. He was the only human being I had met so far whose breath seemed to match his thoughts, and ultimate consciousness. Frank was constantly drawing in oxygen and speaking on the exhale as if there wasn't enough air to feed his powerful brain. Sometimes his breath would collapse in an exhale before he had any created words. I sat with my arms folded across my chest. The psychiatrist's black googly eyes stared into mine in a way that announced my naked vulnerability; he was reading my mannerisms as a manifestation of my discomfort.

“So why are you here?” he asked, eyes twinkling but all the while it seemed those eyes were tired of seeing the world's whining. The dark pupils reflected smoke stacks, industrialization, the worlds suffering. Discontent and all its misanthropes.

“I – don't know—not exactly. I feel awkward.”

The tears came pouring down, a sniveling raindrop prelude. The waterworks preyed upon my confusion. Tears that had always been there, waiting, watching for a time for permission to exit. The floodgates were lifted and the salt was bitter, unattractive

to behold, red, puffy, and raw. With wings, I would have flown away by now, away from his dingy office, my small existence in the suburbs, and into something far greater. But what? And where? I knew nothing about life. I stared down at my stupid feet, planted into the old curly discolored rug. My brown leather shoes were scuffed.

“Why are you crying?”

He tilted his head. Was it feigned compassion? The tilt could be the gesture of caring in another story. I think it was the first time a man tried to listen.

“I came back from New York because I ran out of money, and I’m not really fit to do anything. I have an acting degree.”

Years later after he announced his retirement and the last day I saw him, I would shakily pass over a hand-written letter thanking him for noticing me and making me un-crazy. For a moment, he would awaken from his middle-aged existentialism and post-Freudian haze with a start. I know I woke him just for a moment. It’s hard to do that with people, isn’t it.

“Hmmm. Whose idea was acting?”

“Well, they let me go. I don’t believe my father was thrilled. But no one could believe that I got in to the Tisch School of the Arts.”

“Yes, I’m familiar.”

“So, I thought if I didn’t go, I’d regret it.”

“Right, and now?”

“Yes, now (more tears) – I don’t know what to do. I lost weight and had some health problems.”

“Well, you’ll have to settle the health issues but they sound a bit psychosomatic to me. What I mean is, I don’t think it’s anything serious. You’re going to have to get a job.”

“True.”

Was I an idiot? Of course I would have to work. Did I need to see this Freud imposter to hear ‘get a job’ for \$3 per minute? I had only been blessed with professional titles like *camp counselor*, *babysitter*, *retail saleslady*, and predictably as every aspiring actor, (or not so aspiring in my case) the *waitress*. The word job sent my body into a fit of tremors suitable for the opening of a Chekhov play. It was the end of a Tsarist regime except I was on the North shore in mourning for my life. Oh Masha. Why do you always wear black? Because you’re a drama queen. I stomped my feet to rid myself of the prickly tingles.

“What are you doing?” he asked softly while raising his eyebrows.

“My legs are falling asleep. My body has been acting up since I was diagnosed with GERD.”

“Don’t do that anymore. You look insane. And you’re not. People will think you’re pretty off. It looks off. Get it?”

I stopped. Just like that. No more stomping or talking about GERD.

He crossed his legs in the way smart, slightly effeminate men do and leaned in. For an old guy, he wasn’t bad looking, not good looking exactly, but his focus forgave his awkward features.

“The job needs to be your focus. How were your relationships in New York?”

“Well, they were not really going anywhere. I was dating a German, but he wanted me to get my life together. And as you can see, that didn’t work.”

He sighed.

He was probably bored. Just another North Shore brat not ready for life. I was that boring. Oh my god. Am I still that boring?⁶⁵

“You speak of the German boy kind of mechanically – without even mentioning his name. When I talk about my wife, notice the corners of my mouth rise a little. We still get a kick out of each other. I look forward to her calls during the day. There are many psychiatrists who practice without knowing anything about relationships or love.”

There was a long pause.

“Is it dark in here?” I asked. “Could you possibly get a real light?” I asked.

“No,” he said.

I had been warned that Frank didn’t have enough light because he was cheap. The office presented a murky grayish carpet, a beat-up brown leather chair with rips on the arms, and a lone lamp that shone an ominous fluorescent glare.

“Do you know about your dad’s childhood?” he asked.

Frank had treated my dad for over ten years, and after a decade, he was allegedly a lot better.

“Yes, I know that his brother was killed and his parents treated him like shit and told him they’d rather it was him. He had to plan the funeral.”

I didn’t tell Frank about my father’s temper. I don’t think I’ll write too much about it, not because it’s ominous and frightening, but it’s not fair to expose everything.

⁶⁵ I don’t know what to say in this footnote, but still, a footnote seems necessary here. Feel free to scream.

Attic Life

A trope dream is classically placed in italics by novice writers.

I'm swimming in a vast, infinite ocean. The current is wild and the waves surge into my pores and begin to suffocate me. I am still alive, swimming alone under a dark sky against the seas' violent outrage. I see a far away island, and if I keep swimming I may reach it, but it begins to rain and I awaken. ⁶⁶

I had been in therapy and living at home for about six weeks without more than three to four hours of sleep per night. To cope with the circumstances, I relied on a self-help tape entitled “Reducing Stress and Anxiety.” A woman with a low, terse voice, a hint of hostility and a mound of unprecedented resonance repeated several “positive” phrases while changing inflections on each word to avoid monotony.

I AM a caring person
 I handle things WELL
 People LIKE me
 I am CALM and appreciate my life
 There is light ALL around me
 I am OKAY with conflict.
 I LIKE myself.

By the time of the tape's denouement, the actress, who sounded more like a combination between a dominatrix and clinical therapist, would mention: “If you have saliva in your mouth, feel free to swallow,” and this bizarre remark would never cease to jolt me out of relaxation. What the fuck is wrong with this woman? She sounds angry. Why is she

⁶⁶ Water, in this case, may be connected to sexuality, birth, rebirth, or death. Freudian psycho-dynamic interpretations are admissible in this genre (genre is not to be confused with the word “generic”).

angry? I would wonder if she had children or if she was abused as a child or if this was her last acting gig and then return to worrying. Worry about worrying, worry about not sleeping, worry about never getting out of my parents' attic, worry about not worrying and then what would I do, worry about remaining a loser, worry about not dating again, worry about having bad sex for the rest of my life, worry about seeing my father naked (yet again) because he couldn't seem to keep his donger from slipping out of his undies after going to the bathroom, (even though I purchased a bell to announce my presence when descending the attic stairs) worry that my mother thought I was going crazy, worry that I would never get a real job, worry that my therapist would dump me and finally rid himself of my pain in the ass father who seemed to "forget" payment, worry, worry, back to worry insomnia, which actually creates insomnia, so strange that something in process can be the reason for the problem, and then the thoughts would repeat

One morning I heard the usual intrusive marching up the attic steps but this time there was a knock on my bedroom door. What was the point of living in the attic if I didn't get any privacy? I may as well have slept in the bed with them (not a funny joke considering it was only until a few years ago that my thirty-something sister "hung out" with them there watching movies and reading the paper).

"Your father and I want to talk to you downstairs. Clean yourself up and be there in ten," my mother screeched. Her voice is often a cross between an agitated bird and a determined foghorn.

"Okay!"

I wondered if they were throwing me out. Probably not. They were dedicated to

the idea of my working, doing chores, and “acting like a family member.”⁶⁷ The chores were arbitrary and requested with a sense of immediacy. I had practically been sold into white slavery without the work ethic. Without access to a car and no phone privileges after nine, I was confined to a suburban Jewish slumlord that refused to cover his pee-pee.

My mother pushed her short beige hair curtly brushed behind her ears and strolled over to the long black and silver dining room table and sat with her hands folded in her lap. My father was in a non-committal position, somewhere between sitting on a chair and falling off its edge. (How does he do that)? If he was a car, there would’ve been a warning, “the door is ajar.”

“What’s this about?” I asked.

“Your father and I have been talking”—

Most likely it was my mother who had been talking.⁶⁸

My mother continued: “The reality is, you’re not pulling your weight around here. I know you’ve had a hard time, being sick and then being separated from the German”—

“Otto, his name is Otto.”

“Yeah, whatever. But now that you’re getting on track”—

“I’m not on track.”

“Well, you’re medicated.”

“You mean I take medicine that gives me the shits and spaces me out. And I

⁶⁷ I’m unable to arrive at a suitable definition for family member.

⁶⁸ I’m rereading this chapter in a café while listening to calming music on a Pandora station. The birds are fucking chirping. The girl to me is reading some sort of Marxist shit, “\$40 a book,” she explained when asking me to watch her stuff as she excused herself to the bathroom. The girl to my left attempted to take up two tables until I asked if anyone was sitting at the second one. Apparently her laptop needs its own space to decompress. I’m worried she’s writing angrily about me into her checkered paper, but I know that’s paranoid. Checkered paper is for math, not personal thoughts. I need better focus.

doubt I'm staying on that crap."

"Anyway, you're eating and you're sleeping, which is better than a lot of people," said my mom.

"Some people are poverty stricken; you've got it good. You've got to start working," said my father staring straight through me, head tilted downwards. His small coal brown eyes pierced below his bifocals, peering from under his Detroit Tigers hat. In his dark green fleece and tight black jogging pants, he appeared important and on the go. At least in motion. And constantly announcing his title as doctor allowed others to forgive his abruptness and closed body language.

"Well, what in the hell am I supposed to do?" I asked. "I have a fucking drama degree."

"That's not our doing," said her father.

"Well, you let me. I wanted to do a double major."

"In Dramatic Writing, dear," said my mother. "That would've taken you another four years. And remember what the Dean told you about the girl who tried to do it and dropped out? She disappeared. Altogether. No one could find her. And that would've cost us another \$100,000."

"True," I said.

"Your father needs a receptionist."

My mother was never seen without a large u-shaped orange purse filled with an oversized wallet, bag stuffed of makeup, a brush made for a giant, and an enormous oversized penny keychain that clanged with each stride. Her wide mouth, sparkling cat-like hazel eye, and ruddy skin gave her the appearance of a 40-year-old woman, not a

lady going on fifty-something. The tip of her nose resembled the end of a ball point pen. She opened the sack, a purse I referred to as a Halloween bag, and pointedly placed a pen and memo pad on the table.

“We’re not charging you rent. Normally in New York you’d be paying what?”

“I don’t know. I was paying \$650.”

“Well you work for your dad, you get to stay here for free.”

“Seriously? Isn’t that illegal or something?”

“You got something better?” dad asked.

“I swear there’s a law about garnishing wages,” I said.

“Don’t smarty pants us with your legal mumbo jumbo. We’re the best show in town,” said my mom.

“How many hours, dad?”

“I’ll need about twenty. It’s a long drive to Waukegan and Round Lake. So I stick around the house until about two p.m. depending on the day.”

“I’m aware. What do I have to do?”

A flash of my father’s dangling underwear, belching in front of the television, and tuna fish covered mustache crept into my consciousness but nothing could prepare me for watching him eat breakfast made up of three mixed fiber cereals, Metamucil, and Lactaid milk.

“Answer phones. I’ll teach you the billing. And you’ll deal with the insurance companies.”

The insurance companies had been neglecting to pay for individual allergy shots and if a payment was eventually made, it was greatly reduced. My father would stomp

around the house on speakerphone, cursing, demanding to speak with supervisors, and screaming at administrators bellowing sharp words like “incompetent” and “inappropriate.” These aggravating conferences could last anywhere from 45 minutes to two hours. This would be my new life.

Shit More Together?

There were a few more stints with New York City. I moved back to NYC at the end of 1999 to work a paid internship at a large PR agency where I wrote copy points about something called the x-bra and tolerated a girl ten years my junior bossing me around, Maggie, who planned on the same kind of plastic surgery her mother had achieved. She was twenty-four. After the agency so kindly offered to hire me on as a full-time secretary, I opted out of PR and became a full-time reporter for a local New York City newspaper. I conducted another failed relationship and allowed it to continue for an additional ten years. (It’s unclear if we have completely stopped trying to be romantic).

I wasn’t going to tell, but something happened in New York that made me leave.

The ‘N’ Train, Two Planes, and Journalism

September 11, 2001. 8:50 a.m. The conductor announces that everyone exit the train at 28th Street, one stop before mine. I look at my watch. Shit. I still have to walk at least eight blocks, so I will be late for work. Again.

My editor was fine with me, but the publisher out of New Rochelle had begun daily calls into the Manhattan office to ensure I was on time. Or more likely, to ensure I

wasn't. He was analyzing my copy for errors and ill-conceived judgments. In other words, he was looking for a reason to fire me.

“Dang. Shit. Damn.”

I darted off the train. Did I smell smoke? Sulfur? I think so. It didn't matter. Being late mattered and so did being on time. I wanted to keep my full-time reporting gig allowing me to write whatever I wanted for my drinking, smoking, cursing Scottish editor who wrote tabloid style and slapped my name on articles that I no longer recognized. Once I wrote a story about a HUD building overtaken with carcinogenic mold, and for dramatic effect, she referred to residents as “victims of a nuclear blast.” I loved working for that crazy Scott.

I ran around a few buses to get to the side of the street with pay phones and was confronted by two exceptionally long lines of frustrated New Yorkers. Chaos snaked deceptively through the air. I fingered my tight jean pockets for change and found a quarter. New York had been experiencing unusually balmy days for September and today was no exception. The early morning sun had resonated a beam of warmth through my Upper West Side window, but as I exited the train, a grey mass overtook the horizon. My brow and fingers were sweating a little, and pressing into the metal numbered keys of the pay phone felt cool against my fingers.

Checked watch again. Dammit. 9:01.

This is not a chapter I want to write.

I wondered why vast clumps of people were standing in the street and concluded that standing around had nothing to do with an incident but everything to do with New Yorkers. Always the gawkers and onlookers. Numerous chins jutted to the sky, into the smoke. I had an important job, my first real post college job. News was happening

somewhere, not just about broken down trains and smoke, but real news, and I needed to get back to the office to find it. I needed to not get fired. I grabbed the first available payphone and dialed 212-777-6611.

“Hagedorn Communications.”

They had hired a woman in her seventies named Virginia to relate to the loyal senior reading population of Stuyvesant Town, Peter Cooper Village, and Gramercy Park. Virginia had a long, slow drawl and a deep, monotone voice. When she mildly uttered “Hagedorn,” the flat lilt of her words was more reminiscent of “daily morgue.”

“Please put Linda on the phone. It’s Lyndee.”

“Hi, it’s Linda. Where are you?”

“You’re not going to believe this, but I’m stuck on 28th Street. I’m going to be like ten minutes late. I’m really sorry. Trains are screwed up or something.”

“Do you know what’s going on?” she asked.

“Huh? Yeah, the trains. I don’t know; I see some smoke. Weird. I’m sorry I’ll be late. I left on time today. I swear I did. With extra time this time.”

“Don’t worry about it. Do you see anything?” she asked.

“What do you mean? Did Hagedorn call?”

“Do you have the camera?”

“Yeah, I think so, why?”

“Take a few pictures and come down. I’ll explain everything when you get here.”

“I don’t think there’s much to take.”

“Get what you can.”

I waved the camera into the smoldering horizon and clicked a few pictures.

I didn't seem to be in trouble for calling in. The undesirable smell of smoke invaded my nostrils, the smell of confusion if chaos has a scent, and the sound of fire trucks and ambulances. But really, I don't remember any sounds; my only sense memory is a burning smell and directionless clusters of people. More than that, the feeling that I needed to push through the clusters of people to get to work so that I could start a normal, productive day. I never cared for crowds and everyone was wasting time, looking up at the sky, standing around when there was news to be written. I hadn't had my coffee yet.

I walked passed the Dunkin Donuts and the Methadone Clinic, but the regulars stomping amidst the sidewalk, blocking the entranceway, and swaying lethargically to the beat of addiction were not visible, so I easily entered the narrow office building for once. I took the small elevator up to three, an elevator I would later distrust after working late nights alone in the newsroom. The door opened, and I was confronted with my dark-haired Russian friend, Elana, limply sprawled over the top of her desk. Julie, the early twenty-something ad rep with orange hair, was gently caressing her back.

"Elana, what's wrong?" I asked.

Linda walked over to me.

"A plane hit the Twin Towers." Linda said.

"Are people hurt?" I asked, more out of obligation than authentic caring or any feeling at all. In one year of reporting I had learned that accidents, crashes, and weather related malfunctions captured immediate attention, and became archived, unsolvable problems. And in the end, what could one do? If a friend was having a problem with a lover, a family problem, or an illness, however, I was consumed. Advice was worth offering, a discussion worth having because something could be done.

“Cell phones aren’t working. People are missing. We don’t know about victims yet,” said Linda.

“How many people are we talking?” I asked, knowing I should ask this question.

“They don’t know.”

“How did it happen?”

“We’re not sure.”

“That’s fucked up,” I said. “I’m sure we’ll find out.”

I was certain that the plane accident would cause a stir for a few days, it would be terrible or at least uncomfortable, and like everything, else, people would forget about it in time. At *Town & Village* newspaper, I had learned how short the human memory clung to so-called breaking news. I had never liked the Twin Towers. They were overtly phallic and pompously corporate, and I had purposefully stayed away from Wall Street because it didn’t concern me and most likely never would. The closest I came to Wall Street was fooling around with a skinny Jewish trader with a tie-dyed cloth on his wall and a potential cocaine problem. I had hoped the tie-dye and the same religion thing suggested leftist tendencies but quickly learned he just liked tie-dye.

I anticipated that rescue teams would take care of those who had been hurt, that they’d be organized and not fuck up, and the drama would pass. A wave of doubt filled the office and I must have said something like, “I’m sure the police are on it. We just have to wait a little and things will be fine. In the meantime, who wants a cup of Joe? Okay, no one? Elana, I’ll go grab you a tea.”

She was crying softly, almost an inaudible whimper.

“What’s wrong?” I asked again.

“I know someone in one of the Towers. He’s my brother’s friend.”

“Can you call him?” I asked.

“No one can reach him.”

“Just wait a little. It’s going to be okay. I bet the systems are down.” I said.

But Elana’s family had seen Chernobyl; my words were empty. I offered a motherly hug to calm her, enveloping her with invisible wings.

I’m going to start logging how many times I check Facebook and yahoo while I write end then edit this chapter.

Facebook //

Yahoo//

Open and closing flip phone) //

A writer friend suggested that it is “self-indulgent” to include Facebook checks within the serious context of 9/11.

“Jesus fucking Christ,” said Linda who had moved to the back of the newsroom.

“People are jumping out of windows because they can’t escape the smoke. Plummeting to their deaths.”

“What? What about the fireman? Why would anyone do that?” I asked, paying a little more attention.

“I think they’d rather die from trying to live than from smoke inhalation,” said Linda.

Al, the Associate Publisher, head of advertisement, and the only real adult in the office – as we were all twenty-something novices – orbited to the center of the newsroom with collapsed posture and stood silently in central space, away from the rows of desks that stood like soldiers at the sides of the narrow newsroom. I ran to the corner to grab a coffee and tea. It was something I did after arriving at work.

Aftermath

I don't know the day New York changed. I can't remember the moment the pulse shifted backwards. I have this fantasy of calling 212-777-6611 on Monday and talking to Linda Barr, my old editor, if she still works there. I would ask her for a sampling of September 2001 *Town & Village Newspapers* so that I could read the articles I wrote, to recall the words in print, and to see if having that old ink in my hands would bring back something besides the feeling that the small shadow that followed me that morning is still blocking my sunlight.⁶⁹⁷⁰⁷¹⁷²

Facebook check taking over

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One week later every press release coming through the fax began with: *Now More Than Ever* and phrases like “in solidarity” and “united we stand” quickly became clichés. Then it was “War on Terror,” “Missing,” and finally, funeral dates rolled out like the

⁶⁹ Today I found Linda's email address. She's taken her husband's name and now works for the same publisher's Real Estate newspaper. No doubt it's more money than the 60+year-old little community paper. I sent her an email requesting a phone call and conversation about 9/11, and told her I would understand if she told me to fuck off. She wrote back and said I could call her. Her email response was, “yes - married with two little boys. I am really busy today and tomorrow ... you can call me tomorrow night - what time?”

⁷⁰ I also called New Rochelle, where the publisher is located, to obtain old copies of T&V. I was told that newspapers are saved for one month and then tossed. Otherwise, they have a library but lack the manpower to make copies. “Don't you have any friends who could take a picture for you or make a copies?” a saleslady with a New York accent asked. If Linda won't do it, I'll have to go down there myself. This is the moment that might take me back to New York.

⁷¹ Sent an email to new T&V editor requesting copies. Checking my email obsessively to see if she's willing to send them.

⁷² New T&V editor, Sabina, mostly ignores my emails. I'm still waiting to hear back. Getting copies of my old clips is going to be more difficult than expected.

dead out of moving cars in mob movies. My regular beats consisting of local theatre, new business ribbon cuttings, and school curriculum math debates were replaced with funerals. I attended to take pictures, regurgitate speeches, and reframe neighborhood tears into news. *How do you feel about so-and-so's death*, etc....as if that's a fair or reasonable question. I don't know how many funerals I attended in 2011. It was strange considering I hadn't experienced the passing of a close relative yet. Giuliani began attending more and more of them and orating speeches. He was making a name for himself as I peered into caskets without bodies.

The word on the street was that New Yorkers were friendly now, but I think they were just scared. The depths of their eyes didn't reveal more humanity but an arched fear. Fear that is now cemented over by the new Times Square flashing images of 1940's musicals, Disney themes, and the Wall Street ticker, a conglomeration of global corporate America. Fear + corporate concrete = unknown toxic substance that cannot be seen or smelled, only felt.

Town & Village is across from the armory in Manhattan, a military building that became the center for lost souls for the duration of the immediate aftermath. For several blocks around the armory, photographs of the "missing" were pasted anywhere on whatever public spaces that could be found. Pictures of the "missing" were featured in domestic situations with hand-written pleas:

Any information about this loving mom and teacher,
please call.....

-or-

Devoted husband, father of two, firefighter, last
contact by cell phone at 8:10 a.m., 9/11

Downtown became a papered museum of the “missing,” hanging sheets that were tossed and marked with rain and wind and handled by hundreds of fingerprints. Some notes were written in all caps:

WE MISS OUR DAUGHTER JULIA. PLEASE HELP US FIND HER.

As a T&V reporter, I covered the police blotter and the local crime beat. Linda advised me how to speak to the cops after I had been Associate Editor for several months.

“The cops’ll be daft at first and ignore you. It takes ‘em a while to warm up, and you’ll start to get to know ‘em and earn their trust. Then you’ll get the scoop about what’s going on in the neighborhood.”

“What should I say to them?”

“Don’t ask too many questions,” she said.

“But we’re reporters. That’s what we do.”

“Just let ‘em talk and brag a bit. They’ll show you their community medals and shit.”

“I don’t know,” I said.

“You’ll be fine. I gotta start letting you go in case I need you to cover me. Just be relaxed. Once they see you write nice stories about them and you’re not going to screw them over, they’ll start to open up.”

“But what if they need screwing over?”

“That’s not what we do. We’re a community newspaper. You’ll never see a story criticizing the local police in T&V. They’ve gotten burned before, but that was a long time ago. They trust me now. You’ve got to earn their trust.”

I remember two of the cop's faces, not their names. The chief was robust and bald; he didn't say much unless avoiding an answer and then the guy was prolific. A mildly attractive rookie served as secretary; he had thick black eyebrows and for all intents and purposes, he was the charming one. Both had large families and huge dispositions. One thing was certain; they didn't like the looks of me. Linda was a tough, wholesome woman who was simultaneously pleasant. I irritate police. Probably too many angles in my body. I've also been told I have a "bad attitude," whatever that means. I might come off spoiled, big-mouthed, or simply trouble. I'm not sure what trouble means to them exactly, but coppers have never liked my scent.⁷³

Eventually, after covering local award stories and printing dozens of local thank you letters, they didn't hate me. They didn't like me, but I was tolerated and once in a while, I was told me a few juicy news tidbits, off-the-record, of course. Months earlier, for example, a woman in the neighborhood had been raped, an unusual occurrence for T&V, and Linda asked me to cover it. When I obtained official rape statistics, I learned that rapes had declined in New York City, and I was ready to go to print. Then one of the cops pulled me aside.

"I don't know where those stats come from, but they're not right. Word is that Giuliani is having precincts cook the books."

"Seriously? What's the point of that?" I asked.

"So it looks like crime went way down in his administration. Off-the-record, rapes are up."

"Jesus, he's not even mayor for much longer."

The armory promised to have the most up-to-date, classified information about missing loved ones and served as a blood bank for the sick. Lines of loyal New York citizens formed around the building and down the street offering blood and services. People had given a total of 36,000 pints. Giuliani appeared on every media outlet and public space thanking New Yorkers for their valiant efforts. *But what were they all giving blood for and to whom? Where did all the pints of blood go? (donated blood only lasts for two weeks)*

People waiting in line at the armory were heroes. Firefighters and police who were called to duty on 9/11 and after were heroes. People who lost family and friends were heroes. I was an onlooker, an observer.

One of the cops gave me the last tidbit I needed to grow wary of 9/11 rhetoric.

“Government officials knew there was no one to give blood to pretty close after it happened. But they kept it secret. They didn’t want to let the cat out of the bag that none were missing. It helped people feel like they could do something.”

Sampling of *New York Times* article headlines September 2001:

Giuliani Takes Charge, and City Sees Him as the Essential Man

Reaffirming Democracy, Here and Now

Giuliani May Try to Keep Job After Term Ends in December

A Man Who Became More Than a Mayor

Below is part of a Giuliani speech given outside the armory. There is nothing unique about it; there were so many following this one submerged with similar rhetoric, language that filled my life for the next year I remained in New York City as a T&V reporter until I no longer could listen:

"We don't have magic solutions. This is going to be a long process. It's not going to happen in a day or so... The people who are doing this—the police officers and the firefighters and the federal and state officials—are putting their lives at risk. We had buildings collapse yesterday. We had the danger of another today. So they can move only at a certain pace, otherwise we're going to lose even more...

There's probably no one in New York who hasn't been touched by this. Like you, I have people in there I know, care about, and love. Like you, I want to get them out. I hope and I pray that they're alive. And if that's not the case, I hope and I pray that we can recover them so we can give them a decent burial and the respect and the honor they are entitled to. So please work with us, and we'll work with you." (Sept. 13, 2001)

He spoke with determination and his words seemed to make people feel better. His eyes glistened as he told New York to be strong. His protective rhetorical blanket enveloped my city long enough to prepare for the Bush fear campaign and finally, the Iraq war. We were all united in fear.

I began covering the police blotter on a weekly basis. Terror threats began coming in daily from bombs to anthrax. One day I found myself having an anthrax test over some spilled makeup in the T&V bathroom. I was crying a bit at a random internist's office, and it was at that point when I was probably experiencing some form of PTSD.

"This is up to you. Are you sure you want the test? It's expensive and very unlikely that you have anthrax."

Time was stopping. I was losing control. We will never get out of here. What if I have to go to the bathroom? I have no water. We will die here. I will panic. I need to get out. Why isn't it moving? We're going to die in here. The emergency units in this city are incompetent. Do those doors open between cars?

"Miss, what are you saying you're not good at?" asked the stranger.

"I don't like when the train stops," I explained.

The alertness of my features and the way I was moving around must have given away my state of being.

"You should probably have medicine for panic," she said. "Don't you?"

"It really doesn't happen very often," I said.

"Well, you should have something."

A few minutes later the train moved, but I froze. I stopped taking trains and relied on buses. Or walking. Or cabs, which I could not afford. I didn't fly in a plane for eight years. That was the day that New York City filled every crevice of my body with the corporate concrete of the new Times Square.

Jena?

Where are you?

I have opted to write in a dream state.

Whatever comes to my mind, drops directly onto paper like rain bursting cloud.

My memories, many remain sharp – they consist of the distractions—that are pointedly traceable. The not-Jena things. The things I took up without her.

Instead of her, instead of writing, I lived. I dated.

(I fear I became Jena when I was somebody's girlfriend, a ghostly, unformed character.

Has she followed me there?)

Lispector died writing her golem. I can take refuge early before Jena forms. I need time apart...a breakup...one hundred pages or so. ...to regain my voice.

Like a city garbage truck on a mission to clean my urban arteries, a sign on the back reads, Jena, do not follow.

First Name, First Name⁷⁴

I never should've taken up with such a serious WASP. Life needed a little pizzazz during graduate school, and I have never been one of those when in Rome types. I was also at least five years older than my colleagues, so when my friend Lizzie invited me out with her 23-year-old buddies, I put up little resistance. That's who was there.

He was first name, first name: Chris John. Chris' hair was a soft mesh of blond curls resting gently atop his perfectly round head. His nose, average and non-descript, sat obscurely on top of a face in a sea of ivory skin, coupled with a pair of clear eyes fit for a Rembrandt painting. He was pretty like a girl save for having a deep voice, boyish stance, and Ivy League training – an androgynous appeal for every gender. I was more on the miserable side, standing by his side at parties, knowing that no matter how much makeup I plastered on, Chris would always be a little bit prettier. My therapist tried to appease my jealousy: “Just think of it like, I've got a guy every one finds attractive.”

“So Chris, where are your grandparents from?” I asked when my mother insisted on learning his ethnic background. I had warned her that he didn't seem at all ethnic but she contended, “Everyone is from somewhere else.” If he wasn't Jewish, he had to be some sort of other. My family doesn't do WASPS very well and never will unless they one day agree to admit their failure as a collective community. The Yamshons don't understand the concept of non-ethnic and non-activist. (the two tie together like stuck string) If you're not outraged, you're not alive. My mother, for instance, is known to whisper about G-d's wrath against the Jews. “I think we're being punished.” She's

⁷⁴ I returned home for a Masters in Literature and dabbled in inappropriate men without having a plan for the future and still, avoided writing consistently. This is the story of a man I dated eight years my junior while in graduate school.

talking about the violence in Israel and not so subtly connects it to Jewish materialism and the left leaning belief that Palestinians are being treated like second-class citizens. I'm not convinced that G-d is so particularly responsive to political problems, even in Israel. But then again, this admission comes from a girl who felt most comfortable praying in a synagogue housed within the structure of a church on Manhattan's Upper West Side.

I persisted in my ethnic identity questions after Chris continued to shrug his shoulders. He was a shrugger by nature.

"Come on, you have to know where they're from." (I was often pleading with him to speak).

"My grandparents are from here," he responded blandly.

"Okay, what about your great grandparents?" I asked, knowing his response would satisfy all fronts. Then I could begin the psychological profiling. Russians are philosophical and soulful, Greeks are busybodies and overachievers like Jews, with possibly an even higher mother priority with Daddy on a pedestal like Jews too, Italians are similar but play more extensive mind games that I don't quite understand, (or maybe it's the more subtle humor that confuses me), I only know the Irish stereotypes due to my general ignorance, lack of travel, and neutrality towards alcohol and potatoes unless sour cream is involved, there was nothing black or Latin about Chris, Asian was not an option, and the rest was up for grabs. Croatian? Cro-Asian? No, no, cro.

"My family is from New York," Chris pattered dryly.

He looked bored. Chris always looked bored. He was staring at an inanimate object. Chairs, walls, and pencils fascinated him. Everything except the conversation.

“But it’s impossible. I mean, everyone is from another place, or another country,” I persisted, in an attempt to engage him in any way.

“Who told you that?” he asked staring at his shoe or possibly thinking about the striped design on his socks.

“My mother says everyone is from somewhere,” I whined.

“I see,” he said.

Chris enjoyed my mother’s energy, sort of like a child stares solemnly at a wind-up-toy, but I knew he was skeptical of her pronouncements. I was exhausting him, and he sighed. Maybe he was just breathing.

“My family goes all the way back to the Mayflower,” he said.

Defeated again. I knew there had to be some foreign blood in him, but it was too far back to glean an iota of an inkling of anything beyond full-blooded American and clearly whatever the trace was, it hadn’t affected his existence. Was he staring at a pimple on my face? Was he wondering if I was developing a pimple?

Once I brought Chris John to synagogue and introduced him to the Rabbi.

“This is Chris,” I said.

“I’m sorry? What did you say?” the Rabbi asked with a crease between his eyes as he mechanically reached out his hand.

“This is Chris,” I repeated, trying to carefully blanket my annoyance with a compliant tone.

The Rabbi’s questioning gaze lingered as he shook Chris’ hand and walked away. It was as if I had said, “This is my boyfriend, Jesus Christ.”

Chris stared blankly. He didn’t care much for religion anyway.

⁷⁵I read what I wrote... ⁷⁶

With a lot of pushing and shoving, Chris brought me on a road trip to his families' house in Princeton, NJ. I am afraid to fly, and he put up with my antics for 789.50 miles of snow, sleet, and rough winds in his grandmother's tan Buick from the 1980's. During the drive, he pulled out a dime bag and gave me a pleading look with his yellow, angelic eyebrows.

"I'm not really comfortable with your little habit while we're driving," I said.

The fact was, I was never really comfortable with his stoner persona, which was just a dialed down version of his usual state. Lord knows I need to chill out, but there's something so unaesthetically pleasing about small puffy eyes, stuffing your face with chips, and slow introverted mumbling. Snow was coming down pretty hard and the cold, howling wind was swaying the Buick on route 80.

⁷⁵ ...so far in a local café, observing the writer in the seat diagonal to me. His hair, disheveled and auburn, eyes red with concentration deep into the microchips of his laptop. A laptop with a cover because he cares about his work. He protects the words that live inside his computer. Where's my laptop cover?

Today, I threw my neglected Toshiba into a flowered straw bag that I purchased for \$10 in Northern Michigan. What does that say about how much I care for my work -- throwing it in a flimsy, cheap sack? It's clear the writer doesn't notice me; I'm not part of his reality, so why do I look? Because my mother might be right. Perhaps I do have ADD. "I don't know why you're so defensive about it, she says. Just take the test. What do you have to lose?" Uh, nothing except my sanity and more lectures from you, lady. She has already diagnosed so many children in her school that she received an award, a plaque that she dons in her bedroom with pride. I think she should've received a disciplinary hearing, not a plaque. It's unclear why the Jewish Day School is so fond of her running around diagnosing everyone. She's not a counselor, psychologist or medical practitioner.

The guy next to me is surely a real writer. How can I get to that arrogant, place of total self-loathing, surviving on only coffee and cigarettes? (ok, maybe a little cereal in the morning but something more depraved like the Frosted Flakes he probably had, certainly not the wholesome oatmeal made with organic milk I insist on). Back to the book. (Shit, I don't even smoke) I should smoke. Smoking makes your voice sexy, phlegmy, and then I wouldn't sound so midwesternly nice and non-writerly. I don't fit into hipster clothing. Too many curves.

⁷⁶ Years later, I have a real desk, a cover on my laptop, a new computer. I no longer look at other writers as more real than I am. I know we are all full of shit!

“This is how I relax on trips. It’s perfect for a long drive,” he said.

“But what if we swerve off the road or if something happens to the car? I want you to have your wits about you,” I said.

Since we were in his car and it was my fault we were driving, he puffed away as I stared him down and coughed excessively for effect. He rolled his eyes, and we continued to drive. It smelled like burnt leaves and body odor for a while.

When we arrived in Princeton, I noticed an abundance of traffic signs: arrows pointing upwards, downwards, to the sides, signs reading no left turn, no right turn, no parking here, there or anywhere, particular times to park in certain spaces, no loitering, no jaywalking. I was bound to screw up. We pulled up to a small stucco house sitting on the end of a winding road as I hobbled in with a ridiculously large iridescent blue suitcase. Chris’ mother put on a slow smile and said hello adding, “Wow, you brought a lot of your things.” I had doubled outfits for each day since I didn’t know the expected attire; there was the casual me, jeans-and-a-sweater-girl, girl-next-door to the WASPS girl, or the impress others by being formal me, which called for longish skirts and simple blouses (I still do not know what a simple blouse is). The pretend nice orthodox Jewish girl me wearing longs and longs like they told us to do at Olin Sang Ruby Union Institute summer camp during Shabbat evenings. Most likely the Orthodox girl would remain in the suitcase. (She’s probably still there).

We were told to go to Chris’ bedroom on the second floor. There sat two lonely twin beds, pushed next to each other, dressed in dull quilts. Deep wooden bookcases faced the beds in conversation. “Haven’t seen Chris in a while. Who’s this girl with the large hoop earrings? Doesn’t look like a John clansman. Wonder if she’s literary.”

“This place is great. So many interesting books,” I said to Mrs. John.

“This is a particularly interesting one,” she said pulling out a book titled *Manners for Guests*. She handed me the book.

“Looks fascinating,” I said.

“Would you believe some guests show up and simply eat you out of house and home?” she asked.

I would starve for the next five days. Mrs. John’s eyes were brightly glowing now. Her wavy hair embedded around a distinct left part stood perfectly in place just reaching her above her chin in a bob. Mrs. John’s nose was a bit more turned upwards than the other Johns, something I could only aspire to mimic with surgery or becoming any of Philip Roth’s fictional lovers.

After practically raping Chris in his old bedroom to help me get through a tense first day, Christmas morning rolled around. I woke up to the murmur of soft voices downstairs. Why had he let me sleep in? Luckily I had painstakingly purchased pink flannel pajamas with my mother after trying on heaps of nightwear. A three-foot pile of footsies, flowered tops, and flannel matchies had been piled in the corner of the TJ Max dressing room. My mother, who knew less than I did about Christmas morning, had accompanied me for moral support.

“This is terrible, just terrible,” I moaned. “Everything is see-through, too sexy, or makes me look like an elephant. What in the hell do they wear?” I exclaimed. “How do they pull it off? What do the WASPS wear on Christmas morning?”

“Dear, I don’t know. Why don’t you just ask him?”

My mother is very practical, and she asserts herself with tact. When I try to emulate her, it often comes off aggressive.

“There has to be something I can pass off as pajamas,” I said. “I don’t want to seem like a total spaz!” I was screaming in the dressing room and getting a bad case of static cling.

“Are you sure you don’t want to call and just ask about the attire?”

“Do you want to call and ask?” I jeered.

My mother pursed her lips.

With a static ball of hair circling my head and a fat lower lip, I purchased my first pair of Christmas pajamas. Pink flannel: feminine yet sturdy. The one humiliating aspect of my choice was the feetsies that I thought about cutting off, but my mom warned me with a simple, “You’d better not.” I can’t cut straight lines.

While the *Manners for Guests* book resolved to destroy me, I vowed to make Christmas morning memorable. I ran a brush through my hair, cleaned up in the bathroom with a good face wash and with a newfound courage, walked down the stairs hopping about like a Jewish Easter Bunny before I reached the bottom, almost falling on my face.

“Good morning,” said Mr. John, Chris’ jolly bald father who seemed to like me.

Mrs. John was wearing a sweater with a reindeer, a turtleneck, and corduroy pants. Was that a glimmer of pink lipstick? Chris was in what I referred to as his uniform, the faded blue short-sleeved oxford and Levi jeans we had bought together three months prior, which he proceeded to wear almost every day since. Dana, his sister and a not so recovered heroin addict, was draped in all black with shaking hands.

“I thought you guys would come down in your pajamas,” I said.

The vast emerald tree glistened flashing a majestic rainbowed belonging, offering to envelop its prickly arms around the John family. I pressed on as the underrepresented misinformed Semetic bunny, emphatic that I would connect with the family at some point during the joyous holiday of good will. After hopping around the tree a bit and making it through a very stressful unwrapping presents ceremony with recycled paper, a game forbidding rips, I still had a chance to get in with the Johns.

Christmas dinner was a five-course meal. The men sat around the table, including Jake, Chris’ 18-year-old younger brother, who miraculously emerged from the basement, while the women ran back and forth from the kitchen and heaped seconds onto the hundred-year-old china plates. I don’t believe Chris stood up even to use the bathroom. No one peed in that house.

Dana had been back to rehab for the third time and was in full shakes and jitters. Each decorous dish featured a champagne glass, and you can imagine my surprise when Mrs. John offered her daughter some bubbly. I believe I observed a glimmer of surprise in Dana’s eyes.

“Um, no thanks, mom,” she said.

I was catching onto the WASP culture. *Just pretend like everything is normal and it will be.* Man, my family could learn from that. As Dana sat on her hands, I looked a little closer into Jake’s eyes – since his mouth never moved unless it was being stuffed with turkey. Those eyes were dilated and small. Chris’ father was on his fifth glass of champagne and began raising his voice.

“This damned country is just screwed up,” he called. “Screwed up, I tell ya!”

Everyone sat and watched as he gesticulated and yelled. Later Chris explained that he “can become belligerent when he drinks but it’s a lot better now.”

The highlights of the remainder of my trip to Princeton included a visit from a Palestinian family who had been thrown out of Israel, a social ill that just happened to be Mrs. John’s main life passion.

“They just had nowhere to go,” Mrs. John had explained, staring fixedly into my eyes, as if I was personally responsible for the Middle East mess.

“I’ve kind of taken them in,” she added.

When she introduced me, I was worried my last name would tip off the family that I was one of them, but I don’t believe any recognition reflected back at me, which was all I could hope for.

When we left to return to Chicago, I knew that Chris and I were on borrowed time. Soon after, he “accidentally” left open an email from his mother asking if “there was ever a more narcissistic people,” referring to an incident near the Gaza Strip where an Arab violinist was forced to play his music in a humiliation game with a Jewish check point soldier.

Is it my fault? Do I force them out? It’s not what I actually want –

I’m not actually sure if they leave. Maybe I leave? They dump, but only after I have been gone.

The next “male connection” occurred after my second year as a PhD candidate. After two years of deliberating about applying and taking numerous courses at the school to get to know the faculty, I applied and received my acceptance letter. I was new to

teaching and theory, so I immersed myself in busy work. I was not doing much writing.

It was the end of the semester, and final papers were due. I wasn't finished, so I opted to find a man the night before the due date. (Jena? No, never mind)

King David – A Modern Day Minstrel with a Different Name.

He's beautiful. I've never seen anything else but aesthetics on him, surrounding him. Only in the first few hours of knowing him, was I able to see him human fallibility like everyone else. If I could've remembered the gangly bean-pole scrawniness I had initially observed, how he clumsily touched my shoulder to mask me from oncoming cars, the first hug when I couldn't reach his neck so I had to throw my arms around his skinny frame, I could have been myself – or at least held onto part of me. But I let him inside, first his fingers, then his lips, and then, the man and the depraved raincoat – bouncing, pushing, swirling, recklessly invading my innards. And I thought, now there's nothing to do but wait. And sit back. That's how most faux-fairy tales go. That's what the girl does. But I hadn't done what I was supposed to do. And although I understood that whatever you chase runs away, it didn't matter. He was running since I found him.

I hadn't seen him since high school and had done the lowest of the low – face booked IM'd him, the most direct and humiliating sign of desperation. I hadn't expected him to agree to meet on the spot. It was already 11:30 p.m. and although my conscious mind was somewhere on hiatus between vacation and pure denial, the forecast was clearly a ninety nine percent chance of a boodie call with stormy consequences hovering on the horizon. When there's thunder, there's rain. And when the rain stops, the lawn remains wet.

It had been two-and-a-half weeks since my breakup, and I was needy. Recently, Shlomo had e-mailed me “fat” pictures of myself from our last vacation (ridiculous, if you saw me, you’d know why) and had thrown a fake punch in my face as a last hurrah – to prove he was truly the psycho that he wanted to be – you’ll get details later. He’ll get his own chapter. Maybe.⁷⁷

I recalled fragments of Niles from our high school friendship, something about being obsessed with Egyptian culture, listening half-heartedly to his positions on black power and the phrase any means necessary, a faint memory of learning he had a child out of wedlock.

Niles is the kind of guy who agrees to have drinks with a woman he hasn’t seen in years near midnight because he feels like it. He doesn’t question his actions or thoughts; he just does. We had been some kind of friends in high school, and he was a man willing to tend to my feminine side on a Saturday night when I was suddenly single. He gave his number on IM and offered to cab it to my neighborhood.

“Hey,” I giggled as I picked up the phone. “Weird. I can’t believe we’re going to meet. It’s been a long time.”

“Yeah.”

His voice would not commit to a complete thought; he often trailed off at the end of a sentence, like it had never happened. A sentence that could become an accident or a clause. A quiver emitted from his throat like a train regretting leaving the station. Without a destination. A hint of baritone covered his vocal ambivalence, a filmy congealing,

⁷⁷ Nah, you won’t. Thinking on it, he was pretty harmless. We were a dramatic couple, but I don’t think he is so terrible now. He married a nice girl, and I’m certain has a much healthier relationship than we ever could. I dated him too soon after being deeply in love with Chris John, so I’m not sure we had a chance. I did not want to date at the time, but he was persistent, and I was flattered. And I had work to do. So-

vibrating depth. It was something I would grow to almost get used to like when Ani DeFranco sings,

You look like a photograph of yourself, taken from far far away...

I don't know what to do. I don't know what to say except-

Niles is a man far from himself. Recently I've reexamined shadowy photographs of his face on a website. An invisible question mark lingers between his eyes. He often posts pictures from his youth. Yes, I continue to look. But I don't call him.⁷⁸ He places these youthful pictures as a reminder that he is tangible. With cells and blood and platelets and embodiment similar to the rest of us. A person with a past and an unimagined future. I still think of him as an unfinished poem with numerous possibilities. I did then. And years later, the reason why I have avoided editing and revising this chapter. It can never finish.

For my first meeting with Niles, I draped on a black buxom brassiere under a tight brown tank that revealed the right amount of bulging cleavage, and ran my arms through a deep burgundy blouse with ruffles along the sleeves. Hippy-sexy with the first several buttons open. I knew it was risqué to flaunt my sexuality so overtly and so last minute, but what the hell, I thought. I hadn't felt like a woman for a few years since my ex-boyfriend had been raised as an Orthodox Jew where oral sex made him gargle and spit for twenty minutes. "Chhhhh, chhhhh," like Chanukah were the only sounds echoing from the bathroom despite over a running faucet to compete with the guttural Semitic "chhh" reminiscent of an allergy attack. Not to mention the drool dripping down my thighs because he didn't want to swallow the stuff. I was the oozing disease the orthodox

⁷⁸ I'm a liar. Well, it's true I don't call him, but I just texted him while editing, "I'm revising my memoir and did not realize that I wrote more about you than I thought." He has ignored this text for about 35 minutes. Eventually, about a week later, he contacted me about something else.

thought of as a “watered down Jewess,” my vaginal fluid, the dirty, diluted reform movement.

Niles was taking a cab to my neighborhood. Good, that was right, him meeting me. I wasn’t going halfway; no more of that shit. Halfway always turned into three quarters, then all the way. Men could sense that, and they always took advantage. It would be one of the few times he would come over without my having to pick him up. (FYI- men without cars = men with commitment problems. If you can’t commit to transporting yourself, you won’t commit to transporting a relationship to the next level. Saving the environment is a cover for the so-called sensitive man).

I left my Wicker Park apartment resembling a barn ornamented with external porches and plastic hanging flowers. The wind goose bumped my skin although Chicago was experiencing a warm front. A dark version of a hooded Ichabod Crane suspiciously glided towards me. I hugged the specter, and we walked aimlessly for several blocks in a failed attempt to find an uncrowded bar. I felt a quick flip of my stomach, small fleeting fireflies swirling in my guts, but nothing substantial enough to imagine that feeling would last into a craving.

“I have preliminary exams soon, so I haven’t been going out,” I said when we arrived at a bar across the street from my apartment filled with grungy twenty-something’s covered in tattoos and multiple piercings. The Inner Town Pub sign read “home for the arts” and was filled with overgrown children, most likely underemployed adults that could play a few chords on a guitar.⁷⁹

⁷⁹ This is me now. A prophetic line, perhaps. (I’ve started writing a musical with my basic chord guitar skills while I’m editing this beast; summer of 2014)

“Just have had so much work lately, so I haven’t been making plans until the last minute,” I said.

It was, after all, a Saturday night and we had both been home trolling the internet. Our behavior needed justification.

“I hate Saturday nights. You’ve got all the crazy cats running around. The days of the week kind of merge for me anyway,” he said.

He wasn’t so fine. Large watery eyes reminiscent of Gregory Hines and a certain intensity as well as a directionless ease. Big deal.

Girls with heavily dyed hair, men with lots of tats and goatees, and a drunken buzz resonated softly in the bar. Two guys and a girl with braids joked around a pool table. I waited in line for a tiny toilet and looked in the mirror at my flushed cheeks. My teeth were tingling, and my heart rate began speeding up. I am a two drink minimum girl, a cheap date, a lightweight. Two strong vodka orange juices later, I had a little conversation with myself in the bathroom, the kind of mirror talk a male performs during his blockbuster movie moment.

“Get your shit together,” I said in the mirror. “Calm down. You can handle this guy. He doesn’t even have a college education.”

It was the moment before I made a decision that I denied was a decision. I felt like an adrenaline junkie, like I was so high, and this was just the beginning. I cooled my wrists with mild running water and returned to the small, circular table. I would talk about my writing because Niles was a DJ and very existential; he would get it. It was sexy and intellectually stimulating. I had framed the evening’s purpose, and I didn’t have

to sit at the lonely computer to shape it. That would happen later. That is happening {now}.

“Sometimes I get stuck. I don’t know what it is. It’s like I get to this point, I’m writing, and then, I can’t finish it. I think too much or something,” I said.

I thought I was on my game. Open. Honest. Vulnerable. Sexy. Self-aware. Establishing intimacy.

“Do you think talking about it makes it worse?” he asked.

“No,” I said definitively.⁸⁰

“Okay,” he said. “I know what you mean. I go through the same shit with my music. I get all in my head. I’m grooving to a tune and then, something happens. It gets all fucked up. I have to drink or walk around or stop. I’m going to call you when that shit happens next time.”

He laughed, and looked at me. He looked like he saw something. What did he see?

“Maybe I should start drinking regularly,” I said, knowing I wouldn’t. I wondered if he was an alcoholic.

“It doesn’t work for everyone.”

“Yeah, I think I’d be too dizzy to make any sense. Is that what you do?” I asked, guessing the answer.

“Only when I write,” he said.

My eyebrows rose as I imagined that he talked a lot of shit. But I was drinking and he was kind of languid and alluring, and I so much wanted him to find me the same kind of sultry attractive, so if he wanted to call himself a writer, why not? I wasn’t

⁸⁰ Talking makes everything worse.

interested in what he wrote – or what he thought he was writing. He was smiling lightly. Maybe it was the vodka that I didn't have to buy at \$3 a pop or that his large seaswishing eyes looked softer than I remembered in high school. He pulled his cell phone out, clicked on it, closed it, and checked again. Two more times. He rolled his eyes and put his phone in his long Ichabod trench pocket.

“What's the story?” I asked.

My stomach flipped again.

“Oh, I don't know. My ex; she keeps calling,” he said, still smiling.

“Oh.”

I was holding my breath and my body alerted me, danger, danger. It was a rush. He looked at his phone again. One of his front teeth stubbornly overshadowed the other; he probably didn't go to the dentist or do his taxes. A whiff of apathy hung in the air. He leaned back and crossed his long skinny legs, one endless toothpick on top of the other like a pretzel, a puzzle that would break into endless pieces of puffed starch if I tried to straighten the crooked lines.

“She's going to feel bad about this. She's probably really drunk,” he said.

I was being forced into obligatory dialogue that I still don't want to write. Damn you, Niles.

“So why'd you two break up?”

“I don't know. She just disappeared.”

I had a feeling there was more to the story but the vodka and his bodily flow made me almost believe him. Maybe it was my failure to focus on my graduate papers that were due in forty-eight hours. It was all vague and airy, and I needed not to be present in

my life. It hurt too much and the future too vast and dark for contemplation. I ran my fingers through my hair and started to pull at a few brown ones until they came out. I flicked the limp hairs off my sweaty fingers and onto the floor. It was a habit that my father mocked during religious services. He would exaggerate the hair flicking and mime pulling at his scalp as if I was a wild animal without control of my limbs and then look at me to measure my level of perturbation with a knowing glance.

“That’s crazy that your girl just disappeared,” I said, again, out of obligation, on cue. I was losing control of the scene’s framework. I never would have written those lines. It’s as if I had given my so-called muse too much control and too early. (Jena? No, it’s not you)

“Yeah, it’s weird, right?”

Was he really asking me? I thought only Italians flirted by lamenting about their ex’s. Niles and the Italians.

“I thought everything was going okay. She used the ‘L’ word recently. Serious stuff,” he said.

“Did you love her?” I asked. Like a fool falling into his stupid trap.

“No,” he said. Then he added, “I don’t know.”

“There’s probably a reason it didn’t work out the first time,” I said.

Hadn’t I had enough? Enough of poorly written dialogue? Enough of men?

“Yeah?” he asked. “Maybe you’re right.”

His eyes replenished their waters, not fully alert – in a half sleep, but the waves in his irises had more time before eroding.

“So tell me about your music,” I said, feeling the vodka tickle between my teeth.

“What’s the genre?” I asked.

“Genre?”

“Oh, that’s a literary term.”

“I know, silly,” he said.

I can be pretty pretentious. But we were playing the false humility game, secretly thinking we were both geniuses and simultaneous losers. Niles might be smarter than I am, but he doesn’t know how to do anything. He knows a little about a lot of things, but he’s lazy. He can’t advocate for himself, he’s terrible with money, and he’s an emotional fuckwit. I didn’t know people like this existed.⁸¹

“I do all different kinds of music. It’s mostly Black Techno.”

I didn’t want to understand how Techno can have a color, race, or culture or why he calls it Black Techno with a “k.” A cultural critic would have fun with that. Isn’t techno a kind of music based on repetition? Anyway, Niles isn’t fully black⁸² so it seemed there was a little over-identification going on.

“Do you play an instrument?” I asked, hoping to think more of him. At least if he had a craft, that would be something.

“A little keyboards, but I do everything on the computer.”

Ughhhh. But computers are...hard. I was reaching – It was and still is important that I find my lovers genius in some way, or I cannot move beyond a platonic relationship.

⁸¹ To date, “Niles” has a live-in girlfriend, and I’m broke. The emotional fuckwit title is up for grabs.

⁸² The phrase “fully black” is so offensive that it doesn’t deserve a footnote. I wrote this chapter years ago. I’m not clear where I stand on the race issue, but perhaps I am hiding behind these footnotes as justification for a more layered, adult perspective when I am really the same child I was, craving a male muse, willing – and even advocating for near abuse. Race is not a factor.

I do school. I've practiced acting: Meisner, Stanislavski, Uta Hagen, improv, musical theatre, opera, Lessac and Skinner for voice and speech, Shakespeare. I don't fuck around when I learn things. I've got a bagful of writing and literature courses. Years of tap, jazz, and ballet. The concept of a musician who can't play an instrument is not....well, it's just not good in my mind. Granted, I don't know shit about computers and there must be some kind of genius in that- I don't know. I just don't know.

He offered another round of vodkas; I accepted. He stood in his six-foot-two grandeur and sauntered to the bar as he must have done hundreds of times before while a diverse array of women awaited his presence. I ran my fingers across my chin, found a small, ingrown hair and began to pull. He returned with the alcohol. I had mastered my two-drink limit and was on my third.

“What about your writing?” he asked, setting the glass down.

“What are you drinking?” I asked.

“Gin.”

“So,” he said. “Your book.”

I would comment here, but the pretention and (building) desperation speaks for itself. And then there's the problem with commenting about talking about my book in my book. I'm not going to do it. Okay, but quickly.

“I'm writing about a ballet dancer. She's technically proficient, but detached. Not sensual and boring as hell to watch. Then there's this whole subplot with the fucked up father who's a painter. She's always being looked at and it makes her kind of insane. Like she's done something wrong or unseemly. Its an undercurrent.”

“I'd like to check it out sometime,” he said.

“Maybe, I don’t know. I’m not sure what’s going to happen with it.”

“When are you going to finish?”⁸³

“Don’t know.”

“If you won’t show me, who will you show? Have you ever published?”

“Ummm, not fiction. But news and feature articles.”

“Hmmm. When was the last time you finished something?”

“What do you mean?”

“What do you mean what do I mean?”

He smiled and showed all his teeth this time. A dimple sprang up unexpectedly from his right cheek.

“You know what I mean,” he said.

“Well...”

“How long,” he stated. Was he irritated or trying to get me?

“I’ve been working on the same chapter for a while.”

“How long?”⁸⁴

“Three years.”

“Three years, girl? You know there’s nothing worse than calling yourself an artist and not doing it. If you don’t want to be a writer, you should find something else to do. I bet you’d be good at a lot of things.”

“I do,” I said.

“You do what?”

“I want to write.”⁸⁵

⁸³ This conversation was five years ago. Fuck you, Niles. You’re still here, and it’s two weeks before I send this to my dissertation committee. “Fuck you for your untouchable face.” (Ani DiFranco)

⁸⁴ 5+3=8 years now.

“Ok,” he said. “Then write. Let it go to the world and let them judge it.”

(A beat)

“I’ve started something else that’s a bit more autobiographical.”

“What’s it about?”

“Relationships,” I said.

“What about them?”

“The seamier side,” I said. “Don’t I remember something about you having a child?”

Good, I’m a bitch.

“Yeah,” he said, averting his eyes.

“He’s already thirteen. Lives in Baltimore. I never really see him; I feel kind of bad”...

Going in for the kill. You want to play dirty? Let’s look at your fuck ups.

“Who’s the mother?” I asked.

“Somebody. It’s complicated. She said I didn’t need to be involved. I’m not moving out there; it’s not an option. I’ve seen him a few times.” He turned around to scan the room.

“Where are your parents?” I asked, changing the subject.

My boodie call was beginning to sound like an ambulance on fire. Warning bells and flags the color of Bozo’s nose were slapping me about.

“My father lives in Germany. My mother died when I was a kid.”

“Do you see your dad?” I asked.

⁸⁵ It is now clear to me that Niles is an ass whole. A righteous ass whole who is sometimes on target. Other times he’s just an AH. Dammit, this chapter pisses me off.

“Once or twice a year. Sometimes I feel bad, like I’m doing the same thing as he did. There’s this kid out there with no father who probably needs one. Oh well.”

Oh well, you mother fucker.

The red flags were out. Ready, set go; the race had begun.

“What about you?” he asked. I was reshaping the dialogue.

“My folks are still in Evanston. Same house,” I said.

“Liberal Yuppies?”

Touché.

“Something like that,” I said.

The bar was closing. I frowned.

“But we’re not done talking,” I said.

Gush- why, why.

“Guess there’s nowhere to go,” I said.

We left the bar and walked across the street. He followed behind me and then up my back stairwell when I realized, he was coming in. It must have been an automatic march for him.

I had left the door open because I had rushed out without my keys. It was not the norm, but I was no longer myself. But neither were the scattered heap of papers and books piled on my coffee table. Or mixture of clean and dirty clothes next to my bed, the unopened bills thrown on my bed, the old food sitting out and funking up my fridge, the full sink. I hadn’t mourned the last disaster. Almost three years down the drain with Shlomo. Why be sad? It was past that now.

I was the single girl, the one without an other, the me without a self. It's like I was erasing myself and trying to make a copy of something that never existed. A hole without a bottom. (theoretical turrets spurred on by grad school. When in doubt, blame grad school).⁸⁶

My house was still set up for Shlomo. Two desks, one in the living room, one in the bedroom; I had made myself the second class citizen as an amendment to our agreement – he would move away from the Jews in Lakeview in order to share my small but (somewhat) tidy remodeled one-bedroom, paying more than his share of rent to assist me as a struggling student. The light green microfiber couch divided the room in two because he had insisted on it, a graphic designer attentive to feng shui in an effort to create “distinctive spaces.” Modern lamps insisting on policing the room corners, overseeing that whatever drama went down was conducted with soft lighting. Fluorescent made him groan, avert his eyes, and turn away as if its hazardous beams were his personal kryptonite.⁸⁷

I beckoned Niles into my controlled chaos. It was better than drowning in it alone.

“Sorry for the mess.”

“Girl, this ain't messy. You would think my house was a garbage dump.”

I was certain of his words on that point. We chatted, not about much. The mood was light again in that way that he was, air bound, simple, but with no bottom or anchor. The ex-girlfriend was far from my mind, (big mistake) and he was with me, looking at me. A shadow of moonlight shimmered onto the top of his curly short fro and lightened

⁸⁶ Written midway through my PhD when my writing persona was deeply connected to my identity as a graduate student. Thankfully, this has changed.

⁸⁷ I have internalized this sensitivity to light. I will walk out of a restaurant shimmering with a hint of fluorescent decor.

his eyes. I was squirming and sat in my computer chair, away from him, giggling again and spinning in circles.

“You are very feminine,” he said.

I felt the meaning of feminine in synchronicity with his words. I don’t believe in defined gender roles. I can’t remember the last time embodying the word “feminine.” Maybe it was nothing at all.

Niles walked over to me, knelt down (several feet for a man of 6’2) and softly, lightly, kissed my lips as if they would break into glass pieces. I looked down and turned away. Although he had followed me in, spent a few hours drinking with me, still, I feigned innocence – mostly for myself. Or perhaps his presence brought an innocent awareness; I had not lived this way.

It was my house and still, my script. There was time to be an active protagonist, the leading lady of my own story. I stood up and walked over to my kitchen sink, the pile of dirty dishes, a light stench of lemon soap that I had caked over them to hide the filth, the waste and the last time Shlomo and I had eaten together. Niles followed my lead, trailing my steps in a dark, vampirism way.

“Lots of dishes in there, huh?” he asked.

“I can’t do them,” I said.

Still passive.

“What do you mean, silly?” he asked.

“What I mean is – it might sound kind of weird, but it basically ended when he refused to do the dishes.”

“When did you guys break up?” he asked.

“About three weeks ago.”

“Oh shit, that’s really recent,” he said.

“Yeah,” I said.

It wasn’t what I was supposed to say, admitting I was in the midst of a turbulent breakup.

“So he says, why should I do your dishes. And I was wondering, what the fuck? How is he supposed to move in here if he won’t pick up a single dish? Tit for tat doesn’t work for me. I knew it wouldn’t work,” I said. Maybe I wanted to ruin what could happen. Maybe I make them leave. Maybe I leave first.

“That’s bullshit,” Niles said stepping over to the sink.

“What are you doing?”

“I’m doing something that’s going to help you,” he said. And he began washing.

“There’s a lot there. You really don’t have to,” I said.

“I know. It’s not a big deal.”

There were at least twenty-five food caked dishes. He stood there, for half-an-hour, scrubbing, washing, drying, then again. I looked at his tall, wiry frame, into his eyes, and held onto myself. Something stirred inside me.⁸⁸

“What?” he said, noting my stare.

I took it all in and a warmth filled my insides, down to my toes. I looked away momentarily and then down to the wood floor. When he finished, he took my hand, and we sat on the couch together. His moist, full lips touched mine again, faster, deeper, and then, it was over. I had no more defenses. Clouds of yellow, white, and blue washed onto

⁸⁸ Jesus %*@###! Christy. That’s all it took. A few dishes. All I need for a man to win me over is to wash a sink full of dishes and suddenly he’s my hero. Yes, that’s how I am.

my body, glossing my frame with a tie-dyed wind. The black sky pushed me deeper into the moonlight shadows.

I let it go, all of it, Shlomo, potential looming poor grades on my final papers, the sticky smoke stacks holding my thighs together, the bitter, decaying cigarettes leftover on Niles' breath, the idea of myself as " " , or ??? , the ideologies of Marxism and neo-Marxists who didn't find it problematic to be a neo anything, the armchair Marxists who sat comfortably in tall, stiff chairs that I could never afford, on pulpits that reached to the decrepit, crumbling heavens with crumbling academics, the broken sky that had forgotten me long ago although Moby insists it's somehow poetic or meditative, or even – even what I don't know, I let go of my proof that indeed the sky was falling, is falling and will continue to fall forever, the deepness of the feelings I never had but ideas of feelings I clung to that I only felt in music, because I had nothing else to almost cry about, the hurt I was supposed to hate but desired, the cravings for Chipotle, the raw talent I couldn't express but displayed and ravaged stupidly and was told that I had, whether it be as a dancer, actor, singer, writer, fuck it, who knows, I couldn't do any of it right anyway or finish anything because of such shameful self doubt, the raging storm in my guts that craved my attention for thirty-four years, the storm I would continue to ignore on most days, the nothingness that had built a dull grey mass into the foundation of my home until, one day, I thought, the wind's sage would blow it out, carry it, and take me, again and again -- until it had all washed over me and cleansed me from the filth and the dust I had excavated and draped onto my life.

But I'm a fuckin' Jew so I can't be baptized. Fuck it. The gross scene continues. Sorry mom and dad and anyone's parents I don't want to read this, and cheers, to all of

you, and my ex-boyfriends. Here's to you, Niles, who still didn't text me back nine and-half-hours later.

He led me to the bedroom where we made love without penetration for multiple hours. Everything else, save for the genitals, intertwined, moving over dissonant, minor chords. In a dream state, two figures moved, slowly bending, gently, lightly moist, softly touching up and down the crevices of shoulder blades, kissing everywhere, not stopping, timeless, self defining sharp moments were swallowed and digested but cut and saved only in the dark staircases of small pricking glass, DNA in the body, pushed elsewhere, maybe into the heel, the uttermost point of an elbow, the corner of an ear.

Still the First Date with the Wandering Minstrel who Hadn't Yet Left My Apartment and Possibly Might Still Be There If I Hadn't Shown Him the Door

I didn't sleep. Perhaps it was the intensity of his fingers inside me, his long, dark penis,⁸⁹ maybe it was his lean body. It was unsettling to have a man so easily relaxed like that, after such a short time, snoring next to me. My heart raced; my paper comparing Freudian psychology and Fanon's personality theories was due in a few days; once again I had chosen a weird topic with virtually no available research:

Regardless of possible unforeseen consequences in creating disease models of the other, Fanon partially rejects the Freudian hegemonic discourses when defining illness, and is able to rupture and reverse Freud's theories in the context of racism and colonization. Fanon calls for possibilities of consciousness that Freud's dark forecasts were unable to imagine.

There was something in that paper of interest although it was almost impossible to find commentary eluding to any comparison to Fanon and Freud. Seemingly, they have

⁸⁹ I'm not trying to write porn here for various reasons.

nothing in common, but actually they are in search of the sexual male identity within their own diasporic struggles. Does anyone else find this interesting at all? Does anyone (else) perceive this not-so-obvious parallel? Come on, Freud and Fanon, people!

Niles had joined the Fanon Facebook group as a result of my ill-advised lectures and members touted Fanon's heroism. (I don't know if he is still in the group because one of us unfriended the other; I can't remember the chronology or the details) You see, I had a momentary impact on his life, and since I had very little on my own, this was so necessary.

I may have slept twenty minutes as his warm naked body clutched my torso and his hands clutched my bottom. He was holding me too tight; I couldn't suck in air. Light shone through my white blinds; our first date had already been six hours, and the man who was too long for my bed was still sleeping, hanging over the frame, taking over the blanket, impeding my oxygen. I stood, heart still beating quickly, and dragged my books to the bed, taking space in my own room. I kissed him on the neck, and he smiled. I worked for a few hours as he dozed on and off. Working with the pressure of another's body warmth against me had been the kind of thing I had done with my ex, but this time I was charged beyond the highest volt battery, and we had not had intercourse.

He woke up a few hours later while I was typing, and we began kissing again. He served me with his fingers and I returned the favor with my hand. It was another two hours like that until we were hungry. In a daze, we walked across the street to a trendy café after an awkward shower together, an intimacy I hadn't achieved during my three-year relationship.

"Do you want to split the food?" I asked.

“Yes,” he said.

“Do you always go Dutch?” I asked.

“No, but I’m not rich,” he said.

“Well, I didn’t really want to pay.”

“Then you shouldn’t have offered,” he said.

“True.”

He wanted to take the food back to my apartment. The date continued. We ate, and he climbed back into bed and slept. I grabbed my books, papers, and I began typing for several hours. By six p.m. I still hadn’t slept. My breathing quickened. He was still fucking there. Helplessly I touched his face and felt his long naked back; it was all I could do with my hands and fingers that aimlessly danced from the keyboard to his face, legs, and torso and back to the keyboard. By 7 p.m., I was worried about sleep. My body stiffened. Two days without sleep, and I would freak out. At least I knew that much about myself. I wanted to protect him from my anxiety. I made him dinner, tofu dogs, and broccoli.

“I guess I should go now. I haven’t been home in a few days,” he said.

I knew he should go, but wondered how far I could push it – not him but myself. And I wanted to see how hard it was for him to part with me.

“Why don’t we go to the store and get Nyquil so we can sleep?” I offered.

Instantly as the words slipped out, I regretted the idea. I should have dealt with my papers and what I had done on my own. It would only worsen later. He agreed to my terrible plan, and as I got in the car, I knew something was wrong. My head was spinning circular thoughts:

What if I can't sleep? I might go insane. And if I go insane, who will take care of me? Can people go insane from lack of sleep? Doctors in residency programs don't sleep for forty-eight hours. But I'm not a doctor. And since I'm not a doctor, there's no reason for me not to sleep. This is just bullshit anxiety. There's a new guy here, and I don't know him very well, and all of a sudden he's in my house forever and-a-half. I wonder if he does this all the time. So what if he does? What do I care? Does he care? Jesus, my head is spinning. Breathe. In for five, hold for five, out for five. Oh god, I'm never going to fall asleep. Not tonight. But when? But I don't really want him to go... What if he leaves and never returns? He shouldn't stay. He should stay. Why can't I just go with it for once? What if I end up in a mental institution from lack of sleep?

When we approached home, he played his music. The man who created music on a computer played his political sounds, something about racism and the 60's with Martin Luther King reciting one of his lesser-known speeches to techno. I couldn't engage anymore.

"And when the time comes, I'll go out and buy a rifle. I'm just waiting," he said.

"What are you talking about?" I asked.

"There's going to be a revolution and at the right moment, I'll fight."

Another fucking armchair Marxist. This one sounded more dangerous. If he was serious. I still don't know.

He stripped down to his underwear where I could fully glean all of his muscles and bones, and climbed into bed as if it were his own. I followed and clutched his backside. Something was wrong. My heart raced. The veins in my neck were pulsating. Fuck, I thought. He needs to get the fuck out of my house. But I didn't want to ruin it

with this beautiful man in my bed. This Adonis didn't work or think; he was comfortable being looked at. I checked my cell; it was midnight and he began to snore. My legs began twitching. Jesus, I thought. I hadn't slept in two days. It was 2 a.m.

"Hey, uh, Niles, I don't know what's wrong, but my legs are twitching. I think it's from lack of sleep."

"Oh," he said groggily. "That's okay."

"Well, no, not really," I said, feeling my breath getting shorter.

"Well, what do you want me to do? Sleep on the couch?" He sat up a bit, more alert.

"I – I don't know. I'm pretty stressed because my paper is due in a few days, and I haven't slept."

He sat up and looked at me sighing.

"Do you want me to go? It's the middle of the night."

"What the fuck is wrong with my legs? This is really weird. I'm sorry, but I think it's better if you go."

"Okay," he said, looking at me for the last time in the way I wanted.

I continued lying in bed. I couldn't make it better; I was ruining it. He had to leave. He had to get out. A quick goodbye kiss. Then he was gone. It was possible I would never hear from him again. To this day, I panic at the idea of a man sharing a bed with me overnight.

The Things He Said that Stuck⁹⁰

When I looked at her, I didn't see her face. I couldn't see anything.

You're not an artist. You're a grad student.

Rain

If it isn't immensely clear – regardless of the way I'm framing his rotten attitude – I was kind of gaga over this King David. One night a phone call ended before the tacit understanding that the conversation was over, or to be blunt, he hung up mid-nag as I pathetically pleaded for more time together. (to see one another more than once every two weeks after 11 p.m.). The summer rainstorm only added to the mystique of his “artist's studio,” an open loft space south of downtown with five living spaces – or crevices without doors –allowing four guys and a girl to paint, practice fire dancing, get high, mix music, or do whatever without constraints. The small kitchen was centrally located like a mini island on the first floor and filled with unfamiliar spices and angry notes about what not to eat and how to share productively. This is where I first learned about the widespread existence of angry hippies. The loft itself was dark and vast with high ceilings, and I didn't know if the continuous dimness served to save money or as creative mood lighting. I suppose there is a certain moodiness to darkness regardless of the reasons. When I spent time with Niles, I was inspired to write. Sometimes when I couldn't write, I sought out Niles for stimulus. When I felt dead inside, I looked to Niles for an emotional stirring.

⁹⁰ Jena? No, that was me, not you.

That rainy evening, I wouldn't be invited to his bed piled with dirty laundry and a corner area for mixing music, which for Niles required a record player, piles of hundreds of records, a computer, and mixing equipment that I probably asked questions about but still can't describe. That night, I would only stand in the doorway, soaking, dripping with an anxious sadness. Those were the days I only rode a bike in summer to get around, and I peddled recklessly in the rain, swerving through puddles, wiping water and sweat from my eyes, a pumping pulse, pushing through a defeat that was always waiting for me in every interaction I had with my muse. Niles did not know I was the kind of girl who would show up at his house at midnight uninvited. I didn't know I was that girl either. But with him, I was. Desperate, longing, like the death of a beautiful woman before her end but understand that death awaits nonetheless.

I rang the bell.

"Hey, it's me."

He didn't respond and buzzed me in.

"Hey," I said, trying not to pant, pushing past him in the doorway with my leaking bike.

"Whoa, whoa, what the hell," he said blocking my entrance.

"Let me in, Niles," I said inching forward with my bike, jabbing his knee with my wheel.

"You're all wet."

"No shit," I said.

"Your bike goes in and we talk outside."

"Whatever," I said. "That's fine."

“Surprise,” I said, brushing the wet hair off my back and pulling it onto my shoulders, feeling large droplets fork down my shoulders and forearms. As his large wet eyes rickasheyed question marks in my direction, I was immediately aware of my folly. There was a detached cruelty about those eyes although just as likely, him seeing me in a frazzled, vulnerable state made him horny.

“What are you doing? What time is it?” he asked.

He looked at his watch for emphasis. He looked to shame me. He often stayed up until 3 a.m. – sometimes drinking, sometimes reading, sometimes with other girls. I didn’t always know what he did most of the time.

“I know, but I felt badly about how our conversation ended. I just wanted to talk to you,” I said. My voice cracked, and I started sobbing.

“Nothing is wrong. Everything is fine. What are you getting all worked up for?” he said, looking around the hallway when his front door opened and his older, dreaded-locked yoga teaching bodyguard for a roommate left the premises with a low leveled “hey.”

“Wonder where he’s goin. Hmmm,” said Niles.

“I don’t want to make a scene,” I said.

“Well, you kind of are,” he said.

“I just – miss you sometimes,” I said opening my arms for a hug.

“Nnno, no, no, we’re not gonna start that now. I have a job in the morning.”

“At noon. At the store.”

“Boundaries, Yamshon.”

“Right,” I sniffed.

“Do you know why you’re acting like this?” he asked, sighing. I don’t know if he was tired, felt sorry for me, or hated himself.

“No.”

“I do. You’re in love.”

“Huh?”

“Yeah, I’m sorry, sweetie. It’s really a wonderful and terribly painful thing. I know what you’re going through.”

“You do?”

“Yah, I’ve been in love. You don’t know which way is up. Everything is tragic and emotional. I just don’t feel that way. I’m sorry,” he said.

I don’t remember the rest. I continued seeing him, and things remained the same until they didn’t. Sometimes he brought several loads of dirty laundry over in large heaps and during those times, he spent more time with me, but mostly, it was every two weeks and then once a month and then —less and less. I don’t know if what he said was true. I’ll never know.

Between the time when he told me that I loved him and with increasing neglect, one day I snapped.

A shirt and a book

I threw the worn gray t-shirt and Chekhov book of short stories in a plastic Dominick’s bag and drove over to his artist’s loft on Michigan Avenue. I tossed the bag onto the seat next to me in my unkempt, unwashed black Honda Civic with the dent on

the side and listened to the bag flap in the September wind. One more time I told myself not to bother to fix the dent; another car would probably bash into it a day later.⁹¹

Approaching the square brown building with the oddly shaped wax sculptures in a window display, I glanced at the plastic bag again – making an ugly rustling sound as the wind relentlessly hit it. J-Lo was cooing about being Jenny on the block. I thought about turning it off before he called me out for listening to what he called pop trash, but fuck it, I thought; it doesn't matter what he thinks anymore. I dialed the cell number that I had erased so many times during the past three months. To my disgust, the digits had been too easy to remember – or impossible to forget – every time I resolved never to call again. Once he had caught me in the act of one of my failed attempts at cutting him off before the numbers had fully marked themselves into my subconscious.

“Um, what’s your number again?” I said when my caller ID didn’t project his digits, and I was tired of hating him for a time.

“Did you erase my number?” he asked.

“Well, maybe. Yeah,” I admitted.

“Wow, you are out of control.”

The first time he blew me off, he had stayed at my house for two days, and then he hadn't returned my calls for three weeks. After a series of similar disappearances or near vanishings for three months, I told myself I had finally had enough. We had slept together every time we were within five feet from one another; he was a magnet, and I passively stayed in place and let him have his fun. But I never spent the night. He would beg me to stay, and after letting him have me, I would quickly gather my belongings and scurry away to safety. I dialed his number, hoping it was the last time.

⁹¹ Dent is not fixed.

“Hey,” I said.

“Oh, hi, are you already inside?” asked Niles.

His voice was always calm, blasé.

“I’m not coming in,” I said.

“Oh- okay. I’ll be out in a minute.”

A tall, lanky frame sauntered over to my car, which was parked on the opposite side of the street from his building, something I had never done before, and pointing in the direction I would be sure to follow – the university library. I unlocked the doors wondering if he would take a seat or simply run off. With a half smile, Niles opened the car door, spotted the swaying plastic outlining his two items, grabbed it in one swoop, and thanked me. He still managed to make it seem like I was being put out and not really doing him a favor by delivering his possessions. Damn it, I was trying to reverse the dynamic. I was the one in control now, so why wasn’t he at least partially irked?

I don’t remember how quickly or slowly his pace was from my car; I don’t recall how he looked when he walked away, if his head was cocked, what his expression was, if his shoulders stood erect or slouched. I do know that he barely made it across the street before I peeled away.⁹²

⁹² This wasn’t the end as there are no endings. I was never physical with Niles again, but one evening, he pleaded with me to come over. When I declined, he offered to meet me elsewhere, anywhere, he said. I refused. A few months later, he called to tell me he impregnated a girlfriend. I told him that the baby and the girl took precedence, and there was nothing more to discuss. He was silent, and his silence hurt both of us. The baby is alive and well, and his relationship is over. I believe he is a good father.

We attended a high school reunion two years ago, and I offered him a ride. He declined. At the reunion, a DJ blasted 80’s dance music, and we found each other face-to-face on the dance floor. I offered a few silly grooves in his direction, he smiled and paused the moment before finding another girl. She was a real grown up – a full-bodied woman who had been fast and popular as a tough girl during high school.

Pre-Imposter Syndrome

It was year four of my PhD program, and I would soon take my comprehensive exams, which were typically taken in year three but some waited until their fourth year. I was a little lost and not sure of my focus. For my creative dissertation, I couldn't make Jena come alive from my head to the keyboard to the page. Maybe she was dancing in circles in a black hole somewhere. In writing workshops, critiques were numerous; I had continually rewritten the first chapter in multiple workshops. (I had begun the Jena story six years ago). Aside from my creative work, the PhD demanded a theoretical component, and I was just as hazy about my academic interests. Comprehensive exams, a prerequisite before defending a creative dissertation, were based on a focused scope of hand-picked literature and theoretical sources, not creative work. (not that Jena would have saved me). By the time I found my interests leaning towards gender issues, psychology, and persona performance, it became increasingly clear that the professors of my department did not focus in these areas. I would have to force some sort of compromise, but I didn't know how or who to start with. When I'm unclear, it doesn't register, and I avoid tackling my confusion while my anxiety climbs. I stand still. At that point, I have to backtrack and figure out what got me in a frightened, almost catatonic state. I'm trying to recognize this faster.

It was the fall of 2009, and I was meeting with professors without a succinct plan for my comps. Unrelenting piles of paper and notebooks eroded my living room bookcases. A slow moving inertia (Jena?) formed a glob between my ears, so I did my usual recalibration from large looming task into the role of girlfriend. I knew this role and had played it several times, however poorly, whereas I did not know how to prepare for

those orals. When a daunting project awaits, it is time to get into a new relationship. This time, I pushed harder and with more force.

I met Eron, a drummer and construction worker and fell deeply in love. Not in the hyperactive way I chased after Niles having mini-heart attacks over dirty laundry, but full-on oblivious heart-pumping love. He was nine years younger and came from a working class steel town in Indiana. The moment he mentioned not wanting children, I immediately began pushing for a family despite having any clarity on the issue myself. I pushed for him to return to college. I pushed him to finish college. If I could to push myself into an upper middle class lifestyle, I'd finally believe it. He was my test run. I pushed with relentlessness until he fell.

I was inundated with heaps of post-Marxist readings from theory courses. Although I swallowed the rhetorical wording whole, I couldn't digest it. Consciously, my politics leaned way to the left, but my unconscious mind and my heart pulled me far to the right until my mouth caught up and performed those appalling righty behaviors in my romantic relationship. I didn't like myself pushing this boy, but I couldn't stop. He wouldn't fit in without a college education. But fit in with whom? Me? My parents? My degree? I couldn't answer. I looked for a reason. I avoided mirrors and anything that reflected my ugliness; I wrapped myself tightly around him so I would not see.

But when he was at band practice or working, my body pumped with a black rage as I surmised my so-called liberal upbringing. How could my mother teach at a Jewish Day School and keep quiet about some of Israel's bullying behavior? Why did my parents move to North Evanston if they really wanted desegregation? And why couldn't I hack it at Evanston High School? Why did I leave and attend a private Chicago high

school in Lincoln Park if I was such a lefty? How could I indulge in a conversation complaining about capitalism when I was doing nothing to change the system? I espoused my left leaning politics in a sprawl composition course and taught the history of Chicago's racist real estate practices. I taught about King being hit with a brick in Marquette Park and Daley pushing him out of Chicago and pretending to create an "open city," a sweetheart deal without a real contract. But in my personal life, day after day, I pushed with all my might towards an upper class lifestyle, a schooled husband, and a heteronormative reproductive imperative on heterosexual time. I was the truest armchair Marxist, a hypocrite. Eron was my test.

I arranged a Frank Lloyd Wright walking tour with Eron. When we finished, he said, "I can't afford these houses."

I didn't know what he meant.

"It's just a tour," I said.

He shook his head. I was confounded.

For Thanksgiving and his first introduction to the Yamshon family, my parents suggested Eron bring his drum set to play alongside the karaoke machine, a yearly family tradition. The machine was out of time, a drummer's nightmare, and Erin grimaced as he struggled to create rhythmic structures for requested songs. My sister mouthed across the room, "What the hell is he doing?" After the karaoke episode, my father suggested, "He kind of reminds me of Jim Kerry. Something about his comedic face or laugh." It was a clownish idea for me to create such a strange setup for my family with his drum set. At the time, I found it comical.

I continued performing my own contradictions and confusion. While pitching an upper-middle class lifestyle, I demeaned and mocked it with leftist theories. Often I would turn to David Harvey and a current professor's work, a neoliberal polemicist, to back up my alleged desires for the end of capitalism while asserting Eron in the other direction. One evening he arrived at my apartment in tears.

"What's the matter?" I asked.

"I don't know if I can have a baby. I don't know if I want one," he said. "You need that."

I didn't know what I needed or wanted, but I couldn't reveal that to him or myself. Neither of us bought my fraudulent sales pitch, and we broke up four months later. A slow burning fire was building towards my left leaning parents and anyone claiming to care about poverty while fraudulently living an upper middle class lifestyle. I had been taught that second wave feminism failed because anti-capitalist rhetoric had been removed and women became fractioned with individual interests. I was just a fraction myself. A girl with an individual interest to obtain an advanced degree, date, and marry. A cog. I began to despise academia and what I thought it represented. I did not want to become what I was becoming. Social structures ended my relationship, I told myself. How could I spit out the same bullshit theories that ruined my life?

Comps took place nine months after the breakup. No baby, no boyfriend, and not even a creation of a political platform. I can't tell you where I was for the year of 2010 and half of 2011. I responded to this time in my life with the next two chapters, "Imposter Syndrome" and "Imposter Confirmed," similar to a version of "Blame my Family" chapter. Just substitute family for professors and educational institution. Sometimes I

don't know if I continue to deflect blame or if I linger in the process of understanding the what-happened part. When I allow myself to revisit this jungle gym of crossed emotions, I am attempting to untangle so many knots on top of one another. The haze lingers, which is why I have saved writing this chapter for last.

My academic confusion coincided with a misty fog after Eron's Dodge Durango sped away from my life. Unlike I had mourned other relationships, this time, I couldn't forgive myself. I was a theoretical liar, and I still don't know if my hypocrisy pushed him away. Instead of performing what went wrong in a scene, I will reflect the genre I used to express my pain in 2010, writing. And then when writing failed, music. And then when music failed, back to this chapter. Eron was a regularly performing drummer, and I became embedded in his creative vision and the sound of his drums. It was the first time another artist inspired me romantically and artistically. I suppose that's why I returned to multiple mediums to reflect the loss.

Below you will find one of his application essays that I had proofread over time (marks in red). For some reason, like I held onto pain, I also conserved his essay drafts. You will quickly learn what went wrong, and I hope you experience it as a puncture the way we did. You see, Eron did not necessarily want to return to college. At the time, I needed him to try.

Prospective Percussion Performance Transfer
Fall 2010

Adolescence, Academia, and Musical Musings

For as long as I've known, I've wanted to make music. As a child, "drum" was my third word (following "ma," and "da"). As an adult, music has certainly proven to be my primary passion.

Coming from a musical family, I accepted at a very young age that I was to pick up a practical skill to use as a career and **pursue music as a pastime. (sounds only like a hobby) That (avoid beginning sentences with “that”)** seemed to be my route most of my way through school: earning academic awards and honors through primary and secondary school, enrolling with distinction in Ball State University’s Journalism Graphics program in August 2001. After two years at XXX, I found myself **dissatisfied with my program (this doesn’t really build you up, that is, being dissatisfied, a theme running throughout your essay)**

Would you have stayed?

The day he left, I had proofread the above essay one too many times. The prior evening, I had promised to stop. But it was my compulsion to help, and I thought I knew better, that our futures depended on my syntactic flair (please, you’re thinking; I know, I know). So I emailed him the latest revision against my better judgment, and as we sat in a café together in Pilsen, I told him I sent another version. His face hardened in a way I had seen so many times when he was overtired from band practice and working construction and sometimes, exhausted from what he called my “pushing.” The words

“I’m sorry, I know I promised to stop, but I sent one more revision”

escaped my lips without permission. I couldn’t take them back. I can never erase those words. He frowned, said a quick, “That’s it,” placed a brisk peck on my cheek, and sped off in his white Dodge Durango. No more words. I have replayed that short scene innumerable times and spent the following two years in a stupored shock. Every white

truck filled me with panic and longing. I continued looking for Eron in every white truck driving by knowing he was gone.

I found letters I wrote to him months after the breakup, begging him back, berating myself. Here is a sampling:

I'm frightened about my own future. Nothing is certain. Instead of being self-aware and realizing my own fears, I projected some of them onto you, focusing on your future instead of mine because it's hard for me to face my own reality. I have no idea if there will be jobs in my field or where I'll end up. It scares me. I am also afraid of "failing;" I'm in a terribly competitive field and had a different degree before now. I also worked in the non-profit sector and have little prior teaching or publishing experience. It's hard, and sometimes I worry.⁹³

It's hard to experience you pulling away...Stopping communication has been surprising after four months of closeness, and I hope it is only temporary. I hope you realize the situational anxiety you are experiencing with school is okay, and that I am reaching out to you in a different way, acknowledging your concerns and trying my best to show you that I can be there for you as a support and not as someone who feels the need to push or use force. ...I did not fully understand the stress you were under and now that I do, I see that you just need support and love, not force.

I'm afraid too. I am afraid writing this letter, and I've been afraid for the past two weeks. I think that's okay to fear some things as long as it doesn't debilitate. There are so many things I want to experience with you- writing music together, seeing more of your shows; I would like to go to Portland one day with you to see smart growth. Most of all, I want to have the chance to show you how much I care about your concerns.

I love you very much.⁹⁴

Writing direct letters did not prove cathartic, and if I had sent them, he wouldn't respond anyway. I tried to work it out in fiction and presented it to a writing workshop. It didn't go over.

⁹³ How is it possible that I'm in the same emotional place four years later? A memoir is supposed to teach.

⁹⁴ Oozing desperation dripping off the italics- painful.

Fictional Attempt 1

Jaynie squeezed men into her life the way she parked her Honda Civic- forcing it into small spaces, bumping the cars, which sandwiched her so that she could rest and stop looking. Her mere force left her bumper scratched and had her wondering if she'd ever be able to get out of the space she worked so hard to squeeze into. When she finally shoved herself in, the men left eventually, all parties bruised and scraped, dragging dismembered auto parts through the streets like wandering limbs in search of a nearest body shop. Scratching her head throughout the years, a bit more heartbroken each time, she continued to quickly move onto the next one, the nearest parking space.

But this breakup didn't just leave a small mark. Her license plates were violently ripped and remained permanently removed. Who was she now? Searching for another space was no longer a desirable option. She was left petering around in circles in her 2005 black, rusted Honda envisioning the white Dodge Durango that drove off – and the young man in it.

Derrick Sherms was from a steel mill town of Northwest Indiana and hadn't finished college. Along with her difficult choice of careers, an eight-year PhD in music therapy, her parents also did not appreciate her latest choice of boyfriends. The family tradition called for women to work in the service industry – teachers and social workers while the men solidified their roles as doctors, lawyers, or real estate developers. While the husbands made money, wives saved the world and had their hair done in Chi-Chi salons. Derrick, on the other hand, was a construction worker and a drummer.

“Is he religious?” asked her mother.

Jaynie explained that he was against organized religion, which she wrongly assumed would sound better than practicing Catholic or devout Christian. Her mother didn't respond, and Jaynie knew no response from the Yom burgers was worse than a verbal critique.

“I dislike organized religion,” Derrick would say. “It's used to ruin the environment. A lot of the Old Testament is based on man ruling over animals, a concept I have a real problem with. There's no humility.”

He was a strict vegetarian. Jaynie taught the Old Testament every Sunday morning at a local synagogue; she was a staunch cultural Jew.

“Derrick, that's awfully narrow. It's just one small part of Genesis. Have you actually read Leviticus, Numbers, or Deuteronomy? You can't take a sound bite for an entire religion. Why do you think Moses was chosen? Because he tended after a straying sheep. Moses cared about animals.”

When Jaynie made a point, her eyes narrowed and she lowered her voice for dramatic emphasis. Derrick spoke softly and tentatively in Jaynie's presence.

“I’ll have to look into it,” said Derrick. “But from what I remember, your religion, the one you live by day in and day out, functions by people ruling over the planet.”

“I don’t live by every line. It’s a nuanced system,” she said. “And it concerns me that you make snap judgments.”

Derrick flashed her an alarmed look.

Jaynie didn’t know how to talk to men.

She attended all of his shows. His band was eclectic, an indefinable combination of rock, pop, and jazz. Infused with a musical theater style, she could have been the lead singer herself if she had stayed with the performing she embraced in her twenties in New York as a triple threat. Being so close to the action made her feel full of colored lights and bubbles. She often arrived early and held her breath before Derrick’s entrance. And although he was in the back of the band without visual prominence— as is always the case with drummers – she listened for the percussion, the sexy sound that set the pace of the evening, the throttles, thumps, and syncopations. Derrick was the band leader who found and booked the venues, created the fliers, and was in charge of publicity. He collected the money at the end of the sets, he organized rehearsals, and set the rhythm. He was metaphorically fathering a beautiful child, and after it was all over, he would hug, kiss, caress her, and say, “Thanks so much for coming.” She in turn flashed back the essence of his magical world, the girlfriend of a drummer who played generously, lovingly, and always exactly. Jaynie quickly learned all of the song’s harmonies and sang loudly along in the audience until someone next to her stared; singing with the band was the closest she could get to being on stage, an audition where she always got the part.

I couldn’t finish that story; it offered no long-term joy, and I wasn’t propelled back to the stage because of my words. It was enough at the time to relive my past visceral energy as a performer through this drum set. But now that the drums were gone, the pulse faded.

I began another story called “The Loft Bed,” attempting to illustrate my discomfort with his bed, sleeping over, and intimacy. My fiction professor was bored by the arduous details. It was if my meticulous documentation would lay bare why I could not keep this man.

Eron had a loft bed, and I wasn’t able to sleep in it for any significant duration during the four months we were together.

(Fictional Attempt 2)

The Loft Bed



I like to keep my feet on the ground. Literally. But Derrick built himself a loft bed twenty feet in the air, perched in the corner of his room where a dirty thin mattress meets tough, medium brown wood. To rest, you push your back against lumpy bits of polyester— a mattress not wide or long enough to fit the frame but seemingly reaching to create a space for two.

The rungs and ladder are constructed of splintery wood. The ladder, placed intricately on the inside of the bed's structure, is aligned on a discreet angle to match the ultimate goal, facilitating entrance into Derrick's 'purple world.' The purple significance has been feebly explained, but I still don't comprehend why his band is clothed in all purple. I have the same confusion with the symbolic intent of his two tattoos, one on each forearm. One is a tree with some kind of fence around it or something ecological. I can't recall the other. See Exhibit I below and Exhibit II on page

four for full scope of the purple experience.

EXHIBIT 1- STAIRWAY TO HELL

Once you make it to the top, you have reached a bird's eye view of Derrick's slice of heaven. Mostly you will notice several crates of records and comics piled on a ledge directly across the height of the bed. He claims to have read all of the comics at least three times. I wonder if he misses having access to them or if he ever had access to all of them simultaneously. These are the sort of questions I'm not entirely interested in pursuing although it is a bit curious- all of those boxes of things that he loves shoved away in hard to reach places.

In one corner, a drawing of a penis surrounded by large testicles with a smiley face grins wildly. For some, the college lifestyle is ongoing. On the college continuum, Derrick is somewhere smack in the middle. Because I have a roommate,, and I'm still in school, I'm not off the continuum, but towards the end of it all. To be honest, I'm a decade off the continuum.

Derrick sleeps at my house instead.



The hallway light must be off for sleep time. For a time, the upstairs and downstairs neighbors were flashing the light on after 3 a.m. and abruptly waking me, (in addition to my space heater over-heating) but now I've placed three fluorescent post-its in the entrance that read: PLEASE turn off the hallway light after 10 p.m. Now I am the only one to be blamed for leaving the light on. If things are my fault, I can fix them. You can't control other people but you can control yourself.

Derrick has a small purple bear that was given to him by his mother on his birthday. I have a small mouse that my sister gave me when my ex-boyfriend Jerk-Off Jack-Ass refused to visit me for five days when I had the flu because he didn't want to catch it.⁹⁵ I should've dumped him when he explained that he was "doing research" to find out how quickly flu shots were effective. Anyway, the bear and the mouse must sleep directly next to each other in my bed or the harmony of the bed is off, the feng shui of the room becomes confused, and I fear that one couple is being wrongly separated. If bear and mouse cannot snuggle, why should I have the right to caress my darling

Derrick?

Derrick has a live animal that he sleeps with – or slept with – before I came around. This live animal is known as "Big Baby Jesus," an overweight cat with a meowing obsession, a real chatterbox. She sheds fur balls and asks incessant questions that are unanswerable. There's no way to bridge the gap. I try to create a zoo-like situation in my bed since Derrick rarely sees his fat kitty anymore. My boyfriend is starting to meow and mimic pressing a wet nose up to mine except that his nose is mostly dry unless it's running. That's what the bear and mouse couple us for. They emulate our love and the cat he is most definitely missing

EXHIBIT 2- THE PURPLE WORLD

I met Derrick at a birthday party for early twenty-something stoners and two-bit musicians on the South Side of Chicago. I'm neither.⁹⁶ I brought a fried chicken eating beer-guzzling date that was wearing a t-shirt with an image of a beat up mouse. I arrived at the smoke infested apartment, sat in a worn leather chair with a large rip, and waited for something to happen.

The large living room was filled with colorful found furniture and used books. Another room off the main entrance was smattered with guitars, a drum set, a bass, and a few hand made instruments that probably sound like the clanging of tin cans. Because two of the

⁹⁵ I didn't introduce you to this man.

⁹⁶ Realizing that they were always better musicians than I am.

three of the residents had graduated college within the last four years, it was most likely they were still receiving family funding, which allowed them to work part-time jobs and bang on instruments when life allowed.

I glanced at my date making Beavis and Butthead jokes and then back at a group of young, confused looking men. At least half could have had asperser's syndrome. My mom says I have ADD, but it hasn't been proven.

It was my friend from grad school's boyfriend's birthday, but my friend had not arrived. They are both total bohemians, and I am just like a quarter bohemian. I sat in the brown chair with my legs crossed and then moved to the floor near a young man with long, wide sideburns otherwise known as pork-chops or big chops or some kind of chops who began telling a story about how he jumped in a car with a crazy person. He was not quite smiling, not quite sitting up, not a stoner like the others. He didn't even have a beer in his hand. He was dark eyed and soft spoken. Cross-legged, he looked at me, a kind, intent gaze resting on my face for long moments. I wasn't totally uninterested.

He contacted me. I was flattered and decided we would date. On our first planned excursion, he was wearing real male date clothes, a non-descript button down, so I knew he meant business. I had a little makeup on and wore jeans. We were both trying way too hard. He showed me how his ring finger had been harmed in a construction accident. I touched his calloused hands.

"I guess that's a good omen," he said. "Because I never want to marry or have kids. What about you?" he asked.

I tried not to choke on the salsa between chicken and avocado bites and gulped down some white wine from an overused California grape, "zinfandel." The Mexican food and tangy wine swooshed around my cheeks and into my canker sores, a sweet, sour, and pungent combination insisting on emphatically announcing each ingredient before diving down my throat.

This was the first moment of my life that I wanted marriage and children.

The letters and stories did not prove cathartic; they temporarily induced my desire to regain what was lost and then I sunk lower. No representation of what was lost would bring him back or dissolve him from me. How did Poe escape the beckoning death call of his raven? Eron was caught in my pores, poisoning my oxygen, and I hated myself more every day for making him leave. I picked up a few chords on the guitar and wrote a sad song. Then another. I played multiple breakup songs for my immediate family in their

Evanston living room, and my sister would run upstairs, “Dang, I don’t want to hear those sad songs anymore.”

I called him every four of five days for almost a year. Sometimes he would respond right away, other times not at all. I looked for non-existent patterns, traces of his rhythm, but I was out of time. I wonder if I had left him alone, perhaps he would have come back. (Nevermore, nevermore, nevermore).

One night he may have taken pity on me and agreed to allow me to accompany him to pick up some kind of construction material in Indiana in his white truck. I dragged my guitar and played my sad songs I had recently thrown together about him on the road. We drove all night through my tears. He cried too and at one point during my singing because music moved him. “You’re not getting better. You’re just not,” he said. I think he had hoped I would have mended a little by then. (Nevermore).

Song samplings:

Repeating Song

Verse 1:

*Sick of singin the same old song
Wonderin what in the hell went wrong
Not quite sure what I’m tryin to see
Truth is you can’t even hear me- anyway-anyway*

Chorus: *What if there’s noting to say? Anyway – anyway—*

Verse 2:

*Two months together workin like a dog
You said you were doin it all for me
Then one month later, you’re in a fog
Just because I wanted a family-
And you say you just got to be free-ay-*

Chorus: *What if there’s nothing to say? Anyway – anyway
Why won’t this song go away?*

The next song, “Birds,” was written one evening in my Pilsen apartment when I was drawn into the inertia of my bed on a Saturday; it was 2 p.m. (Jena?) I clutched my half-stolen guitar from Old Town, (I had rented it for a number of months and had forgotten to pay the difference). making just enough sound to hear my own voice over D minor and E chords.

Birds

*As the waves crash against the shore
Why is it I don't remember anymore
As the birds glide across the sky
Why was it our turn to die?
All the songs I sang for you
I thought they would pull us through
In the end I dreamed the words
But now all I see are birds. Soaring, flying, gliding
Lalalalalalalalala*

*As your face glides into my mind
Now I know that it's too late to rewind
But the waves they cycle back and forth
Touching birds along the shore*

And then, the song blaming my parents for losing him. (**Nevermore**)

What's Mine is Mine

*The time has come when I define
Life on my own terms
What's mine is mine
I know that this may sound cliché
I've got to be alone
At the end of the day*

Chorus:

*I was such a scared little girl
Living with all your strings
Living in your world
I never understood
That I could be – The kind of woman- that's me*

*You disregarded my true love
I let you denigrate from up above
Because he didn't fit your mold
I walked away from him in place of gold*

Bridge:

*I know you've done your best
To raise the kind of girl you're proud of
You've took me to the test
But now it's time to find my own love*

*So please accept that I'm on fire
For years of silencing all my desires
I mourn the love I left behind
So now just let me go
What's mine is mine.*

I was sleepwalking songs and academic speak to my professors while imagining I was formulating a plan for my comps. I believe it took two years in total to wake up at all. Heartache comes in threes, so after my derailing exam experience, my uncle passed, and then my grandmother left this world. I was a shell of a quarter note, flailing outside a time signature, bouncing absently down a zigzagged notebook. I had no vision. I spent most of the second half of my thirties staggering in and out of academia, boyfriends, and this project- whenever I could muster up enough courage to sit the fuck down.

Imposter Syndrome⁹⁷

It's a well-known fact. Graduate students have this problem. It should be in the DSM V which would read, "A syndrome where graduate students feel they are merely pretending to be smart as they hide their stupidity in a heavy backpack that will one day accidentally spill out their idiocy which will be precisely the moment when all the academy learns the authentic dumbness of a student's insides and stare at it." Please.

After my gothic comprehensive exam experience, a professor or former grad student would tilt their head to the side empathetically with a gentle hand on the shoulder, sigh, and say, "I'm sure it wasn't that bad. All grad students go through it. It's just imposter syndrome. All part of the process." I really, really want to believe this. But do we *all* have it? No, I would argue. It is *arguable* that we do not. How's that for an argument? In fact, many arrive at the university primed with tight hair sprayed crispy curls and a clickdiddledee click Shirley Temple tap dance minus the chubby cheeks. Felap, felap, felap ball change. Shuffle off to Buffalo. Smile! They had stage mothers or they have always been their own stage mother and they show up with minted Curriculum Vitae's to the nines. They practically carry them around in frames glued to their briefcases or hipster backpacks. They arrive ready, I mean ready for the job market and they are not shy about it. (Why the fuck are they in school) Meaning, they arrive published and polished. They don't need school, but it's sort of like extra firm eye cream

⁹⁷ I could not write the imposter chapters without my own hubris and anger shadowing the textured truth of past events. The poison was inescapable, and I needed it to keep going. I still need it but to a lesser degree. This section may read as defensiveness, and when you are defending your life – when your memoir is your dissertation – you are caught on the witness stand that you have carpentered for the occasion. I believe my professors care about my work, but it was a fuzzy, distorted, ambiguous time. Thankfully my sadness turned outward to anger. I am still scorched, but the wound is no longer a second-degree burn. When I wrote this chapter, my words were freshly singed, openly seething, looking for victims to inject their poisonous content so they could neutralize and heal.

with Peptides on top of the cream that's already there. It adds extra extra coverage and prevents potential wrinkles. They are walking 8x10 super glossy headshots with feet. And I'm not just talking a few published articles here and there. I'm talking books.

Book +s= plural. Books.

And they know people. I'm talking about being in the know. Knowing the good ones. Published writers, writers who are currently being accepted as you read this, publishers, publisher's neighbors. The people who put publishers in business. Being in the know allows them to schmooze with the faculty in a certain kind of way so that more books can be produced between each other and maybe even sleep together. Books having babies. My god, it's the reproduction of production.

I'm getting carried away. But this is not sour grapes, man. (oh, maybe it is) This is the world I'm living. I'm surrounded by minted fresh CV's and Shirley Temples. How in the hell am I going to survive another year of this when my one hope is just for some online journal not to find my work totally abysmal and allow me into their world for a short minute? Even if they mix up my work with someone else's and I accidentally get published, I'd settle for that. I'm almost at the point of plagiarism. Not yet. But almost. The other night I found the thought of myself tacking my name onto Annie Dillard's work not immoral. Amoral perhaps. But not wrong. Just without values. This is not actually me. This is the graduate school me. But practical reality stopped me. People would eventually figure it out. But if it was a small online journal constituent of fewer people in the know, maybe they would overlook the potentially sounding familiarity of what I sent in or fail to recognize Dillard's work and - no, no, no. Maybe if I make a rule

to just simply check my email for rejections- I mean acceptances, once a day instead of twelve times, I'd get more writing done.

In fact, today, just as I put the finishing touches on the previous paragraph, Brevity.com rejected me but assured me *our readers read your essay closely. We have been blessed with a large number of excellent submissions lately, and we hope that you understand that we can only publish a small fraction of the material we receive. Good luck with your writing.* This kind of rejection is more problematic than the typical blow off. They actually read work thoroughly, so it was a thorough, complete, fully realized rejection, a personalized form letter. And apparently, they are also blessed, either by Jesus Christ or Buddha or possibly the Hebrew G-d or Allah or – goddesses...the goddess religion pushed out by monotheism or the masculine powers that be. Someone is blessing these people and they are sharing these blessings with the dejected, rejected, the objected. The point is, I received a thorough and spiritual rejection today of the highest power. And the good luck at the end is just something to say to someone when you never plan speaking to that person again. Everyone knows that “good luck” is the proverbial middle finger. Relationship severed. Until I submit the next piece.

Back to professional students. It's not just that they're published. That hurts, but they *sound* published. In fact, they don't even need to ever get published because I would totally believe them either way. Anyone would. They could lie their way through a lit interview at Harvard and totally get hired. The kind of smart sounding phrases that they use would never slip delicately out of my mouth. Ever. I've even made a point to write them down in various writing workshops and practice job talks in the hopes that I would ingest this sort of sort of sort of (that's how they talk- with a lot of sort of's but that

What I'm saying is, I said Bourdieu and didn't plan it. It just happened. But I didn't want to *sound like* a graduate student as this potentially eating biscuit eater suggested. I wanted *to be* one without ontological problems. Well, it's five years into it and it doesn't look promising that I'll ever be one. I mean, what do you think?¹⁰²

These are the types of eloquent phrases that I have trouble swallowing as food and spitting out as French nicotine in any natural Bourdieusan way:

1. *The geography of this piece* (I know little about geography. In fact, I often get lost in new neighborhoods. The boyfriend I lost my virginity to complained to a friend about me. "She doesn't know where Australia is. I can't take her seriously." It is important to know, however, that this is the same guy who introduced himself by saying, "Hello, my name is Alan, and I own a software company." People who live in Manhattan their entire lives are so myopic).
2. *The architecture of this story* (I know a little more about architecture than geography, but I still can't relate it to writing. Buildings, floor plans, green architecture, I don't know. It's not writing. Architecture will always be architecture to me. I don't remember the difference between gothic and Corinthian, Athenian? for example, although I can take an educated guess.. I don't mean to sound dumb about it all. My writing professor suggested I should really extrapolate about real life situations like the first one...my problem with geography. Why am I still including a professor's suggestions? I am halfway through this book; it should be mine).
3. *I am being oppressed by the narrator* (What? How can a narrator feel like a fascist dictator? This narrator makes me feel like Stalin is beating me with a stick. Reading this piece makes me feel like I'm being interrogated by Nazis. I feel like a slave in a field and I want to resist by working or- reading very slowly. Mmm- I don't think that actually happens. There most certainly is a scholarly definition of a story, but I don't want to look it up, dammit. I'm not doing it. I won't. People oppress other people, but I don't think a story can even if the form is somewhat berating).
4. *Banal* (makes me feel so dumb saying it. Even worse when others refer to writing, especially my own, as banal. Sounds like banning. Banned books. Ban this stupid writing.)
5. *Sortofsortofsortofsortofsortof* _____ (I'm bad at hedging, and when others use it, it sounds thoughtful).

¹⁰² I've changed my mind on this point. I'm going to succeed.

6. *Dead mother plot* (apparently one of the professors is obsessed with this “trope” and it makes me very uncomfortable. I don’t want to think about the obsession with plotting to kill anyone’s mother. This sortofsortofsortof thing is the kind of thing that could set the feminist movement back one hundred years if it’s not dead already. Dead feminist plot. Then again, I never took this course from this particular professor, and everyone raves about her. I just don’t know what the fuck they’re talking about).
7. *High postmodernism, low art, high art, middle brow* (Cook those words until they’re toasted, very well done, rare, medium rare. Fry that art. Confusing for obvious reasons)
8. *Interconnectivity* (this term can only highlight internet tendencies)
9. *Paratactic* (dinosauric in an extinct sort of sort of way or like a pterodactyl)
10. Embodied language (no, no, no. I draw the line here. Language is not related to medicine or the body. If it were, I’d be rich. Hell, we all would. Stack a row of dead bodies or live ones next to a crossword puzzle and see what happens. Nothing!)
11. *Impulse to rupture* (sounds like popping a zit or the desire to murder someone. This impulse cannot be good and if someone is trying to do this with their writing, it’s a white privileged colonial violence that should be curbed immediately)
12. *Grammatical constraints, chains of signification* (S&M)
13. *References and cross references* (so cross eyed that can’t even try this one)
14. I’m stopping here but just because I couldn’t find any more of these smart phrases in my writer’s workshop or job talk notebooks, not because there won’t be more of them that confound me. I’m probably going to piss a lot of people off while simultaneously coming off like an ignoramus, so I should just shut up.

Initially, for my comps, (aka sorority/fraternity hazing known as “orals” after course work is completed and before being sanctioned to move on to the dissertation) it was suggested that I work with the main non-fiction professor in my program through a teaching assistantship. That way, I could use the books taught in class for a study list and have discussions with the professor after class. After a few months of back and forth, I learned this person was often out of town on book tours. I asked fellow students who had worked with him in the past for advice and was encouraged to be “very forward,” so against my better judgment, I began using obnoxious tactics such as sending email titles

in ALL CAPS and marking emails as !urgent!. When he returned, we chatted over email, and I was ready to forge ahead with teaching his course. The week before class, I was informed that the class theme was no longer non-fiction writing, but instead, nature writing.

I have no problem with nature. Nature is a good thing. I offered a positive take on my predicament and told the professor, “Some of my best times occurred in nature.” I’m not sure this was convincing, and wondered how to create a book list pertaining to non-fiction nature writing for my exams. Clearly, I am not a nature writer. (You may note there has not been one tree description thus far) After a semester of enjoying bears and **trees** and rivers and old white men pontificating on the meaning of existence, (oh, and Dillard of course) I was naturally confused about going forward with comps or how to work with this professor in terms of old man nature when I was all about Jewish humor and the psychology of gender. What was our common ground?¹⁰³ How could we share a scholarly or creative tree conversation when I wasn’t totally a tree lady myself? I decided to put the non-fiction plan on hold because I did not have enough of a core background and needed a structured course to make a solid list. He was an understanding prof, well liked, and admired, so I knew that when the time came, I could contact him later, and he would help.

I approached an Americanist for practical purposes. American literature is broad, the basis of my reality as an American scholar. (ish- I’m scholarly (ish) And since I am presumably in America, I thought, at some point, I’ve read a book or two related to this field. I attended high school with the professor’s daughter, and I knew he enjoyed a

¹⁰³ A few years later when I finally found the time to take this professor’s nonfiction workshop, he was deeply supportive of my work and gently teased me for “causing trouble” at school.

Philip Roth sensibility in terms of his reading list although not Jewish himself. American-Jew I could do. We decided I would create an American literature list and that I would become a teaching assistant for his class, a repeating “trope” in my life:

Teaching assistant = Topic AND Comp List

I was starting on solid footing and it seemed that from this good decision, my other lists and papers would take off. Then I received an email explaining that due to low enrollment, the Americanist was no longer offered a TA. I had spent the summer reading books for a course I would never teach. Apparently, the teaching coordinator of my department felt sorry for me when I explained the time and effort I had put into preparing, and I was assigned another teaching assistantship in Asian American literature as a kind of recompense. I was told this was a “sweet deal” and it would relieve me of one of my teaching courses. Hmmm. I wondered how to incorporate Asian American studies into my exams. But I was determined. Here’s my brainstorming session:

Nature is out. American literature is out. In with the Asians. I don’t know many Asians. I haven’t read many Asians. Maybe none. What is related to Asian American literature that I might know about? African American, Latino American, Native American, Gender American...no, doesn’t exist. Not yet. Jewish diaspora....? Jewish American? But, that is complicated- cuz- like- we’re already here, sort of, sort of. Multicultural literature. I don’t exactly have an in-depth background in multicultural literature. I don’t exactly have any literary background. I took those Rushdie courses at DePaul, but he was sortofsortofsortof doing his own thing. Hiding in all those caves and being hunted and haunted by – political dilemmas. Forget Rushdie. Hmmm. I am Jewish. That’s kind of a minority although a lot of us are doing well in kind of a sortofsortofsort

of major way. Still, we're not overpopulating. Not in America, and I am in America taking an exam with Americanized professors. So we're kind of a minority here. Jewish studies. Ok, I know things about being Jewish. I have a basic knowledge in that area. Hebrew school. Bat Mitzvah. Israel. Been there twice. Shabbat dinners with my mom's crispy chicken. Twice a month. I know what kosher is. I know how Jews talk. Most likely I talk like one, but I have never actually researched how Jews talk. Not in America. Just sort of took it for granted. I know bible stories. I know general Jewish culture. I am therefore interested in the Jews. I am one. It is arguable that I have to be interested. Being a Jew = some interest + basic knowledge = exam list. Done. I could start my first exam list. Almost.

I approached a professor in the Jewish studies department. Unfortunately, she informed me that she was a bible scholar and not a Jewish literature expert, but she agreed to do a book list with me anyway.

"We don't have a Jewish literature scholar here, but why don't you take my reading the bible as literature course?" she suggested.

"Um, ok, if you think that will help my understanding on a fuller scope."

I was far from being a victim. She was offering me her time, and if I didn't think the list was a good idea, I should have spoken up.

My exams would be put on hold until I understood what I was doing or which classes I was taking for what or – what the themes were... I was already a year behind, as I pointed out to the bible scholar. The fog in my brain thickened.

“That’s okay. Take as long as you need. What you really need to do is impress your professors,” she explained. “Be in school as long as you can. The market is really competitive.”

Would I get smarter if I stayed longer? Perhaps the great words just needed to marinate in my brain with the right sauce. I had no publications, so I knew she was partly right. Maybe by the time I finished I would have more to show for myself. Or would I repeatedly fail and hide in the ivory tower until I rotted? No, no, that wasn’t right. I was determined to be impressive and maintain longevity after I figured out exactly what I was talking about. Mostly, I had impressed people in my life, but something was shifting. I was no longer leading impressions although I was feeling pressed upon. I wondered how reading the bible as fiction would tie into my readings of gender in Jewish literature and my latest idea to research representations of marriage. Since I wasn’t actually compiling a bible list, and ideally a graduate student uses course work to inform their lists, I wondered I could benefit from her course. I had finished all of my course work several months prior, but if a few extra classes would earn respect and longevity, I would do it. If I could earn external respect, maybe I would internalize it one day.

The bible course taught me that a Jewish marriage is never mentioned in the Old Testament. The closest I came to approaching a biblical marriage “trope” was the old faithful “Be fruitful and multiply.” I had failed at both. (personally and later professionally) I made another discovery: Jewish biblical women and Jewish fictional women are like – not really developed characters for the most part. A lack of subjecthood in both cases. (like myself) A few female spear-carriers like Naomi, Ruth, Leah, etc. make a quick cameo and disappear after giving birth. Not much air time. In the bible,

they take a quick walk around, get bossed around by some dudes, spread ‘em and go. In modern lit, they complain about their minor roles and briefly frolic in an independent life before turning in their badges and then the same – spread ‘em and go. (*Marjorie Morningstar*, anyone?)¹⁰⁴ Then they spread ‘em and disappear or end up alone and ostracized from the Jewish community. A fruitful multiplication of Jews or –vanish. Hmmm. I wondered if I should convert. Depressing that even my reform sisters were shackled to the old book. But we are a people of the book, so what do you do when the book is inherently patriarchal? I continued to build my own prison, and the literature confirmed and necessitated it.

I trudged along in reading the bible as literature course, assured that I would be struck down by lightning any minute, because all Jews know, even if they don’t believe in the bible, if they read it any other way than a commandment, trouble follows. (Noah’s Ark, Sodom and Gomorrah, etc., etc.) Serious trouble. But for the purpose of my career, I asked G-d to understand my false reading and scoured Leviticus with a fine toothed-comb and a scribe’s pointer, analyzing legalities with all the potential loopholes while perusing the commentaries. When it was time to write the final paper, I asked the professor what sort of (sortofsortofsortof) theme I could write about to tie into my comprehensive exams. We decided upon a modern Jewish literature focus, and so once again, I discarded all the (biblical) reading from the course and threw together a paper based on reading a few last minute novels during the last two weeks of the course that were not discussed in class, including the six hundred page *Marjorie Morningstar* (Man, did I read quickly). My final paper was returned full of marks, cross-outs, and questions.

¹⁰⁴ Ok, Wouk, here’s my beef. You gave Marj hundreds and hundreds of pages and then you put on the white gloves and smother her with ether. WTF, Wouk! But it was the fifties, man, I gotta give you credit for giving that girl life as long as you did.

It's hard to write a paper about the authorial extinguishing of the female Jewish protagonist. Sounds vaguely like a dead mother plot. I had no theoretical apparatus and researching alleged Jewish feminist theoreticians served more problematic than helpful. Laura Leavitt, for example, was hardly radical. Everything harkened back to what I read as an angry, relentless G-d who left little room for feminism. If there was a version of a feminist reading, it was done lightly and with much guilt for rewriting the Torah.

When I met with the lovely Jewess to discuss the paper, she said, "It's a process and you have some really good ideas in there. It just needs a lot more work. I consider this a draft."

"Okay," I agreed.

She slapped a "B" on it, which in my program = bad news. She changed the subject to consider my language requirement.

"What language are you taking?" she asked.

"I don't know. I think I remember French."

"Hmmm. Do you know any Hebrew?"

"A little. I went to Hebrew school, but I'm not sure how much I remember."

These invigorating conversations in her office involved a rapid heartbeat and such quick breathing that I often had to slow my speech to avoid fainting. Why do I give scholars so much power? The remarkable Jewess had bookcases lined with thick volumes of Jewish titles that I knew I should have read or known something about. She was close to my age, but of course, married with a child and on her way to tenure. I was always wearing the right amount of makeup and glowed with an anxious youth (that I don't

possess) and hunger for knowledge that almost made up for whatever I was doing wrong in my research.

“I think it would really benefit you to take Hebrew level three and four so that you can read Israeli novels. You probably won’t get to the point of fluency, but you’ll be on your way for later.”

What does later look like? When will it happen, I wondered. I still don’t know.

“I haven’t been in Hebrew school for over twenty years,” I said.

I was a blank Torah scroll without a scribe or story. Would this woman help add the required sacred lettering? Who would roll me up and cover me with an embroidered case? I didn’t have a prayer.

“I’m sure it will come back to you. I’m going to give you a professor’s name, and he’ll be happy to have you in class. The thing is, you’ll have to get up to speed over the summer and then take an extra course throughout the year, but it will be worth it.”

“So I’ll be taking advanced Hebrew for an entire year?” I asked.

“Yes. I’ll write a letter on your behalf to present to the English Department to explain why you’ll still be fulfilling your language requirement by time you take exams.”

“Okay, this sounds like – a good plan. Thank you for being so helpful.”

“Be prepared. You will have some native Hebrew speakers in there.”

“Oh, you mean like – Yeshiva boys?” (shit)

“Exactly. Who else is on your committee?”

“I’m kind of still working that out,” I said.

On top of entering the diasporic Hebrew classroom in the fall, she suggested I take a course with a certain professor known for his neoliberal tendencies. He was famous for

his polemical theories, and she said that although it would be challenging, ultimately my working with him would be a useful experience. If I impressed him, a recommendation letter would be worth many shekels. She felt it was arguable that he would help me. It was arguable it would be an enriching experience.

“Does he often work with creative writers?” I asked.

This man was known to be the badass of the department. I was afraid of getting a theoretical whooping.

“The best thing to do is take his course, engage with his work, and then ask him to work with you. Form a relationship,” she said.

“But I’d be putting off the exams for another year. And would this be a problem with the extra Hebrew courses?”

“There are no jobs anyway. Like I said, it’s best to stay in school as long as you can right now. And if you can galvanize his support, it will benefit you immensely.”

“Ok,” I agreed wearily.

I took the man’s class. It wasn’t terrible- in fact, pretty frickin’ interesting - although it was filled with Shirley Temples who had read his published works and quoted them throughout discussions. I guess people really do their homework. I presented a brief framework and questions regarding poet Tina Howe and my classmates congratulated me, but the professor said nothing. No written comments. No in-class comments. In a panic, and since I knew I needed to impress him, I emailed “I’m concerned I’m not retaining the major arguments and concepts in class. Should we have a meeting?” He returned my email with, “You are doing fine in class are make good points so no need to worry, but I’m happy to meet with you.”

Nothing memorable occurred at the meeting and later on when it was closer to my prelims, I presented my pieced together memoir list based on a brief conversation with the non-fiction professor. He warned, "With these books, you'll never get a job. What are you going to say? I read *Prozac Nation* for graduate school?" I asked if he should help me with the list instead.

"I don't focus on memoir and I haven't read many but I can do that list with you. The question is why they're being read now and how they're being read," he said.

"Yes, I have some theories about that," I said.

"Your list is not literary enough. I don't recognize any of these works. What the hell is *The Kiss*?"

"Um, it's about incest."

"Okay...What's *The Surrender*?"

"Anal sex."

"What?"

"It's about anal sex."

"*Prozac Nation* is about depression?"

"Kind of. She's actually more manic."

"I really don't care. I suppose you can use some of these books, but a lot of them have to go. Change your list and come back to me. I'm totally uninterested in the memoir, by the way," he said.

"Okay," I said, knowing that I was fucked. One bad disappearing Jewess paper and now a professor who hates memoir working on my memoir list.

"What interests you in the memoir?" he asked.

“The first person direct address. And how it’s gendered female in these books. Also, the current memoirs that I’m interested in focus on mentally and physically degenerating middle class women, but instead of going down a therapeutic trajectory, which would be more of the St. Augustine tradition, or writing as healing, the memoirs I’m looking at are more what I deem anti-therapeutic as a comment on a volatile market.”

“Interesting idea. What other texts have you read?”

(I knew he would go for some kind of post-Marxist stuff, so I had whipped up the non-therapy volatile market theory)

“It reminds me of Eighteenth Century novels when writing was sort of (sortofsortof) seen as domesticated and feminized. Or individuated.” (grasping)

“That’s good. Why don’t you add some Eighteenth Century novels to your list? Then you could say, hey, I also teach the Eighteenth Century when you go out on the job market.”

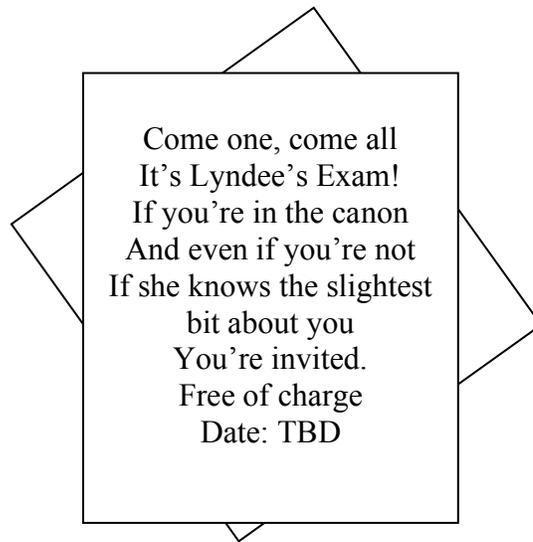
“So- trashy memoirs and Eighteenth Century literature?”

“It doesn’t matter if it’s good literature. It’s the argument behind it. I personally don’t care about that. So yes, you can add five or six Eighteenth Century novels to your list.”

“Interesting.”

I was looking at a list comprised of some of the following novels: *Prozac Nation*, *The Kiss*, *Liar’s Club*, *The Surrender*, *A Million Little Pieces*, *Just Checking: Scenes from the Life of an Obsessive Compulsive*, *Pamela*, *Shamela*, *Emma*, *Roxana*.

The Jews, the Asians, the Americanists, and the scholars would not help me now. I was spinning in a field of graduate jargon, strange politics, and my own idiocy, which I understood less than anything else. I had the sinking feeling the exam situation was somehow my own doing, that I hadn't heard someone correctly or I had misinterpreted someone's advice. Or I should've put my foot down somewhere, but at what point, I don't know. Who was my actual advisor and if I had one, would they just lead me to another book list? Hell, what about the post colonialists? Maybe I could add Victorian literature, subaltern studies, perhaps a touch of Marx himself instead of going so postally post? I hate Hegel but still, I'm surprised he didn't make a showing. He would totally be into fucking with graduate students. It seemed everyone was invited.



Imposter Confirmed¹⁰⁵

A syndrome may dissipate in time, with maturity, a good therapist, a supportive community. But what happens when the syndromee experiences her fears confirmed by

¹⁰⁵ This process was fuzzy and distorted and ambiguous. I was very angry, regardless of individuals supporting me.

reality, a reality revealing her imagined demons are in fact quite real? The condition feeds on itself – expanding from a small sea to a tidal wave of overwhelming and vast hopelessness. What happens to those who are hijacked and planted in a locked room of superiors from which they have been so desperate for approval but will never achieve? The unnatural fluorescent glare of self-doubt flashes bleakly in the interrogation room, the moment you are told flat-out, you will never succeed, the moment before you disappear forever. I almost disappeared.

Eron gone. Intellect fading.

When heart and mind fails, what is left?

Diving into this memory is setting off alarms.

Three papers were prepared for discussion:

The Marking of Female Covenant amidst Secular America, Treading Water in a Sea of Middle Class Despair, and last gladly least, and *The Early Novel Constructs the Rising Middle Class*. The last title is admittedly the least original although I still believe all the submitted papers have some merit.

With the first title, I argued that the modern female version of covenant in Jewish literature is synonymous with the Jewish marriage – as opposed to circumcision. That one didn't fly. The neoliberal polemicist on my committee changed topics so quickly, I forgot what the frick I was doing when he tried to coerce me into admitting that Jewish American literature did not exist. I think that's what he was doing, but that fast biscuit is a quick one, and my mental velocity was closer to a cross country pace, while he was sprinting. And then there was the fog. Oh, the fog. Where had I been? Why couldn't I

answer him or any of them in a way that sparked further conversation? I repeatedly served dead tennis balls that hit the court without bounce. No return, no return.

He wanted me deconstruct the term Jewish American literature, I think that's what it was, a fairly annoying and nearly impossible endeavor. Most likely a thankless task because I didn't know how to structure my retort. But still. Still. I mean, come on. The conversation avoided the reproductive imperative still rooted in Jewish rhetorical devices, etc. etc. Dang. I should have known I'd be derailed on that one; identity politics were not favored with my particular committee members and that kind of reading was regularly rejected at my institution. Why was I insistent on deconstructing the Jewish marriage in that way? What could these disappearing protagonists tell me that I didn't already know? And why after marriage? I was fading with them.

Not a word was uttered about my second paper claim: recent memoirs inhabit an anti-therapeutic trajectory accompanying the fall of the middle class and particularly middle class memoirists performing mental illnesses. Look, I understand it's a bit wobbly to connect a "sick" economy to "gendered" psychological suffering, but it is *possible*. A stretch, for shnizzle, but *possible*. I couldn't prove how the economy was necessarily gendered erratic and volatile (a ship metaphor or hurricane was rendered female, but money was somehow more neutral) and the added burden rested on proving female mental illness in memoirs at a particular historical moment. Dammit, I see the pitfalls, but I still don't know why it wasn't discussed. What did I neglect to write, to say? Then there was the problem with tying neurosis to a failing economy in the most general sense.¹⁰⁶

My chosen memoirs featured underemployed middle class women threatened by a failing

¹⁰⁶ Uh oh, the rhythm of this chapter reminds me of similar problems with finding appropriate audition material. Am I stuck in the same pattern of a perpetual audition without proper material?

economy and acting a ill cray cray. ... I still think there's some merit in it. (Oh geez, why am I still fixating on these arguments?) Are you still reading?

The intentional repetition of illness is a symptom of the structural failure of capitalism, a disease with no cure. The suffering protagonists' sickness is a form of market resistance illustrated by personal unproductivity and mental stagnation. Ongoing illness parallels a Brechtian alienation affect, and without catharsis, the reader is disturbed by a cyclical disease model without the expected therapeutic cure of the mainstream memoir.

Why were my ideas not worth discussion? Why do I still care? I continue to create the debate in my own head because we never had it. It was not discussed! I am ready! Let's discuss it! Will I be forever haunted by rejected papers, and how does this rejection equal being shown the door from the academy? What kind of idiot invests years in failing theories without intellectual or practical application? If the pursuit of lifeless ideologies signifies my thirties, who am I now?

My third paper piggybacked on Watts' *The Rise of the Novel*; that one was more of an exercise historicizing Eighteenth Century literature than anything else. I contended that class anxiety was dramatized through representations of sexualized female protagonists in the first person. Another idea POSSIBLY WORTH 5 FUCKING MINUTES OF DISCUSSION? HOW ABOUT TEN?! I worked on these papers for over a year, dammit.

So what happened in there?

A week preceding my academic reckoning, I had met with the Asian Americanist who was guiding me with the middle class sea of despair tidal wave nearly thirty pages of

vomit paper.¹⁰⁷ This paper was more heavily weighted since it was written ahead of time. (The other research papers involved questions given over a weekend and brought in the day of orals for further discussion).

“The paper is a lot better. It’s an unusual topic combination – psychoanalysis, post-Marxism, a bit of Pierre Bourdieu, and memoirs. I’m curious to see how the conversation goes,” he said.

“You are?” I asked.

“It’s interesting how you sort of (sort of) write in a stream-of-consciousness style when discussing *Prozac Nation*,” he added.

“Is that bad?”¹⁰⁸

“Not necessarily bad. Perhaps a little unusual. It’s as if you’re mimicking her style.”

“Should I change that?” I asked.

“Don’t worry about that now. It’s a detail that you can fix later. The conversation is going to be a lot of fun- a real academic conversation with diverging viewpoints,” he said, looking up at me to catch my expression. Did he desire my approval? Impossible.

“Fun?”

“Absolutely. How are your other papers going? What does the rest of the committee say?”

“I guess fine.”¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁷ The Asian American paper was chopped. My theory is the Anti-Neoliberal Polemicist had neither the desire nor the time to do a paper with me, (although the man spent numerous office visits working on my Eighteenth Century list where he could have been eloquently bashing unsuspecting Neoliberals like myself, and it’s weird, because I still don’t think I am one). The result: neurotic low-brow memoirs pushed onto unsuspecting Asian Americanist. Wrong problem, wrong culture.

¹⁰⁸ Of course, it’s bad! It’s a research paper, not a method acting journal...argh.

“Don’t worry,” he said. “You’ll do great.”

“Ok,” I said.

A low murmur of paranoia grumbled within, a monk-like ancient call from the womb.

“Ahhhyingahhhhh ahhyingahhhh,” it said. “The Asian will terrorize the Jew, Ahhhigahhhh, that means youuuu.”

Chang Rae Lee often characterizes fictional Asian-Americans as untrustworthy characters and more specifically, social climbers willing to do anything to blend in and get ahead, and this a sort of sort of OCD unwanted irrational thought crept in my fragile cranium. I was no racist—just hadn’t known a lot of Asians in my day, which is odd considering my trajectory of friendships around the globe. My sails simply just hadn’t blown that far East until now. Now it was time to deconstruct the irrational, fear based thought. I had sort of sort of learned to do this in cognitive therapy, but not very well. Here goes: I had only fully analyzed Chang Rae Lee texts in this particular professor’s courses, which was the reason why I was associating him with the novelist at all. Secondly, it was doubtful he was going to pull a model minority spy busts you when you least expect it kinda thing, Chang Rae Lee style. I reminded myself, Lee writes fiction and generalizes cultural tensions by aggrandizing stereotypes. That’s how he makes money. A fiction writer cannot write in a social climbing Asian American professor into my life. That guy is real; Chang Rae Lee writes fiction. Fiction does not equal non-fiction. Chang Rae Lee had no knowledge of my comps, nor did he have any desire to usurp them. Chang Rae Lee did not meet my Asian American professor nor is he my

¹⁰⁹ I’m still unable to replicate my professor’s opinions, but the tone in the room was unforgivable: there was something terribly wrong with those papers.

professor in any way. Not even close. They are different people. Not related. My professor is not even a fiction writer.

I had worked with this particular professor for several years, and he had always been supportive of my work and said things like, “How did you catch that theory so fast?” or, “Your paper dealing with mothers and daughters in *The Joy Luck Club* is really insightful. You should work on it some more to present at conferences. I can help you.” We had become friends by sharing off-color remarks about Asians and Jews, a camaraderie involving collective amusement around our ethnic upbringing and the awkward charge of teaching multicultural literature as potential ethnic representatives. He was in my camp.

Next I met with the JA (Jewess American) who recently suggested I had some sort of breakthrough. I don’t believe I said anything different than any other time, but perhaps I sounded smarter that day. Or had a good bowel movement in the morning.¹¹⁰ At the meeting’s denouement she mentioned, “Be sure about what you’re saying and be clear. Just make sense.”

I was startled. Was I regularly not making sense? Shit.

I approached the hater of neoliberals. (I had learned that sometimes, you could be one and not even know it.¹¹¹) I still had a pint-sized reserve of confidence from the Far

¹¹⁰ Clearly I didn’t understand why I was praised for my work on some days, when other times upon speaking, I replicated one of Rabalais’ caged carnivalesque creatures.

¹¹¹ One may exist as an accidental neoliberal, not a hater. For example, Obama still has no idea he is one. Freud was one before the term existed just for inventing psychology because it is structurally based on individual problems, not political structures. Get it? There is a slight possibility that I’m still getting this theory wrong, but I assure you, I have the basics down. (When I say “I”, it is not the collective “I,” but still I must insist in *my* defense, I am not a neoliberal. This insistence is not a structural problem; it is very clearly *my* problem. No neoliberal bootstraps will pull me up and out of my proclamation, that I am not, never have been, and never will be a goddamn neoliberal.

East. Was it possible that as Mr. Biscuit¹¹² told me to enter his large corner office, that I had noted a distant bell toll, *You're on borrowed time, Yamshon*. Was the renowned scholar looking at me with tired eyes from too many hours at the computer or was he farsighted? Was he tired of me or just – tired –as we all sometimes are – tired? (You have no idea how exhausting it is to obsess over the possible motives and feelings of Mr. Biscuit. This is very, very tiring).

I spoke quickly, and he gave me assurances with dozing and (irritated?) yes, definitely tired eyes.

“You’ll have no trouble from me. You have nothing to worry about,” said the Southern muffin.

With one vote of confidence, one odd remark, and a single promise of “no trouble,” I focused on creating acceptable exam experience. A few days before comps, my uncle took very ill after surgery complications and was suddenly in hospice. I don’t have a lot of family, so the ones that are left matter. An undertow pulled me downward and shadowed around me. I had purchased a black, dreary dress for the oral exam, 1950’s style with three large buttons by the neck knowing I would wear the same dress to my uncle’s funeral. I was the bird who couldn’t afford two dresses although I bore the weight of a large stone in my heart.

On November 8, 2011 at 2:15 p.m, I stood outside a closed door on the twentieth floor outside the English Department’s conference room, a room I had observed many a PhD candidate stammer, blush, and inadvertently fuck themselves over during practice job talks in front of their peers and professors. The thought of the room still tugs at me.

¹¹² There is no good reason to use this term to describe this man save for a deeply rooted immaturity. I just also really like the way it sounds. Try it. “Mr. Biscuit.” The “R” in Mr. and the way the word “Biscuit” rolls of the tongue is pure fun. Mr. Biscuit.

My campus was infamous for its brutalist architecture presenting an abundance of concrete and undersized, narrow windows. Brutalism was created by a man with an interesting architectural sense of humor (Walter Netsch, may you rest in peace in a durable, well constructed coffin)¹¹³ during the 1960's when the university was built in thick cement in the Little Italy neighborhood with the intent to protect itself from



The Man with Concrete Vision

rioting local residents protesting its presence and potential gentrification. In the end, although officials promised to move the beloved and ethnically diverse Maxwell Street Market “across the street, to the east side of Halsted, and everything will be fine,” (<http://www.chicagoreader.com/chicago/maxwell-street/Content?oid=876062>) that didn't happen. Today there are only a few lifelike marble statues of market patrons and sellers outside the now University pharmacy where I have spent some significant time, you will later learn.

¹¹³ Oh shit, oh shit, is this guy going to haunt me tonight for teasing him after death?

So geez-Louise, not only did I watch my fellow classmates sweat and stumble within the brutalist structure, but it seems the university's presence disrupted and wiped out an entire community. On my shoulders, within the city of big shoulders, I bore the local pain and disappointment of so many people; I was pulled in by it, but I would stiffen to the charge and get through it. With greased palms and tingling feet, I paced to and fro amongst dingy elevators for forty minutes after turning in my work. The committee was deliberating. Deliberately. I knew the conversation should not have taken that long. Something was off. From time to time, I saw colleagues walk by and offer luck. (Condolences?) One poet suggested there was a rat in every group, and even though my spine tightened when she said this, (racist paranoia awakened yet again) I grew stony in a way that is not me. My armpits had drenched my dark long sleeved dress, but the fabric was thick and not porous. The unseen sweat from beneath my layers stiffened the rock forming inside my throat and eventually, poured from my tonsils to my exterior. At some point during those forty minutes, I stopped forming into solid material and floated above, to gaze at the fierce, emotionless statue of stone I had become. I levitated outside to look, feeling nothing. A small voice within asked where I was to which I responded, Why should I feel anything when I have been gone for almost a year?

Still, still. This was my time. The lights were on me, and soon my cue would strike to enter. But I didn't care for the role. I didn't enjoy the play. I didn't feel the moment before walking in. I had no backstory, no intention, nothing to propel me forward to activate the scene. I disliked the script. My internal monologue had disappeared. The dialogue was flat. (Jena?)

Walking in held the same action as waiting in the hall – more eternal waiting for life to start when I had never agreed to this play. I don't believe I'd even read it.

I cannot do my job as a memoirist because I wasn't there, so I could not have agreed to the terms of my life. I'm ready to fail you in the retelling. My body was still as I gazed into smiles on the mouth, not in the eyes seated around a large square table. There was a heaviness that I already understood because that was what the play felt like. You bring your life with you to any role, so it must have been my fault. And yet – it wasn't me because I wasn't there. I know three things that happened. If there is a word for detached, calm, and professional, that was one of the things that happened. The other two, I will tell you in other ways.

I walked in, a girl in mourning for her life, like Masha in "The Seagull." The only difference – Masha responds to the question: "Why do you always wear black?" by knowing the answer, "I'm in mourning for my life." It is funny, droll, sad. But I was not a comedic character that day because I wasn't there.

My committee and I began by standing in the academic court. The neoliberal spy headed the conversation.

"Congratulations," said the judge/arbitrator/argumenteur/theoretical guru/neo-academic and reached to shake my hand over a long table. Both of our thin limbs stretching to meet like mottled species of birds on rocky, foreign terrain.

I hesitated, inhaling and wondering if perhaps I had missed my cue and blinked to regain any backstory so I could begin the scene. Was it possible I could awaken and the story would close easily without heartache? Had I missed some rooted psychology of the characters, setting, events passed, and most of all, the tenor of the play?

Still holding onto one another's bony jointed claws, the moment before I sat, the academic from a well-bred bird clan held my hand a moment longer and said,

“You passed but marginally.”

We lost grip from each other's claws and slid and skin slid apart as I sat on the word *marginally*.

This line that would repeat infinite times through chai lattes, misread articles, vocal reaches for high notes, (was I flat?) stretching my arthritic neck in physical therapy, heavy morning eyes, half-baked sexual encounters, tea pots hissing, staring into a marred reflection, refolding and refolding clothes in my broken closet, arranging for my broken dresser to be taken to the alley, and finally, promising myself that one day I would only play in the margins when I decided.

Just like that, I was marginalized. In the margins. Off to the side but looking in. A footnote inside a footnote. Not inside the main paper, next to it. Over [here](#)

The Jewess mirrored my blankness; my Asian friend offered downcast eyes Only the Neoliberal Aggravator spoke fervently with pointed staccato. After being damned with my marginal sentence, my Hebrew sister threw me a few softballs about *Marjorie Morningstar*, and I filled the answers with summary content and little theoretical prowess. We had never worked it out in my paper, but I was able to fill in the empty buzz

of the fluorescent lighting with some noise. Then Mr. Milktoast demanded what element Jewish literary works had in common, and I spouted something about the holocaust.

He chortled, “The Holocaust?! No one talked about the Holocaust in the 1950’s.”

“Exactly,” I said. “And that denial was deeply filled with the American dream and assimilation. But the guilt and melancholy lurked in the background of merging with a successful capitalist society,” I said.

He didn’t disagree or comment. Maybe yawned.

By the end of the dreadful “conversation,” I asked, “Are there any written paper comments? I mean, is there a way I can work on these papers?”

“No,” I was informed.

“Was there a specific problem or something uniformly problematic with my work?” I asked.

I was told to focus on my creative dissertation and move on.

“Would it be beneficial to rework any section?” I asked.

“Not necessary.” A uniform tension coerced all heads to nod. It was arguable that no one thought I should discuss the papers ever again.

“Wouldn’t it be educationally sound if I continue to work on the main paper at least, since you all agree there is a problem?” I asked, interrogating the same question with different words, which probably brought back similar feelings of irritation to my professors as they recalled my repeated office visits.

“If you want, I’ll help you,” said the man who talked.

I passed and was given the nod to go forward, but it was all wrong. I was stupid or incoherent or – what was it? Why was I being moved to the next level? Others failed

while some revised parts of their papers. Perhaps I was too hopeless to help. Or no one wanted to bother with me. I had wasted so much of my time and everyone else's, it seemed. They had made a mistake. Accepted a bad egg into the program and now regretted it. Perhaps my (somewhat) charming personality eluded them all along, and when it was time to show the goods, the egg was broken open, and the stench was clear. "Bad" stench.

"What will this mean? I asked.

"Excuse me?" said the man with the power.

"I think she is asking what the consequences are," my dissertation director piped in. She was the coordinator for the theoretical exams for creative writers but her role was more deeply involved with guiding the actual dissertation and running the defense later on.

"The consequences?" he said.

From twenty feet below, I heard the faint echo of a white Dodge Durango stop momentarily and skid by. I wanted to crawl inside, but I was twenty floors up and enclosed by brutalism.

"No one in this room will ever write you a recommendation letter. You won't get a job," he said.

Silence.

Follow Up from the Far East: Aka, email in Parts

(Bolded text = scholarly interpretation)

You're obviously smart **an idiot but I'm covering my ass because I told you that your paper was good** so that's not the question, but as you may have figured out by now, just

being smart is not necessarily enough to make it through grad school. **I have no idea how you're going to finish this program let alone make it in academia.**

What I see in the field exams is actually that you don't have certain basic skills, the kinds of skills that you would get from an undergrad major, like how to construct an argument and how to frame theoretical questions. Also, you don't really have an extensive background in literary history. **You didn't come off like a hillbilly at first...I think that's part of what The Literary Bisquick was trying to get you to do for his exam. Mr. Muffins is so over trying to help your dumb ass.**

So while you bring a lot of other interests and experiences to the program, **so while we all find you interesting and kind of fantastic as a person** this is one of those moments where the lack of basic training really hurts you. **You are screwed.** In order to move forward, then, you need to play catch up and that can be hard to do. **Totally. Screwed.**

So I think you need to make some important decisions about what you want to do in the program and how to do them. But we should talk it over first. **Go into hiding like Rushdie but don't hate me for having to do so. Oh yeah, did I mention, you are screwed?!**

Armchair psychologist self-evaluation

I am obsessed with respected authority figures liking me, and clearly have a complex (impostor-ish not yet in the DSM and so on) and pressing need for external praise. This neurosis manifests itself in deflecting "Daddy Issues" onto potential male role models and demonizing them when I feel rejected or abandoned in any way. I am potentially being too hard on everyone involved, including myself. In other words, please, please, let me tease you and don't be mad at me. Please!

(grow some Yamshon, grow some): see in the (parenthesis), the penis envy at play.

Golem's Conferences at ABT

It was a month into the summer program, and time for individual assessment conferences. Jena's acceptance letter had accompanied an outline of grading procedures for the ballerinas in training, highlighting meetings conducted once a month to measure the dancers' progress. Jena understood these talks were an obligatory part of entering the professional world of artists. At this point in her career, she was expected to possess some ease with discussing her work, which involved name-dropping role models, ideal roles, and an ability to assuredly self-critique in the form of a self-compliment. Manifestos and biographies written by actors, dancers, and writers were expected to be read by young dancers that prescribed their craft, motivational mantras, and philosophical perspectives regarding an artist's relationship with his or her audience. Jena had memorized Gelsey Kirkland's biography and could twist it to fit her situation if necessary. The formula: hardship + identity crisis = a fresh artistic approach and star quality, that unknown zing to allure audiences and maintain a continuous following. Longevity beyond what the body was capable. Jena imagined she would talk about the death of her mother as her crisis. It was surely in bad taste, but that's all that she had.

Her role model, Baryshnikov, was considered vintage. She admired his iron legs, male exploits, unnerving focus. He didn't care what others thought of him. It was unlikely that Baryshnikov ever had to discuss auditions, classes, or the process of dance. Why was everyone so insistent on deconstructing everything and "talking about it?" Perhaps she could fake certainty or smile and charm them with her long yellow hair. It

would be more difficult with the female mentors. Her naturally delicate bone structure and Aryan features gained her an added respect that she didn't have to work for, and in this world, looks mattered. Most other trainees were borderline unattractive on the continuum to cute or plain at best.

Jena prepared for a somewhat strained but successful conversation with Deirdre Dessin, The School of American Ballet's Program Coordinator and mentor. Remembering to imagine a string lifting from the crown of her head, she walked over to the front desk. Terry, SAB's secretary, resembled an aggressively stilted skeleton attacked by bright red lipstick.

"I'm here for my conference," said Jena.

"They're waiting for you," Terry said pursing her lips.

"There's more than one?"

"Oh, yes, indeed. Rome, Deirdre, and Lucille."

"Oh," said Jena. "I didn't realize Lucille would be here."

"Well, she wanted to sit in on this one."

"I'll be right in. I'm just going to use the washroom."¹¹⁴

Jena took large paces to the women's room around the corner. Sweat began building behind her knees; saliva in her throat was drying, her tonsils were sticking together. Darting towards the nearest water fountain, she accidentally snorted the metal tasting liquid into her nose, which dribbled off her mouth onto her white-laced short-sleeved blouse. Although she was wearing men's deodorant, her armpits were sweating

¹¹⁴ Every audition I've ever attended made me almost vomit, which is why I've only been on a total of approximately five in my lifetime. I let people assume I'm not an actress because I failed in the automatic way failure is imagined. I've got to finish this book.

through her blouse creating a heavy dampness that fanned away like a wide sail on a windy day with each stride.

Jena entered a large pink and yellow painted bathroom lined with bold daisies. She faced a narrow mirror with two rows of small light bulbs reminiscent of a star's dressing room. The mirror laughed back at her, elongating her figure and widening her face. Her white wisps were flying every which way, so she wet them down with lukewarm sink water. Her light eyes darted around the pastels around her, a carnivalesque baby room. She imagined dreams realized and broken in this strange vintage powder room. She gazed at her reflection again.. Frail, bony hands emerged helplessly from flaccid wrists and spindly, narrow feet sprouted to the sides, almost in first position. She splashed water under her eyes and mouth and when she glanced back for the last time, she perceived a wet, lanky hobbit with round protruding eyes.

She thought of sprinting – back to the water – to Lake Michigan, water made for sitting and contemplating. She would sit in front of the translucent water and reconstruct herself in a poem, a song, through the wind in the trees. But a force outside of herself, in a boundless black fog, pushed her back to a room where she would receive her reckoning. Jena imagined the few times her father had spanked her with his hard, calloused hands and compared it to the web of guilt he spawned upon her for leaving. A physical lashing was always preferable to a lashing to verbal harassment. Was it possible that her father had used his power to thwart her? He was still connected to a few known artists in New York. But although he didn't want her to succeed, he didn't necessarily want her to fail, did he? She returned to the lobby and stood in front of Terry's anorexic head, which was narrow enough to be considered a 3-D plate. The plate was leaning over and staring

straight at Jena, tentatively threatening to fall to the floor and crack in several pieces.

“Listen, sometimes I hear that if you cry it helps,” she said in a confidential whisper, motioning Jena to venture towards the first door down the hall.

Grasping the tail end of a few murmurs, she knocked at a closed, brown door.

“Come in.”

She heard Deirdre’s neutral tenor echo.

“Hi Jena, it’s nice to see you.”

Deirdre, the program coordinator, sat with smiling lips and caved in composure, Romeo, as always, smug and twinkly-eyed, and Lucille, unnecessarily haughty in a slinky, long black dress. (Ode to Masha) Too dressy for a summer day, it offered a funeral formality that didn’t belong. Romeo’s tinted sunglasses rested fixedly on his head in the usual way – rain or shine –in the event of eye irritation or a bad mood.

“Jena,” Romeo offered, “please sit down and join us.” He motioned to a brown leather chair opposite the committee at a large and long conference table. Jena sat slowly, remembering to push her shoulders back.

“We don’t bite,” said Romeo, with his right dimple pressing inwards. Without seeing his eyes, Jena mistrusted the appearance of a smile.

The room was unseasonably cold with blasting air conditioner and offered no windows, only a flickering fluorescent light buzzing above. A stale smell of sweat, cheap cologne, and a hint of body odor permeated the air.

“Jena, we are impressed with your technique. You recall every combination with precision and you are one-hundred percent focused during class,” said Deirdre.

“Yes, it’s almost uncanny,” added Romeo.

“Excuse me?” asked Jena.

“The focus. A little unnatural, but no matter. Your pirouettes are always on your leg, your balance is superb, your flexibility elastic, you never forget a step. And, it doesn’t hurt that you’re easy on the eyes,” said Romeo. “We like our dancers to be attractive. And you definitely fit the bill.”

Deirdre shifted in her chair with downcast eyes. Jena’s face burned.

“Thank you,” said Jena. “I always stretch at least forty-five minutes before and after class,” she added.

“It shows,” yawned Romeo.

There was a long silence.

“But, my dear, you are incredibly boring to watch,” he said, graining back into his chair and crossing his legs.

“I don’t understand,” said Jena.

“Believe me, you are,” he assured her.

“There were four slots offered to the most talented. You are talented. There is no doubt,” said Lucille.

Lucille, SAB’s Artistic Director, was distantly related to Balanchine. All decisions came down to her, including who was recommended to choreographers, who was perceived as possessing star quality, and who might be kicked out of the training program or the company. She was the final decision as to what productions would be performed and when and most importantly, who would be offered the most coveted roles. Lucille also controlled oddities such as artistic vision, for example, if the scenery in “Swan Lake” would be painted all white or black, what musical piece was played, even

to what hair color hair the ingénue should possess. Rumored to be heartless and detached, save for the way she was with Foofer, her white yapping Frison Brise, she navigated a constant ennui of spirit as she fidgeted with her designer croakies dangling from her neck.

“Frankly, we’re not sure about your passion,” she Lucille, creating an emphatic circular gesture between her tiny breasts on the word passion. She was not looking at Jena but somewhere between the cement cracks beyond Jena’s head, deep into the crevices of the walls. At eighty-seven, her voice was beginning to fracture.

“But I am far better than the other girls. For all the reasons you just named. My body type is perfect. One of the girls picks food out of her teeth”-

“We are aware of that particular situation and she has been spoken to. The fact that you are tattling about your peers – those that love and nurture you – is astounding and part of the problem,” said Romeo. His grin was wide; Jena felt the irony stiffen her spine. Ballerinas were known for particular cattiness; it was what the profession demanded. Romeo understood that Jena had no friends.

“But again, your attractiveness and let’s say, somewhat anti-social behavior is neither here nor there. It’s your dancing that drones on and on. There’s no feeling whatsoever. Just a bunch of detached, staccato steps. Blip, Blip,” said Romeo flicking his fingers. There’s no artistry,” said Romeo. “Look sweetie,” Romeo started in and reached across the table to Jena’s neck. “You look like a virgin. You dance like a fucking virgin. For god’s sake, unbutton your top button. You’re a dancer. Act like one.”

And he proceeded to grab Jena’s collar and unfasten her top button with great force. All observed silently as the button, resembling a small pearl, rolled off her small

breasts and slowly down the floor resulting in a clinking echo. Romeo exhaled an exasperated sigh.

“There, he said. Much better. Stop wearing clothes like that.”¹¹⁵

Deirdre shifted in her seat; Lucille was unmoved.

“So if I dress differently, will that help?”

“No, for God’s sake, I’m not explaining this right. Someone help me,” said

Romeo.

“Jena, what attracted you to ballet initially?” asked Deirdre.

She thought of her childhood.

“My mother put me in ballet class when I was four-and-a-half because I was always dancing. Then I became very good at a young age,” said Jena.

Jena’s mother had enrolled her in ballet class when she was not quite five before

¹¹⁵ My freshman year at Tisch while studying at Playwright’s Horizons, I weaseled my way into an upper classman’s musical theatre performance practicum. After performing a song during class, my teacher (now dead) approached me, ripped off my top button, and announced, “You perform like a virgin.” I was one, but couldn’t explain. To combat the issue, he assigned the song, “Arthur in the Afternoon,” from *The Act*, a song about an uptight secretary having an affair with her boss in the afternoons. Unfortunately, my failed performance typecast and solidified me as an uptight freshman. That didn’t stop Drey, the red haired senior from class at trying his luck with me.

Drey would come by my dorm room to sketch me in my bra and underwear. I thought it was sort of erotic. I also found him attractive with all that brightness on his crop and clownish grin, so we would kiss but nothing turned me on. Once he left the room and told me to “stimulate myself” in the hopes that when he returned, we would finally get things going. “I got nothing. It’s not working,” I said.

Towards the end of the semester, my musical theatre teacher brought in a lovely triple threat, a girl five years my senior who had “made it.” She sang a song, I don’t recall what it was, but at the end, her eyes teared. She didn’t actually cry the way I would sometimes – in the way a young novice actress sobs for unknown reasons with an inability to finish her song. I would start to whimper during the beginning of a song such as “Unusual Way,” hardly getting through the last note with the accompanist and then scrap it. But this lovely woman just gently misted over her bright seeking eyes. Her voice rang softly like a clear bell. He was hoping I would become like her. I wanted to be her. It was flattering that he thought it was possible for me to blossom into her. One day. One day.

her death. The more praise she received in class, the more focused she became. Making friends became challenging throughout the years and Jena learned that to avoid competition and jealousy, it was easier to be alone. In order to be the best, you had to be okay with others not liking you.¹¹⁶

“Dancing is not just technique; it is about your relationship in context to the world. It seems you’re struggling in partner class,” said Deirdre. “You’re not getting along with the other students.”

Where had all these problems come from? She had been the best in Traverse City. Her Midwestern mentors were has-beens, but here on the East Coast, these were the has-beens who mattered. Jenna looked at Romeo. He had been talking about her. A betrayal.

“We would like to get to know you,” said Deirdre. “And I’m sure the other dancers would as well...Being immersed in the dance community is an important decision making factor in becoming a company member. It’s all part of the package.”

“Personally, I don’t give a rat’s ass if she makes friends. I know how those bitches are,” Romeo added.

Everyone laughed.

“But you have to get along with the boys well enough to lift you and whatever else, and the girls, well, just enough to be in class with them,” said Romeo.

“Focus on your sensuality. We’ll have to meet on a weekly basis to evaluate your progress,” said Deirdre.

The team nodded simultaneously as if the event had been rehearsed to its finale.

¹¹⁶ The more praise I receive, the more I back off. Actually, that statement could be a lie I haven’t been seriously praised for so long that when it comes to dealing with potential success, I don’t know what is fact and what is fiction.

The meeting was suddenly over.

“Loosen up or this is the wrong profession. Otherwise, become a doctor or a scientist,” said Romeo. “I’ve seen it happen with plenty of other girls. You’re not here for brain surgery. You’re supposed to inspire. So go inspire. I don’t want to see the same boring shit next week. Got it?”

“I’ll work on it,” Jena mumbled as she walked out of the room.

Jena’s (almost) interior

Stepping onto 72nd Street, Jena translated the conversation. She was a better dancer than the other girls but by being so aware of their flaws, she had missed something. She needed to observe their good points more carefully and start conversations with them. But how? Perhaps she would observe a class and take notes. Then she could compare the notes to a video of herself. She had a copy of her audition tape. Was it possible her dancing hadn’t evolved since she arrived? She could befriend a girl or two and interview them, find out what was going on in their head when they were dancing. She wondered if they would actually know what they were thinking as they danced. Probably not. Many were airheads. They might never think at all and where would that get her? Maybe it was better to be a ding-dong and just move through the music. Romeo said he didn’t want a brain surgeon. Dance wasn’t science, he said. The committee hadn’t actually told her to study dance. Maybe if she attended class a little drunk. No, that could get her thrown out. Or take one of those anti-depressants to open her mind?

Couple's Boot Camp: 2012¹¹⁷

I was going to write about couple's therapy, but I've changed my mind. All I will tell you is that five double sessions did not keep Gene and I together. (the previous boyfriend)¹¹⁸ The sessions were geared towards helping him figure out what he wanted, a mirror of several of the men I've dated. I've had so much therapy that I was an unnecessary accouchement. It was as if I wore a sign in the session that read, *I've got it covered*. I'm going to play with tenses because there's some retrospect and some necessary present tense writing.

This is the summer where I'm going to finish this book. My only job is to make this happen. I have no income. I'm attending a residency at Skidmore College with Philip Lopate on scholarship with the desire to nearly finish. It's going to happen.¹¹⁹ It has to.

It's not surprising that I'm dating someone. I met Gene in a yoga class over a year ago. He assured me, "I'm not one of those guys who goes to yoga to meet women." He is moving to Dallas, Texas in two months. When I met him he warned me, "My career comes first," but somehow we decided a relationship and a career could flourish simultaneously. Things are not good. He claims to be having "commitment problems," but I'm afraid I'm the problem. I am the thing he doesn't want to commit to. It's hard to blame him for that.¹²⁰

¹¹⁷ I became serious with Gene, a lovely New England WASP from Massachusetts soon after Eron, which surprises me. Constructing the timeline alerted me to this rebound. I don't know how I managed. The relationship began quite slowly and like they so often do, ended abruptly...I was also surprised to learn that I took my exams during this relationship although I have no memory of Gene being in my life at the time. You will not witness many details about my time with him. I'm starting at the end.

¹¹⁸ Now two boyfriends ago as I edit this beast.

¹¹⁹ It didn't.

¹²⁰ He's been long gone since July of 2012. He dumped me the morning before he moved to Texas. His mother happened to be in town from the East Coast the day he claims to have unexpectedly called things

It seems I'm too close to this experience to write about it. I'm not moved to write about it. I was hoping that typing these words would help. But it has become fuzzy and out of focus, a low reel of a Cheshire smile. All white teeth flashing like Gene's wide smile. Dimmer and then...I'm afraid Gene is disappearing.¹²¹

So instead, I'll paint an eighteenth century character description for you. His hair, yellow like separate lines of uneven straw. Eyes light and clear like pale maple leaves dyed blue. Body thin and taut, shoulders with sharp jagged edges. Square head. Square jawline. Large teeth with a yellowish tint. Toes wide and squished. All Squares.

His obsession with teaching Shakespeare to middle-schoolers and climbing the ladder of the private school world brought him to a fancy middle school in Texas where I helped negotiate a thick salary, twice what he was making in Elgin. One of his Facebook status updates recently bragged about Billy Collins being visiting poet and paying special attention to him at a school dinner. His false humility allowed him to explain he was being made fun of by Collins "but oh, it was clever." (I suppose it's quite unhealthy to read Facebook updates from ex-boyfriends, but at the time, it seemed perfectly sane) I am supposed to be there with him in Texas. When we looked at engagement rings together he told me I "seemed confidant in the jewelry store" and that it wasn't "so scary." He didn't mean it when he said, "I *believe* we'll be engaged. I believe we'll be living in Texas together." I believed the belief, and now I don't believe anyone anymore. Never trust a man who says he believes. Men do things; they don't believe. Don't believe them.

off, so they rented a truck, and drove to Dallas together. She has asked him for the pictures from their "truck adventure" on his Facebook wall.

¹²¹ He's gone.

Who is this man?



Not Really Ruined

In the summer of 2012, I attended a writing residency at Skidmore College on scholarship with Phillip Locate. My dissertation director kindly gestured towards this program and his nonfiction workshop; I needed a push to finish. Classes were coincidentally in a Tisch School of the Arts Building; Tisch is where I obtained my undergraduate drama degree. I was away from my boyfriend Gene, and he would soon be leaving for Texas when I returned. I threw myself into the residency; it was a hope that I would become a real writer there. I didn't realize that I already was.

"I don't believe your narrator is ruined," said a red haired workshop participant.

"Yes, and what do you mean exactly by ruined?" asked a blond one, staring directly into my iris. "Whoops, I guess the writer is still in the box. I'll ask later," she said.

I shrugged to pantomime, I don't know.

It seems that the memoirist, I mean me, is not coming off like damaged goods, or not as much as I should.

"I agree. This narrator doesn't seem like a ruined anything," chorused a third.

I had told myself I was ruined for several years and needed to justify the first sentence of my memoir.

A white-haired friend with a Betty Page haircut who had spent years on the streets drinking and drugging leaned in and confidentially explained to me that ruined women seem "more sexually devoured."



More Sexually Devoured Friend



Less So

I wasn't exactly the Eliza Doolittle of the bunch. I guess I'm not as done in as I thought.

"I have to agree with what others are saying. The narrator doesn't seem ruined to me," added Philipp Lopate, the non-fiction guru. The two-week residency was my last resort to find refuge for my hybrid fiction/non-fiction disaster. It was also my last attempt to introduce my fictional golem Jena to a new crowd. Jena doesn't get along with anyone anywhere; she always gets mixed reviews at best, she never plays nice. So here I was at Skidmore College, my purgatory before Hades, and she was still putting up a hell of a fight, demanding her space for center stage when she damned well knew she wasn't much of a character. That's how golems work. Fastidious little fuckers.

Jena = problem number one. Problem two = not being ruined enough. A memoirist has to vomit her problem repeatedly and streamline it into an appropriate trajectory. What is my fucking problem? Could my problem therefore be not knowing what my problem is? No. Absolutely idiotic. The whole I don't know I'm confused thing that just happens to be in vogue is unreliable and simply a failure to do your job as a writer, claims Lopate. The reader needs you to be the expert, especially about yourself, if

nothing else. Dammit. Problem 3 = not being the expert about my own life. Jeune? Is that you in the far off horizon?.....I might need to negotiate a contract after all.

A reminder of page one:

I don't know the moment before I got ruined. All the harnessing, critiquing, scolding by mentors, parents, teachers. I had so much potential. Raw talent. But now I'm not young so raw is just raw, not a prize. Now they tell me not to sound banal. Be a little sharper.

Lopate warned me about the danger of keeping Jena in a private meeting:

“I don't mind fiction. But yours is inept. This Jena character- there's nothing to her. She's always a victim; she's uninteresting. The non-fiction is much stronger. If you want to hold onto this hybrid idea and this boring character, you can always just write for yourself and not worry about publishing.”

Fantastic. I'll just write for myself. Little bitch is ruining everything for me. What Lopate didn't understand was that I wasn't holding onto Jena. It was she who had me by the balls.

A serendipitous moment at Skidmore occurred in the lunchroom when a mass of teenaged bun-heads from the American School of Ballet lined up for pork chops. Was it possible? Had I brought my little golem to life through the powers of intention and imagination?

Then I saw her.

Blond hair, light eyes, irregularly small frame. Jena? Jena-ish?

Here's where she differed from my golem: wicked smile, tan skin, and eyes that knew something. Straight shoulders, walking with a confident glide that Jena doesn't possess. A rush pulsated my body. *That's her. That's her. That's Jena. I have to talk to her. I have to find out who she is.*

What you don't know is that I haven't written a lick about my golem for two years because she's been lost. It's unclear how long she will exist or if she's gone already...She left my imagination, but I revel in the notion that the gangly blond self-conscious ballerina could one day dance and live with feeling, that she will, in some way, un-golem herself. But I have to come to terms that she may be gone for good. I don't feel her presence. Perhaps she passed away in that short story workshop in 2003 at DePaul University. Maybe she's irritated with me for stretching her out into a novel. She wasn't warmed up for that. A full splits is terrible for the hamstrings without a warm-up.

Jena, did I fail to nurture you? Was I a bad mama like Ozick portrays in *Puttermesser Papers*? I didn't murder you by removing the "aleph" or the "a" in Jena as the rabbis have done for centuries. I would never refer to you as Jen without the "a." You are plain enough. And golems do not passively leave. They must be eradicated! I did not eradicate you.¹²²

What words do I have to conjure on the page to rebuild you, summon your life force? Do I need to return to the dance world to feel the vibration of movement across the floor in order to make this prose move rhythmically across the page? Without a forward, musical movement, my drive to write is pulled downward by gravity. How can I finish this book without the musical lightness of an energetic life force? Where is my lively protagonist? I hate you, Golem.

¹²² Not consciously.

But- *there she is*. I must have conjured her again, maybe in a slightly different form, but, she exists! She's here in Saratoga Springs, dancing her little pants off.

I approached the golem form with some caution, a wise move considering her metaphysical escapee status.

"Hi. I'm curious what school you are here with," I said watching my blond creation holding a green tray, ignoring her brunette friends dangling forks and knives along their slender fingers.

"We're with The School of American Ballet."

Mommy is here. I can see through your nonchalance.

"The coincidence is amazing. Truly. (over-exuberance. Careful. Careful not to scare the creature away) I'm writing a book about a dancer training at ABT. Would it be possible to conduct an interview or watch your class? My fictional character. She, uh, looks a bit like you," I said grinning. The girl was not moved.

ABT had not returned my calls for years despite my good attempts to write well-researched non-fiction. When one of their staff finally spoke to me, I was told that I would need to turn over my finished manuscript and obtain a lawyer before pursuing an interview with the school to avoid "tarnishing" their reputation. Explaining to them that I'm a poor graduate student with an unfinished dissertation didn't move any mountains, so I gave up attempting to infiltrate their walls. But here, ABT presented itself to me.

Kismet!

My golem smiled a bit wickedly and glanced at her friends. A ringleader, eh, the little witch.

“I have to check with the school if you want to watch me,” the sly one said. “But sure, I guess.”

Such tentative language. Golems are never too good with words and often hedge their bets. I should have expected such coyness from a Jen-a. (eventually, perhaps, I would have the strength to kill her off and get rid of that darned aleph).

“What’s your name?” I asked.

“Brittany,” said the incarnate.

The name wasn’t quite right. Jena was no passé pop star or teen ding-dong, but no matter. Mere details to be worked out. We exchanged cell numbers, and I vowed to text her the following day. I was onto her, the bun-head. Soon, she would help uncover the mystery of Jena’s disappearance and my novel would finally move. Or I would vanquish her. She was most likely, the missing Jena aspect of Jena.

The space between these paragraphs indicates a certain procrastination that occurred upon meeting Jena in the flesh. It may not be surprising that after texting the Brittany phantom, I felt some resistance about setting up an actual meeting. She seemed willing, too willing to divulge, too open to discuss things as they were, so to speak, which made me skeptical. I wondered in good faith:

What if the golem possessed no information?

What if the encounter was disappointing and the meeting set me further back in my writing process leading to more questions, and self-doubt?

What if the golem was set out to goldmine me?

What questions did I actually have to ask this phantom menace?

What if she was a sexual pervert?....

I followed my hunch as a good writer should and ignored Brittany's response to meet.

The next day I realized my faux pas. Being rude to a golem = untimely writer's block = creative death. Eventually, the creator dies (me, the writer) or the golem dies, Jen-a/Brittany. I wasn't going down without a fight. "Brittany" told me I could watch her class at ABT. This felt right. All supernatural golemic questions would be answered through performative measures. A real dance.

Golem in Saratoga Springs/ABT

The cab ride from Skidmore to the American School of Ballet was merely two miles, and I found myself on an island of thick green grass before three house-like brown structures on a hundred degree day. I should have been reading my colleague's nonfiction manuscripts in an effort to look smart in front of Lopate and possibly to help other writers, but this very thing, this opportunity was the very reason, the essence of what could make my very jumbled manuscript very – congealed. This visit will release my writer's block. I'm in the place where it can all happen; the vibes will fuel my creativity, I thought, much like Geoff Dyer supposed when visiting D.H. Lawrence's hometown.¹²³ In Dyer's book, the protagonist visits Lawrence's dwelling places, his vacation spots, and in spite of (or because of) all his travels and knowledge, he cannot create an indexical

¹²³ Unfortunately, Dyer's experience being in the physical spaces of Lawrence's historical whereabouts proved unhelpful and, at best, digressional to the aims of his project, a project with a goal that remains unclear. So unclear, in fact, that I did not use his journey to Lawrence's whereabouts to fuel my prospectus, the paper describing my dissertation, in any way.

relationship to Lawrence's work and the geographies he's dwelled and worked in. There was just no connection for Dyer:

What they all had in common, these ideal places for working, was that I never got any work done in them. I would sit down at my desk and think to myself, 'What perfect conditions for working, then I would look out at the sun smoldering over the wheat, or at the trees gathering the Tuscan light around themselves, or at the Parisians walking through the twilight and traffic of Rue de la Roquette, and I would write a few lines like 'If I look up from my desk I can see the sun smoldering over the wheat...'
(Dyer 92)

Writing involved not an immersion in the actual scene but its opposite, a detachment from it. After a very short time I would grow bored by contemplating the scene, would leave my desk and go for a walk...
(Dyer 93)

I am not as depressed as Dyer, so, I have that going for me. Plus, I live on false hope. It fuels me, so I can believe that I have found Jen-a, even if only temporarily, at any given moment.¹²⁴

The dance center featured two wide white studios with long windowed glass panels for viewing. Instantly, I spotted my Brittany and she waved. The dancers appeared to be in their late teens with outliers from age sixteen to the early twenties. A man with feathery brown hair and a build like a small Greek god, a company member and a principle, taught the summer program with a modelesque long-haired younger dancer behind him carrying a clipboard. She wore jeans because she was that cool. Classroom doors were open, and the fish bowl architecture encouraged onlookers to hear the intensity of every spoken word and observe the intricacy of each movement.

¹²⁴ I'm still not sure what happened to her, so I keep Brittany's number in my flip-flop phone in case she resurfaces.

“I can’t dance for you. Neither can your teachers. That’s the hardest thing about this career. I can bring you the aircraft but you have to fly.”

“Combination. Assemble, up and down. Assemble, up and down. Jete, jete, jete, assemble.”

He pointed to a young African American girl with a bright smile, and asked her to stand by him.

“Repeat the combination aloud with me.”

The girl giggled. I scanned for Golem, who stood in the third row, with her right foot turned out. She drew little attention to herself save for being the loveliest in the room besides the assistant, a dark haired beauty wearing a long ponytail, jeans, and carrying a clipboard. The director’s assistant was the youngest in the company, gossiped one girl next to me looking in, and the most ridiculed by other company members out of jealousy.

“She’s the youngest in the company so people blame her when something goes wrong in shows. They say it’s unfair.¹²⁵”

The teacher explained the logic for repeating the combination aloud while dancing it: to create automatic body memory.

“Jete, jete, jete, ahhh, bleh, bleh, bleh!” said the dancer.

The apprentice was struggling with reciting and simultaneous movement. Everyone, including the teacher, laughed. The tension was fairly placid, not how I had depicted a serious dance class in my own text. Admittedly, though, something beneath the laughter and all good intention to guide the young dancers was the reality that some were clearly better than others with the lesser skilled tolerated in a pecking order. I

¹²⁵ This kind of gossiping was not quite what I had imagined in the professional ballet world. A bit disappointing in its mildness. But alas, I’m only here to report. This isn’t really a novel.

struggled to formulate where Brittany stood in this order; she seemed on her own plane. No one looked directly at her, but her presence was palpable.

“When I dance, I feel the music. I feel the fragment the same way. We’re saying and doing it; it’s like a boy band,” said the teacher.

The girl and the leader repeated the combination aloud and everyone clapped. For now, she got it right.

“When she says it, she does it. That’s what dancing is about. Coordinating this with this. Stomachs in. Quiet please.”

All began the warm-up in unison. Golem had overtly refined arches and appeared graceful. Was she in the back row because she appeared too young? She looked more like a dancer than the others, longer limbed and additionally elegant.

“Remember this is not a hoe down. Point the ankles, the ankles cross. That’s it Karen. Yeah, good. Just say it in your head if you have to. Yes, Dianne, hold onto it. That’s it, Claudia.”

Class moved into partnering, and the positioning changed. As the lead couples prepared a *pas de deux* in the front lines, Brittany scattered to an upstage corner with her partner. She practiced her pirouettes boldly, leaned into the turns effortlessly with eyes assuredly fixed in the mirror. Easily allowing the young man to turn her by her waist, I knew she was no virgin. A version of Jena, but not necessarily the replica. Jen-a. Who knows what occurs in the cosmos when the metaphysical is made flesh. I’m only a writer. I don’t know what the fuck goes on between me and them.

A woman in her early fifties with burnt auburn hair approached me carrying a small bison frise¹²⁶ under her arm, paralleling the character I created in the chapter Conferences at The American School of Ballet. This coincidence continues to dazzle me. She clutched a pair of gold-rimmed glasses dangling on a string and placed them on her eyes to better glare at me.

“Are you someone’s mother?” she asked.

I think she knew I was not. I don’t look like the sort of woman who has carried a baby or possibly ever will.

“No, I’m here to watch one of the dancers,” I said.

“Which student?”

The dog remained calm as she softly draped her painted red nails on its head.

“Brittany.”

“How do you know her?” she asked.

“I met Brittany in the dining hall at Skidmore College where I’m participating in a writing residency....I’m writing a book about a young dancer.”

“She didn’t get permission.”

“Oh, I’m sorry, I thought she did.”

“No, she didn’t ask me,” she said leaning in towards me.

“Well, I don’t want to get anyone in trouble. I can leave,” I offered.

“Brittany is a particularly problematic,” she said quietly.

The woman paused.

¹²⁶ I had invented a version of this school headmistress years ago, which you should have read unless you opted to skip it without being advised to. Yes, I am scolding you. Did I create this real time scenario from fiction? Is it possible to will your reality from a creative vision?

“No, it’s all right. Stay for a bit if you want.”

Then she walked away slowly.

I peered through the glass. My golem stood patiently with a blasé stance suggesting she would not have a turn. Fearing I would further damage the golem with my presence and feeling the headmistress’s eyes on me, I opted to leave the building. There was nothing more to learn at ABT. What had the golem done to elicit this kind of response?

For the past few months, Brittany only responded once to communication and opted to “do an interview through text if that’s all right.” She doesn’t want to talk.

Why I Haven’t Published Any Fiction– 12 Years after Jena’s Birth¹²⁷

You can love something so tightly, too closely. Squeeze so hard that it can’t breathe. Like when you’re little and you clutch, wrestle, or even masturbate with a soft blanket or stuffed animal. You wear it out until it breaks, gets torn open, stuffing dropping out. That’s love – when you’re not afraid to touch it. You’ve done something to it because you’ve used it up. That’s the good kind of love because then you can move to a transition object or something else when you’re done with it.

There is another kind of love – when you want something so much that you can’t see it, kind of what the asshole Niles said; he couldn’t see his girlfriend because he loved her too much. “Her face was a blur.” I want to be a blur to someone. But not to myself anymore.

That’s my problem with writing, wanting the relationship between me and the pen so much that I can’t see it, watching every moment of drafting, tracing outside comments

¹²⁷ Time has passed since the first draft of this chapter; I have two creative publications.

from the outside, movement by movement, suggested eradications and scratch outs, internalizing those recommended moves, and instead of feeling editing as editing, it becomes the funeral of sentences. Staring so long that the eyes blur over. Maybe it's the wrong thing to want.

To avoid the pain of this gaze, I substitute men for writing. Because I don't love them half as much. I allow myself to fail them and it's okay. Use them up and not care. Not worry or mourn the space between words and me and words and them – sort of like Emily Dickinson. Because I know I'll never be understood anyway. That's why she uses so many of those damned dashes --- --- ----, that little recluse knew what she was doing somehow. That whole Sausseurean disconnect between the thing and the word is the same as the disconnect between me and men and me and writing– a disconnect of what is actually stopping me from writing.

But then there is the writing that finally happens after the moment of the disconnect. The men are often what I write about during the disconnect. Like writing, romantic relationships are potentially filled with conflict, but with writing, the conflict is harder – man vs. himself. The interplay of the sexes is less intimidating than a blank page. This way, I can fill the sensual and sexual void, and the opposite sex can act as a stand-in lover. When I fail one, I find another. There is only one first novel. I better not fuck it up.

Below is a poem I wrote while working with Chicago poet Richard Jones during my MA at DePaul. (Oh, the stuff we churn out in school workshops) The poem is a premonition for this book and perhaps, the germination of Jena. It is probably one of my most poorly written poems during that time.

Demon Blood (2003)¹²⁸

*Dare try your hand at writing –
Knowing nothing of the sport.
Never lived through the wall
What is imagined
You shall report?*

Leave me alone bastard, I'm trying to write!

*Trying to write.
is all you will ever do
One does what one does.
What is all this trying fool?*

*Recall the greats: (I know they haunt you)
Poe, Dickinson, Dostoyevsky.
Even Freud's analytical nonsense
Insight – creativity*

*Give it up child and be gone.
Accept mediocrity
Words vanish with the dawn.*

*No one has to know.
You tried and failed like a sea of others
Now Go! Go!*

Shut up, nincompoop!
Never helped, only hindered.
Black cloud trailing behind like shadow,
Ugly, scowling mirror, you are tiresome.

It is true
My rhyme is stale
I cannot wish.
No dream image –

But I have words – somewhere...

Cannot make friends with you.
Cannot cajole you.
All consuming, smoking fiend hovering above my damp crop
will not rest until you suffocate
with your mirrored fumes
turning my wormy brain to rot.

I will not let that happen.

¹²⁸ Written over ten years ago.

The poet crumples his paper and tears it into a thousand pieces. The ink bleeds over his hands. He devours his fingers with saliva.

Ha, ha, ha!
You cannot remove me.

Poet is maker.
What is your riddle demon, now that I have destroyed you?

*You cannot destroy the blood of your veins.*¹²⁹

Finished

July of 2013 and it's over with Gene. I know you knew that, but I didn't. It took a year to refuse contact with him after months of "possibly" getting back together. I'm not going to write about it in any more detail. I'm not going to do that to myself.

He texted me a few weeks ago for my birthday: "Happy birthday, Lyndee."
Texting my name made the message intimate.¹³⁰ Texting made the message aloof.
Always a mixed message.¹³¹

New Man

It's 2013. My latest boyfriend is a photographer who doesn't want me to write about him. When I asked what he was afraid of, his eyes filled with tears and he said, "I

¹²⁹ Jesus. The drama.

¹³⁰ A workshop participant underlined Texting my name made the message intimate and commented, "Really, come on." Maybe I was reading into it. But I know how he is, and I believe it was a big deal for him to reach out to me after our break up. Then again, I already said I don't believe anything he says anymore.

¹³¹ Okay, so yesterday my mother saw the therapist we used for couple's therapy. She asked about me, and my mother said Gene was long gone. Apparently, the therapist said, "I'm not surprised." Wtf, right? What about confidentiality? Apparently everyone knew this guy was gonna ditch me except for me.

don't want to be another man in your book." I met him at a Jewish event when I propelled myself into the outside world a few weeks after Gene left. I was staunchly against dating, so we became friends for several months as he continued to pursue me. I gave in four months later.

Part II- Golem Eulogy

Jena is gone. I have nothing more to say about her. She is done talking. No more gangly body surrounded by characters demanding she speak. She may have left New York, started her own company, or became a corporate lady. Perhaps she split in half through mitosis and is half dancer, half writer. Or half dancer, half something else unimaginable like a mother or a firefighter. I didn't mean to do it, but she was a very bad golem. Maybe her repressed memory is her final performance.

Jena in the First Person

A Short Nightmare, Golem Pre-Mortem

(Written eight years ago, the moment before the memoir germinated).

Jena, darling, are you awake?

I heard a faint voice whisper, which sounded like his, but I was in a twilight stage of sleep. I feel him watching me when I'm asleep, when I'm half-dreaming, when I'm awake, so sometimes it's hard to know if I'm imagining his voice. She sees it too, and I fear she hates me for it.

Daddy?

Yes, my dear. Wake up. I can start now.

There was an urgency in his voice as he cracked open my bedroom door. My white curtains were slightly apart, and a glimpse of moonlight bounced onto his eyelids, dilating his pupils. The sun would rise in a few hours but not yet.

I have a math test tomorrow. Can't it wait? What time is it?

I want to paint again. I must.

Sweat trickled from his forehead. He might have been having an attack, a more frequent occurrence as mother underwent treatment.

The doctor said you shouldn't get yourself all worked up like this. Why don't you take a Xanax?

But we both knew he hadn't seen the doctor in months.

I grained backwards, recoiling back into a warm down cover, enveloping the puffiness around my frame. He sensed my pulling away.

What's the matter? Don't you want to help me?

Of course I do. But why don't you wake up first and we can talk about it later. What time is it anyway?

It's not that he would ever hurt me, not on purpose. But these nighttime interludes left me feeling strange as if I had done something to provoke them. Like I wanted them.

I didn't bother to ask about mom. I knew he never would have wanted her to pose. She was no longer beautiful and didn't appreciate his work and the glimpse of darkness that had crept in as of late.

There was a long pause.

What do you want me to do?

But I already knew what it was.

Let me paint you.

I nodded, helpless, walked to my dance dresser, peeled off my white robe and slipped on my toe shoes, then my legs through the pinkish-orange tights, the kind that only the best dancers wear, the expensive kind, with the seams showing up the back of the legs and thighs. I stepped into a light pink leotard, not bothering with a bra because there was not much there anyway and crisscrossed the ribbons on my toe shoes. They had been made from scratch, yellow to match my hair. That's how he liked me to wear things, yellow and blue, identical to my hair and eyes like she used to wear before the breast cancer. We had the same coloring. I didn't protest and tried to imagine a day when I didn't have to think about coordinating the hues of my outfits for him. Wrapping my long hair into a bun, I met him in the studio, our basement.

He sighed. He was wearing a white fitted t-shirt, one he had been wearing for three days accompanied by light blue pajama bottoms.

You look so much like your mother right now. Hmm, something's amiss. Take it down.

What?

Your hair. Lean back and look at me. You're no longer a little girl. I want to capture an essence here.

I did as he said so he could be the man he once was – the man the newspapers said was breaking ground in surrealist portraits, my father who could buy whatever he wanted and go for an entire month without a drink or a sleepless night.

I sat in a brown stool, legs slightly disjointed with both feet pushed into a forced arch through my toes, head faintly tilted to the right. Time stretched to a painful

monotony. My jaw tightened. My back ached. First a tingling sensation through my shoulder blades and then a heated throbbing from the small of my back to my hips as the seconds merged with hours. He painted until the sunlight crept under the windowsill, and finally, when he finished, he showed me myself, a sensual portrait of someone I didn't know. I didn't want to know. I wasn't ready to become her, his reason to paint. He brought it over to me in his unconscious painting state. And there I was, his little girl in a somewhat see-through light pink leotard and orange tights with hair down to middle of her back glowing a silky corn texture like hers revealed with an indexical radiance in early pictures. In my eyes was a glint of something shameful. I recognized it instantly and began to cry. He had always been the only man in my life and it welled within me like a cruel injustice.

He promptly understood and demanded I return to my bedroom. We were never to speak of it again. He hid the portrait somewhere down there, behind the storage room so she wouldn't find it. And she never did – until a month ago. She was creating a family album of her own, asserting a world where she could exist in her own right before her time was up and found herself rummaging around where she shouldn't have. I think she was looking for something, a way to find a period to end that sentence of her life. And I knew she found it because they began sleeping in separate bedrooms and a week later, he took up painting women. It was like an obsession; all the ladies in town from the grocery store clerk to the doctor's wife to the divorced neighbor. My weekend babysitter, who liked to sneak cigarettes and cover the smell with vintage perfumes, was painted too. Everyone but mother. And then one morning I saw him with a piece of the canvas that she had destroyed; a triangle of one of my eyes had been saved and he was whimpering

over it. I vowed to leave Traverse City as soon as I could and lose myself to the stage. I would never choose an artist for a husband. Muses were forever temporary. My mother had learned that lesson.

Golem Eulogy Continued

It's a shame that I don't know if she ever made it; I mean, made it big. I don't miss her, but the empty feeling of wanting to miss her pushes a hollow space in my solar plexus. I spent several years in relationship with her, trying to know her, scribbling across the page to find some metrical movement and repeatedly failing. We didn't precisely sever ties. She just –left. I don't believe I asked her where she was going although I sensed she would one day depart.

.....

This seems wrong. An author's cop-out. I think a ceremony is in order. She did exist for a time, even if not fully, she was an entity of sorts. The death drive is a drive. It has a pulse. It continues to throb until it topples onto itself and then turns inward so far, too far, that it disintegrates like a starfish. Or a pile of jelly.

Sometimes I silently sense a twinkle of her stardust or a flicker of her pain fighting to push its way into an empty crevice of my body. But it wasn't real pain, was it? She was fighting to be a full character but didn't quite make it. I didn't have enough ingredients at the time.

Goodbye, (dear)Jen-a. You weren't much. You didn't have things to say, but you valued your own anguish, and you continued to move, and that's a noble thing – that you tried to dance until you couldn't anymore.¹³²

My Plan

I've shed her. Now that she's gone, no reliance on dark tricks and self-doubt to carry my words. No more alter-ego; it's just me to tell you the what happened part. I don't want you to come back, you little bitch! Ya hear?

Dissertation Leave, Censorship, and Shmick

I'm on dissertation leave. Leave means you're supposed to go somewhere, but I'm not sure where the hell I'm going. I'm on a mental trip to Mars.

I've got tons of time and none at all. I've got to finish this book, but twenty-four hours per day minus sleep is like 16 hours. Okay, there's two hours per week when I give cultural lessons to an Israeli woman and explain small talk, girly magazines, and American politics, all subjects that I know little to nothing about. An additional hour-and-a-half of is spent tutoring a young Israeli male who wants to learn grammar. More than once, such as the time explaining lie vs. lay and continuous tenses, past conditional or the

¹³² Unless of course, you're hiding, you little devil, and I'll find you later.

conditions of the past or whatever, I've looked at him and admitted dumbly, "I really don't know."¹³³¹³⁴

Is it possible to have too much time to write? Sixteen hours per day subtracted by two or three for eating and a half an hour for family problems plus an hour of feeling lousy about family problems plus another hour of harassing my boyfriend is still um...how many hours? Ok, wait. 24-8 for sleep-maybe 3 for eating tops - 1.5 hours for family time-1 hour bothering boyfriend= 10.5 per day to write. And maybe subtract two hours for cleaning and cooking or internet or whatever. But still, 8.5 hours a day is a lot of time. I think it's possible to have too much time. Too much time + \$10,000 per year on a stipend = a very bad equation= time to spend money that doesn't exist (school fees make it 10K). And it seems that I'm right on the line for collecting food stamps or free health care. Allegedly I make 15k but with school fees and car maintenance oh boy...

I'm not complaining. It's not like I've had so much time that I'm near finishing this book. I'm just filling this page with what's on my mind. I need a deadline here, and I'm afraid I don't have the internal strength to do this on a daily basis. I have a long-term deadline. Funding runs out in a year,¹³⁵ so this book must be finished several months before then. If you look at it rationally, I don't have much time at all. In fact, I'm out of time. No time and too much time turns time into a mush pile of time. Actually, I need to be done right now. I'm not done. I need to be done. Not done, etc.

¹³³ The Israeli called today and said, "I wanted to call you and not just text. I can't have lessons right now, but I don't want you to think it's anything you did." It's true that his wife will give birth soon and the ministry may indeed ask him to work the next several weekends, but the fact that he insisted that it "wasn't anything I did" indicated it must have been something I did. Or didn't do e.g. past participles, conditioning the future with cream rinse, etc.

¹³⁴ Finished lessons with Israeli woman. No more tutoring.

¹³⁵ Eight months now...tick-tock, etc. Ok, so it seems it's now 2014, and I'm still praying for one more semester of funding. Wtf, Yamshon, Wtf. Get your shit together.

Geoff Dyer similarly suffered in *Out of Sheer Rage*. His thesis, an analysis of D.H. Lawrence and his vast letter collection, became an extensive exercise in failing to complete his thesis and the novel he had begun simultaneously. He thought so much about finishing and not-finishing that the entire project became an obscure meta-narrative centered around the very thing he should have been doing.

All I did was switch between two – empty – files on my computer, one conveniently called C:\DHL, the other C: NOVEL, and sent myself ping-ponging back and forth between them until, after an hour and a half of this, I would turn off the computer because the worst thing of all, I knew, was to wear myself out in this way. The best thing was to do nothing, to sit calmly, but there was no calm, of course: instead, I felt totally desolate because I realized that I was going to write neither my study of D.H. Lawrence nor my novel. (Dyer 3).

It was a terrible prospect since although I had read the Lawrence letters and was therefore obliged to begin writing about Lawrence. I had also read his letters in such a way that I was actually in no state to begin writing about Lawrence. (Dyer 108)

The D.H. Lawrence letters parallel my dating life. Switching from dating to the book, the book to dating and not really pursuing either of them thoroughly or with any precision. Or just going from one to the other without continuity and anguishing over each separately but not knowing how to pace either one. Body banging myself into the novel, the guy, the guy, the novel. But life is multitasking, and it's time to get better at it. Right now. Learn from this project. Then the next project will be less disorganized, more formally innovative, and most importantly, planned out. Strategized. I need a fucking strategy. Time to call a consultant. Fuck, I have to be my own consultant. It's a memoir.

It's been five months since a serious breakup and four days since a more recent breakup which = double breakup.¹³⁶ I don't want to talk about the old guy, but I'm willing to discuss the new one. Except he won't allow it; I've been forbidden to write about him. So if he ever reads this, he'll probably dump me again although I'm already semi-dumped. (note the sparse mentions, vague character development and lack of scenes with the *new guy who shall remain nameless* for fear of being overly dumped, well, well done.).¹³⁷

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The Nameless Boyfriend

He's older than 45.

He takes pictures of the Chicago skyline.

He's bigger than the boney men I've dated in the past.

His nose reminds me of those dolls in the 80's called "Monchee Chee's."

He says his nose is big. I like the fact that he's Jewish but the schnozzle turns upwards as if in revolt of the expected "hook." Phillip Roth and I have the same birthday, so I'm allowed these kind of remarks.

He likes beer.

He kisses gently.

He's unnecessarily social.

He often can be found in the company of at least five to ten others – if not thirty.

He feels guilty for not spending enough time with his mom.

His work and his home are all-in-one where he pays a hefty mortgage for a hot spot neighborhood.

His upstairs neighbor has a howling dog.

He next-door neighbor has a serious phlegm problem.

He's not bald.

He keeps no food in his house save for beer and weak coffee he claims is organic. It tastes like shit.

He once made a chicken and told me about it. (no vegetables) He also cooked for me on Valentine's Day. Since then, I don't believe he has cooked at all.

He thinks he's only loved one woman and that was in the 90's.

He's a non-practicing Jew.

¹³⁶ The recent boyfriend, after dumping me six times (I think six) has begged for my return. We are now in a semi-relationship somewhere between rare and well-done, medium cooked.

¹³⁷ It's hard to say if he dumped me since the last dump. I don't remember.

¹³⁸ Please note that by the time I got to writing this narrative poem, he undumped me.

He bought me a moon necklace on a rope string when he went home to upstate New York. This was before we dated when he was in pursuer mode.
 He's not pursuing me anymore, I guess, since we are "together."
 He once told me I should talk about this book more succinctly and simply. I asked him what good literature is simple. Either he didn't know or chose not to answer.
 He considers reading a luxury, so he doesn't do it often.
 He says he's allergic to my hypoallergenic, rare breed cat Shmick. The only other person who has made this claim is my sister, and sometimes she exaggerates.
 He often can't breathe out of his nose.
 He clears his throat about three times a day, most often on the phone.
 He talks about his feelings more in the negative than in the positive but his actions are more on the positive.
 He has two dark pleather couches in the small living area that looks and feels more like an office. One is small and no one sits on it.
 He sings in a baritone voice.
 His friends are very important to him, but he doesn't know them very well.
 He talked about having children together. We agreed that I'd push one out and the second would be adopted. I'm not sure I want to do this or if it will happen.
 He asked if we should go on "a hiatus" until I finish this book. I cried and refused.

I want him to ask to read this piece and accept that I'm writing about him.

I want him to compose a piece of photography taken from pieces of my face.¹³⁹

I was thrown off a hayride by a few boys in nursery school and have a scar on my right eyebrow that I've been told to fill in with pencil.

I have been consistently told I'm talented but have never won first prize for anything.

I'm told that I look young for my age, but now it's only by five or six years.

I think I want children.¹⁴⁰

I don't know if I want to physically give birth.

I just texted him, "Writing helps me."

I am pretty when I don't look horrible.

I read things aloud well.

I have a twenty-two year old roommate who thinks all the hair in the apartment is mine, especially the blond goop clogging the tub drain. I am auburn headed.

I continue to try lots of makeup brands to see if I can get that clean, organized look but all the makeup I attempt wearing soaks into my face in a few hours to give me a no-makeup look.

Something tells me that if I wanted to be clean and organized, I'd do it already.

I'm flummoxed that he hasn't said I love you¹⁴¹, and that I am forbidden to write about him freely, so I created a list of reasons why I don't like him.

¹³⁹ I hate pictures of myself. This sentence makes no sense.

¹⁴⁰ This desire changes with my moods.

List of Annoying Habits

1. I am writing this list on a Saturday night while he's smoking opium and fucking three prostitutes.
2. He crashes cars for a living and gets paid to do so by squirrels.
3. I wrote number one and two on a Saturday night, which seems wrong because we're not together and it's Saturday night. This is one of the only laughs I'll have tonight.
4. His home has very few decorations. He is an extreme minimalist.
5. His text messages are curt, especially after I send three or four. Communication is key to a healthy relationship.
6. He says I over-communicate. I don't disagree.
7. He distracts me from any good moment I could have by making me worry about the state of our relationship like I'm doing now. This distractibility may not be entirely his fault, but it is a byproduct of a bigger problem although I'm unclear what that problem is.
8. Once he had an orgasm and not a lot of semen came out. I was confused. "I don't think you had an orgasm," I said.
9. Not enough décor in his place. I said this already, I know, but I would like a list of ten annoying things.
10. Goddammit, he won't let me write about him.

My immediate family is an added censorship committee. I repeated an offhanded comment a professor made to me to my mother.

"You might worry about your parents when they read it."

It only took a few days for the disastrous remark to congeal, and the texts started coming in because I stupidly mentioned my professor's concern. When I'm anxious, I become confessional in spurts.

Please tell me that nothing is going in that book that would do irreparable damage, my mother texted.

I will show you guys everything when it's done and we can discuss. Right now I'm in the process of writing and need the freedom to do this, I said in an attempt to "set boundaries."

¹⁴¹ He said it, so why aren't things better?

I thought it was a totally reasonable response, but it made things worse. The texts continued yammering into my flip phone throughout the day.

*Just tell me it won't be like House Rules. Rachel doesn't talk to her family anymore.*¹⁴²

It's not a book about the family. And that is not even true; she has a relationship with her mother and sister. Anyway, you are not the purpose of the book. And why are you assuming it is her fault? Maybe she needed to write it.

At some point I promised my parents that the book would not do something terrible that I don't exactly recall, and the topic is off the table for the moment.

I'm faced with this chapter. It's not working, and I'm trapped since no one close to me wants me to write about them; the parties in question have made their little issue dramatically clear. Then there's the problem with not being able to obtain my old newspaper clips from September 11, 2001. The editor of Town & Village is not getting back to me. The chapter I am supposed to be writing *now* is the second 9/11 chapter infused with my old clips, not this drivel, but as you've learned earlier, I'm having hell of a time obtaining my old clips, so I can't write the chapter unless I physically show up in NYC.¹⁴³ So you see, nothing is as it is supposed to be. How long can I go on with this sort of complaint and really call it writing? Not long, not long. Tick-tock, motherfuckers.

¹⁴² I attended high school with the memoirist of *House Rules* and the author's sister married my ex-boyfriend's brother. I'm not sure this information matters, but my family has been giving me a bit of a thing about it.

¹⁴³ Here's the email I received from one of the writers at my past newspaper job at Hagedorn Communications:

Unfortunately, I looked through the issues that we did have here and I did not see anything that you wrote in those months-- we only had 9/8, 9/22, 10/6 issues here in the office. Sorry I could not assist. If you'd like to try Jeanette in our other office, she may have an archived cd, but there's a chance she's going to ask for a specific date. (I've spoken with Jeanette twice already who claimed they don't have the manpower to make copies) Best of luck!

April, my astrologer friend, sent me an article by someone named Edith to help me focus. I've edited it a bit because it will take too long to address all of her suggestions:

Edith's Weekly Tips for a more Fulfilling Life:

Procrastination is the leisure time we build into our day when we don't have enough leisure time.

Is that true for you?

Not really, Edith. I suppose I could take leisure time instead of worry about not finishing my novel, but that would make me feel very guilty.

Let's look at some of the reasons we procrastinate:

Too many reasons so here comes the editing scissors.

1. Overwhelm

The task is so big we don't know where to get started and there is no end in sight, there is so much to do.

Fine. A novel is big.

2. Stress

Stress can be a trigger for procrastination. We procrastinate when we can least afford it.

I feel anger reading this.

3. Lack of time management

Spending time on non-essential tasks can be a form of ongoing procrastination, until we are face to face with a deadline.

I could blame my cat Shmick and the Censorship Committee here, but that would be immature. Memoirs demand retrospect, so I cannot behave like a total jerk face.

4. Perfectionism

It is easy to procrastinate when we know that the end result of our work is never good enough.

I wish I had this problem.

5. Lack of Goals

Very few people live their life on purpose. Most people go through the motions of what needs to be done day in and day out.

I'm offended. I need to finish. Where are the sympathetic psychological underpinnings?

What can you do in each of these situations?

1. Overwhelm

If a task is too big, the first thing is to break it down into smaller chunks. If there is just too much to do, write down all that needs to be done. Cross out the tasks that you can do without. Delegate tasks that someone else can do. Prioritize the most important tasks, knowing that some lower priority tasks may not get done. Sometimes you can negotiate for extra time.

I try to break the novel into chunky chapters. Small chunks. But one must figure out how the small chunks fit into the larger chunks and if you start thinking about "all that needs to be done," it is certain that one will become overwhelmed. And I'm out of time to finish this book. Funding...is running...out.

2. Stress

When you feel the stress getting to you, take a relaxation break. Take some deep breaths; meditate for 3-5 minutes; get up and take a short 5 minute walk; listen to a piece of music. Rather than letting the stress get to you and pushing forward, a short break may be the answer.

The stress is constantly "getting to me." The root of the problem is surely that I do exactly what this Edith woman suggests. I – am – a – break – taker. I listen to music and take walks. I am full of short breaks that add up to longer breaks that lead to one STRESSFUL break and not finishing, the biggest break of all. What the hell kind of article tells a procrastinator to take more breaks?

3. Time Management

Keeping this one for continuity since I already mentioned number 3, but the explanation is so boring that this is all you're getting.

4. Perfectionism

This is a tough one to overcome. Often this trait was encouraged from

Same as 3.

5. Lack of Goals

Goals give your life direction. Take time out to dream about your life 1, 5, 10 or even 20 years into the future. Think about where you'd like to live, who you'd like to be sharing your life with, and what you'd like to have. Then build tasks into your schedule that will get you closer to your dreams. Those tasks are important motivators to keep you going with everything you need to get done.

Really? I dream about my life all the time, which to me, is the same problem as advice given for number two, taking breaks. I'd like to have my cat run freely around the house and not be in a dog cage, I'd like love letters but instead I get curt text messages, I'd like not to vomit from my own cooking so I could stop eating at little cafes, but you know what, that's just the way it goes. Acceptance is what I need, not fantastical thinking.

Next Steps

Recognizing how you spend your day and what needs to change can be a real challenge to do alone.

Co-dependent much?

I'm going to admit that in addition to consistent email checks, calling my boyfriend, and talking to my dear friend/astrologist about how my day as a Pisces is forecast, I am being bitten on the toes by Shmick, my two-year-old Devon Rex cat. I am forced to keep her in a dog cage when I'm not home because she eats inedible, and has had two surgeries for ingesting foreign objects. I have had Shmicky for over a year, and I cannot control her. I just typed in "Devon Rex Behavior Problems" to see if there's anything I can do (the vet has no clue) and instead the following description came up on my screen:

Devon Rex cats have been compared to pixies and aliens from space because of their huge bat-like ears, large window-to-the-soul eyes, and ethereal, otherworldly body style. Not only are they unusual in appearance, these wavy-haired wonders have personalities that can't be beat.

Rewrite of the false advertisement above:

Devon Rex cats will not tire of staring and staring while making strange, foreboding clicking sounds and peering into your soul while planning your death. Comparable to gremlins, they demand constant attention and will create havoc if you are gone

for more than five hours at a time. The Devon Rex plays skillfully and relentlessly until you are forced to join in.

One evening I returned to an upside-down litter box and a plate broken into twenty pieces. In other cases, Shmickle ripped apart and ingested a light pink loofa and could not “pass it,” so after \$400 of medical testing, immediate intestinal surgery was necessary at \$2,500, her second surgery in a year. (totaling \$5,000 for a graduate student= slow financial decay).

Their coats are soft and beautiful but if not washed with soap regularly, these lovely furs will turn a grayish soot-like color with a yellow tint on the forehead and around the ears illuminating a ragged appearance and creating a fearful response from potential or current roommates to supplement the cost of her very expensive medical problems.

Shmick, for example, has brown yeast on her belly from too much licking which needs to be cleaned with watery medicine and cotton tabs, black buildup under her fingernails from allergies, which also needs some “digging out,” and dark earwax that must be eradicated with a small cotton swab and antibiotics. She has food allergies, so can only snack on hypoallergenic venison and pea. I have been advised to feed her one quarter of my allergy pills daily.¹⁴⁴

The idea for purchasing Shmick was to have a quiet, sweet companion to accompany my dedicated, focused writing life. I was feeling a bit slow witted for purchasing such an animal, so please note the narrator’s slightly dim-witted persona. (one

¹⁴⁴ Disintegrating tabs work best unless she spits it out resulting in the tab and surrounding slobber into your palm.

moment while I check to make sure she's not eating an inedible object).¹⁴⁵ I attempted a short story about Shmicky while taking a brief dissertation hiatus:

The Shmick

As long as Shmick lives, things will be tough. She is a difficult creature. The noises she makes are high pitched and terrible. They are not meows. Sounds like a monkey screeching or a bird whining. I don't think that woman in back woods Georgia sold me a cat.

My grandmother Nonnie had a Shih Tzu named Sheffie (that's where the "shhhh" sound originates for Shmick) who peed like a girl with her leg up by a tree and wore pink barrettes that pulled so tight on his forehead that his eyes watered. Nonnie hit him on the head with a newspaper when he humped human legs. Or pull his leash too hard until he made a little "achhh" choking sound. I think she loved that little guy in her own way. Now they're gone, and I have Shmick. I tried for so many months to find an unusual animal that I wouldn't be allergic to. The Devon Rex doesn't shed much, a breed found somewhere outside an industrial plant in England. A wild Tomcat mixed with another kind of Shmish to form this cat, monkey, dog thing that climbs high.

This thing I have acts like a baby, so I cradle her in a pink blanket and give her treats or she cries and cries at bedtime. And in the morning she wants to get out of the walk-in closet leading to the bathroom. I can't let her roam in the main part of my studio because she'll wait until I fall asleep and then scream in my ear at 2 a.m., 4, and then 6. She figured out what an ear does. My mom says it's good for me to take care of something.¹⁴⁶ Shmick is a lasting experiment.

I'm not allowed to have dogs in my building, and I hate cats. They are mean and sneaky. And they get you back later. But I'm lonely sometimes. I know you might not think this kind of thing maybe should be a story but you'd be surprised how some people might like it. People I know say, "Let's see the Shmick story." "Tell me about Shmick some more."

I was searching for a cat that acts like a dog, a shmadoggy all last summer a few months after Nonnie passed until finally the woman at antabellacattery.com answered. But before then, I couldn't find a Shmick.

¹⁴⁵ She's fine. She's sitting on the stove, so I decided to feed her, I ate an apple slice, and picked up the guitar for a moment to play a song I wrote three years ago after a breakup with the drummer.

¹⁴⁶ My mother dislikes Shmick in reality. She finds her distracting and a waste of money. My father, an allergist, asked if I wanted to give her away or worse, put her down. He knows I've been itchy and sneezy.

Tina wrote me and explained she possessed a mixed-breed Shmick, and here's what she had:

They're mixed with American Shorthair. They're \$400. I only have one sable torti girl left. I'm in Cedar Rapids, Iowa. She's about 5 months old now. She had an ulcer on her eye that has healed but she is squinting in the photos... Some people with severe cat allergies still are allergic to the hybrids but if your allergies are mild they would be fine.
Tina



Mixed breed with popcorn



In a Bucket



Tiny Dancer

I did not want a mixed Shmick, so I found a breeder with one Devon Rex in the United States. (found a few Devons located in the UK, but breeders mail kitties). I found a Shmick!

From: "AntaBella77@aol.com" <AntaBella77@aol.com>

To: xxxxx@sbcglobal.net

Sent: Thu, April 21, 2011 5:30:33 PM

Subject: Re: seeking a Devon Rex kitten

Yes we have the solid white kitten on this very left of this photo available.

Call me I can reserve her for you – thanks

Tammie



Shmick: solid white female-far left, resting chin

Mostly I got her because I'm allergic to regular cats and Shmick has less hair. Tomorrow I'm going to an Ear Nose and Throat doctor because I haven't taken a solid breath since I got her. Allergy tests that my dad gave me don't show anything either. Probably because I keep taking allergy medicine too close to the test but it's too itchy and stuffy to wait. I have to hold my nose open. Right now. Opening it. Anyway, even if it's her fault, Shmick stays. I made a commitment.

Tammie said her husband owns some kind of flower farm and a cattery. Both businesses were in her house in a small town in Georgia. I would for sure take such a cute cat and arrange a flight to get her. I have a friend who lives in Florida, so we rented a car and drove five hours to get the Shmick. My friend makes hummus and dips for Sunday markets and sometimes drinks alcohol too early in the day. I had to pay for the car and most of our dinners. I won't show you her picture because that would steal a friend's identity. Shmick was already costing a lot, and I didn't even have her yet.

Shmick is controversial because she's hard to find and also fancy. Here's an email from a sort of friend who runs a vet clinic in New York. He didn't like the idea of me going to a breeder because of all the unwanted, homeless cats, so I could understand if you have that problem too. Wait until you realize that I'm not rich but I paid \$800 for her anyway. That might get you going. My vet friend calls her a fashion cat, but she's too jumpy for that.

Changing paragraphs here so your eyes won't hurt.

Brice, the friend who thinks you should only take care of free street cats, has been living with his ex-wife for ten years because they share the vet business.¹⁴⁷ He says it's a business partnership. He's fifty or sixty years old. He used to let me sing with him in Washington Square Park sometimes because I sing really good folk songs like Janis Joplin's pieces of her broken heart that sounds like yelling at people but then I moved away back to the Midwest. We sang with drug dealers and prostitutes but I don't do that stuff. They didn't care and were nice about letting me sing probably because I was from the suburbs of Chicago and not really super urban and they knew I was singing there for pure reasons.

Once my grandmother visited and they passed the pot around hippy style and she didn't care. My mom said Nonnie used to drink under the table when my mom was a teenager so maybe that's why things didn't bother her. Nonnie liked the folk songs too. From the sixties. She's dead now but says hi to me sometimes when I'm sleeping. Before she died, she cut out a picture of a dark haired model and told me to do my hair like hers and grow out my bangs. It looks terrible and I can't see but I don't want to disgrace her life since it took her last energy to cut out that picture. I'm thinking of finding a picture on google and putting it on this page, but it wouldn't be the right one

¹⁴⁷ Chapter is old now; they don't live together anymore. I should edit sooner.

that she gave me and it doesn't seem right to put a different picture on here considering she's not alive to protest. I should find that picture and scan it and put it on when I move apartments. That's probably when I'll find it. I'll leave some space for it.

Anyway here is Brice the vet guy's real email. I went through all my emails and I can't find the one I wanted to show you that was kind of mocking me for still being single and getting older. When I get really mad, I delete proof of things so I forget. But I guess it doesn't work because I still remember.

Hi,

The cat is really cute. I assume you got that breed because you are allergic?

What's NEW? Feel free to call- you know I prefer that.

-Brice

The all caps NEW question means that he thinks it sucks that I'm not married. He knows nothing is new. My cat is pretending to sleep on my printer. She always has to be on top. Soon she'll wake up and print another test page. Ink is expensive.



The picture is kind of neat because looks like it has a mirror in it and my cut off head so that's kind of arty because the mirror makes it bounce back like it's saying, who's looking who's watching. Me looking at you looking at me. Then there's the cup that asks for tips shows that the people could be poor. Shows that our world has problems and that Shmick came from a geography of hard knocks.

The bean sellers live in that trailer or at least work there and they sell the delicious beans from the window. The picture is looking into a window where they work. I'm facing the camera like they are.

**BBQ Trailer near the Cattery
in Georgia sells delicious
baked beans in a trailer**

I'm going to give you a list of bad and good things Shmick does now so you know I see both sides.

BAD THINGS

1. She doesn't want me to train her
2. She sits in the sink
3. She jumps in the fridge
4. She sleeps on the stove
5. She jumps on the stove when the flame is on
6. She hides between curtains of the shower and scares the bejesus out of me when I try to dry off
7. She tries to lick my legs when they're wet
8. She takes my people food
9. She sits on my lap like right now when I have to pee so I feel guilty moving so I just sit until I can't stand the tingling
10. She wants attention at all times. I mean it. All times
11. She doesn't call me mom and I act like one for her. I don't get the credit not even from my mom that I'm like a mom for her. Maybe she's practice for a kid. Maybe not
12. Cat with a death drive needs constant saving

Some good things about Shmick are not in a list but I'll just tell you because it looks better. And feels more emotional in a paragraph. Like I'm thinking out loud and not planning every last dot. Besides the true fact that she's really, really good looking? I mean, she could model. Other cat owners will get all awkward around her and worry that their cats are too fat or shaggy. Shmick is a looker. Wish I looked the same attractive as her in people language. Also, I wash her in the sink with special cat shampoo and she lets me. That's another way she's good.

Here's something. About me to try to make this a good story about something that is more than just Shmick. I always get probation on jobs. Get with the program, they tell me. My mom says I need to get stable and not to depend on her. My dad shakes his head but my mom talks so she is trying. My dad doesn't even try. I feel bad that sometimes I take her money. But it's hard to concentrate when Shmick is there so I'm not getting smart as fast as I could. My neighbor with the yellow hair and the orange skin told me it's too loud and I can't let my cat run my life, she says, so now I make quiet cat sounds for a few hours in the morning while I'm pulling the dry and crustiness from my eyes and my nose is still dripping.



This is a long paragraph. Sorry. Like when you're just waiting to finish getting your teeth cleaned at the dentist and accidentally hold your breath. In the morning I walk around my neighborhood asking for jobs or asking for my old job back like my mother begs me to do.

The bad things I used to do at my old jobs:

1. Draw pictures of Shmick on receipts
2. Talk to my mom past break time
3. I was told I overdressed because at one of my jobs, one the first day, I wore this dress.
(this model is not me).

Let me explain. I was hired at a fancy restaurant, and they told me to dress nicely. I took it too far my mom said. Looks like a prom dress she said. I could get the dress dirty with full food plates and it won't make people comfortable going to their table with too fancy a waitress my manager said. People want to feel at ease when they're eating. Not that they're going to spill their food at the frickin prom.

The picture isn't exactly correct. I did wear a dress that was too fancy but it's not this blue dress in the picture. I couldn't find a picture on the internet to match, and it was one I borrowed from an orange skinned neighbor that I don't have anymore, so the blue one seemed better. This is the only non-biographical picture in this entire story so take from it what you will. www.jaksflowergirl dresses.com/Ball

When we brought Shmick in the car she screamed until I let her out and held her and then she calmed down but only a little.



Shmick's mom. The brother was finally sold off the web site. I think I'm a better mom than her because she looks kind of confused. The truth is I knew at my friend's house her big dog was waiting but she kept telling me don't worry, Inabella is friendly, but it started to seem like a worse idea when we got there and her dog opened her jaws like a fish. One snap and Shmick's neck could've disappeared. So we separated them. One in the living room and one Shmick in the bedroom.

Shmick wouldn't eat the food Tami gave me. She was making loud sounds and running around the bedroom, hiding under the bed, throwing her butt in the air, giving us a headache. My friend was laughing and laughing. Not so funny. This cat is crazy, I thought. What in hells bells am I going to do now with this thing?

That night she climbed on my body every single minute while my friend slept quietly in her living room. It got so bad I had to hide under the covers for safety so then she took it as a game and started playing the head pounce game. Any form of discipline on my side she turns into a game. My head is the target and Shmick jumps on it every five minutes. I didn't sleep for one minute. That cat still didn't eat or poop. The next day it was the same thing. I knew I couldn't give her back but it seemed like one of us would die if this kept going. Everything dies I know. Then I saw little black things crawling around her white body very fast. I asked my friend what it could be.

“I forgot to mention I had fleas in my apartment but Inabella is being treated. Florida has a major flea problem.”

I separated that quote to show you it really stands out. So Shmick had fleas and it was giving her even bigger jumps than she was born with. I took her to the emergency pet place and they gave me some liquid stuff to put on her neck. I bought Fancy Feast at the store and she ate finally. Now I know that’s like the McDonalds of cat food and I wouldn’t give her that junk with grains now because it needs to say “grain free.” The next day she pooped and I returned to Chicago.

In my apartment I started itching. Guess those little black buggers can travel. I thought I heard buzzing sounds. So I threw out all my blankets and pillows and washed everything three more times at least. I put a flea bomb in my studio and left for hours while I carried Shmick around the neighborhood. She peed all over herself in the carrier. I didn’t know she wouldn’t like being in the carrier swinging around for so many blocks since I thought she liked traveling. It turns out she likes cars better. I gave her a bath and she shook like a broken tree falling.

After the fleas went away, I noticed Shmick put everything in her mouth. I know this because you see her head and neck jerking around when something won’t go down right. I learned to open her jaws and I found

String
 pieces of glass
 paper bits
 pen caps
 feathers
 people food
 dust
 kitty litter
 shoe laces
 cloth
 rubber bands

and weird mashed up things.¹⁴⁸

One day Shmicky Bip Bip threw up. Then I saw a few pools of diarrhea. She wasn’t moving much. She didn’t even land face first in the food as usual when I opened it. She just snuggled near me and looked sad. She walked to the food dish, licked a few pebbles, and put them down. The next day she still wasn’t prancing around, so I took her in. It turned out she swallowed a huge rubber band with an extra knot and needed surgery right away.

¹⁴⁸ Is Shmick Jena reincarnated – trying to distract me from finishing?

“She’s not acting kittenish like she usually does,” the vet noticed before cutting her all the way open for \$2500. By the way, Care Credit doesn’t care about you when the interest jerks up to 18%.

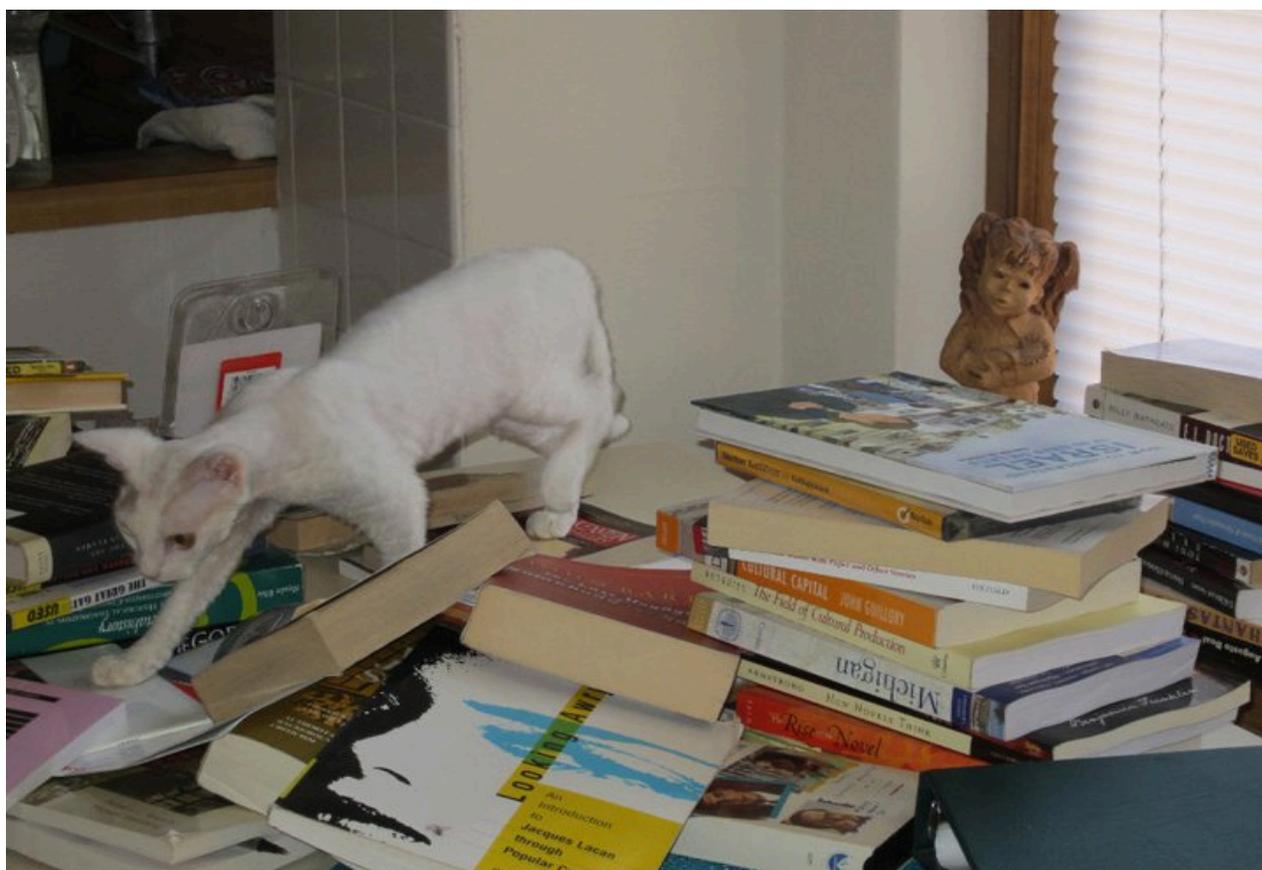
I waited for Bip Bipeedideeboobop in the waiting room until 10 p.m. and then I was told to take her to the emergency room to keep her full of fluids. When I got there, I was at the Island of Dr. Moreau because a dog was having brain surgery in the middle of the room. Its head was in bandages. Give the dog some privacy or some medicine I mean come on. Mad scientists in Chicago.

Shmick was put in a small cage surrounding other infirm animals. She tried to eat her ivy so the nurse put some bitter stuff on it to make her stop. But she didn’t stop trying to strangle herself.

I like a challenge the nurse told me. Bring it on and this little Shmicky is mine she said. When I came back the next day they told me Shmick stayed up all night trying to wrap the ivy around her head so they had to watch her in 24 hour shifts. She stayed awake for another 24 hours in my studio until she swayed so much she fell over. But she wasn’t dead. Just really tired. This is how it is with this cat, you know. She just doesn’t want to miss anything. I know how she feels.

A little later when I got a boyfriend and we kissed, Shmick would get between us and start licking his private parts. Or sniff his armpits, scream and then run. Making a statement that men stink. If I tried to put her in the closet, she would beep beep. You can tell that I’m not married.

Shmick is tricky when she wants her way. She pretends she’s purring to be nice but really just is waiting to take your people food or jump in the sink or toilet or get rid of your man. But she loves me. She finds a warm spot on my stomach to push against under the covers and purr. If I read or don’t read that day. Even if I’m on probation again or go to the movies alone. Or stop talking to friends like Brice. Or if I never have a baby and my mom gives me money still. I prefer Shmick.



The Final Frontier



I am 100% committed to finishing my dissertation. There are some impediments I am determined to overcome. My back is the foremost obstacle. My upper back, often trapped by my traps, frequently stiffens with overuse. And when it's stiff, it hurts, and creates a *concentration obstacle*. I borrowed \$630 from my boyfriend to purchase the large reclining lawn chair (see above) with lumbar support and the wood contraption surrounding me that allows reading at an appropriate height to avoid looking down and causing a neck injury. Observe the desk in the upper left corner of the aforementioned picture, a desk you cannot fully discern, but note that it is raised by three cinderblocks. One cinderblock is visible sitting on top of a white cloth to avoid damage to the wood

floor. My school was built with cinderblocks, but the metaphor isn't working. Cinderblocks are holding up my desk, but my writing has not been held up with any regard – although this project keeps me sitting up. The literal blocks are a purposeful, necessary strategy to raise my desk so I'm facing my laptop screen at eye level while writing. The laptop itself is also raised by a disparate contraption for the same purpose. Observe the wooden rolling device beneath the desk where my feet rest in an effort to stimulate circulation and push me upright into my chair. A special pad was purchased for my desk chair to ensure lumbar support.

It is true that I am living off a credit card, that is, nothing is liquid, so to speak, but money gone towards these contraptions is totally necessary in order to continue with my writing career. (Art before life and so on) With this furniture, I have the constitution and endurance to complete this task and go on the job market at some point in the near future although I am not ready until I finish this project and can succinctly place it in the tradition of other authors while simultaneously and excitedly proclaiming what I am adding to the tradition of this non-traditional...

Although I possess the appropriate equipment to continue writing, it is time to mention a few more extraneous issues that could potentially thwart the culmination of my PhD and possible relationship with the reading public. You met Shmick and understand the extreme patience a mother must possess to offer responsible care for such a kitty. As I'm writing this, she's stalking into the living room area where I will be forced to follow her to ensure she's not eating an inanimate object. As mentioned, with the Shmick, you must offer a considerable time frame of playtime or she fills her cat body with ennui and a sluggishness so concentrated, it results in full attack/distract mode or she will walk

directly upon my legs or body, spin into a perfect complete circle until she finds the correct position, and create a look of such intense tranquility that you dare not move. Otherwise, she stalks you.



Regardless of Shmick's distractible devil-may-care mania, she offers love and comfort when I'm not concerned about her life choices. I'm thinking about writing her story and having it promoted in the self-help section: *Smart Kitties, Dumb Choices* as a conduct book for cat owners and their wayward pets.

Shmick has taken a special liking to my new roommate Tabatha, a linguistics graduate student who spends much of her time studying the language of cat. At first, she was an ideal flat mate for just that reason. She would feed Shmick when I wasn't home for lunch,¹⁴⁹ console her when I was unable to offer her one more head rub, and even created a toy out of a piece of plastic from one of her moving boxes. I am unable to track the exact moment when Shtick's role moved from amusing pet/playmate to full blown obsession for the linguistics major.

Why must a neurotic such as yourself insist on having a roommate, you might ask. I simply cannot afford this tiny two bedroom alone, and although initially upon meeting Tabatha I was alerted that her desire for a roommate originated from a need to just "be around another person," my alternatives included a very loud woman in her thirties who either had a hearing problem or just plainly commanded attention (despite her very cool accent, this extreme decibel level would certainly become unbearable in 700 square feet), or another woman who didn't seem to have a good reason for moving from the downtown area besides it being "kind of expensive," she told me, drenched in sweat for unknown reasons. At least Tabatha was a graduate student. Graduate students must be quiet because they have to study. Also, she mentioned making a mean chocolate cheesecake dessert, which I have yet to see.¹⁵⁰

A few weeks ago, I began noticing the beginning of incessant kitty cat chatter from her usual living room couch/slouch position as she hovered over her mini laptop.

¹⁴⁹ Shmick has bowel issues. The vet requested she is fed three small meals of hypoallergenic food per day.

¹⁵⁰ Never saw it.

“Hi sweetie. Whatcha doin? Did you miss your mama today? Are you hungry? I have to read now, but not getting much done. I bet you like distracting me. What are you up to?”

-or-

“Shmicky, do you want to go outside? You can’t, you know. Sorry! You’re an indoor cat. Aw, you’re licking your lips. It looks like you enjoyed your breakfast. Still hungry? Finish your kibble, go on, finish it. Where you going now? Do you want attention? Do you need attention?”

Tabatha would toss Shmick into her arms and roll her the happy kitty on her back and begin rubbing her belly.

“Aw, Shmicky, you like that, don’t you?”

Once she caught me staring and replied, “Shmicky and I are having a moment.”

A few days ago I received a text that read, “Shmicky pooped two times and peed once, a present for you. TMI- haha.”

I thought long and hard before responding; I didn’t want to engage in too much idle Shmickle chatter, but she seemed like the sensitive type, so ignoring her completely wasn’t an option. A few hours later I responded, “Sorry about that,” to which she quipped via text, “Not yer fault. Hahaha. Big poopy!”

I feel a little guilty complaining about poor Tabatha. She allegedly survived Hurricane Sandy, told me she watched her stuff float away, and had to put her boyfriend in a mental hospital several times. Perhaps the final detail is less related to bad luck and more along the lines of Smart Women, Dumb Choices.

“He was a narcissist,” she explained.

As a memoirist, I know a thing or two about narcissism, but I'm not convinced a hospital is the right place for that. The page works just fine for me. Tabatha spends her free time around crazy people creating an essential need for non-human/Shmickish contact. One friend is schizophrenic, and she's relying on her for linguistic research. She must meet with her several times in person for a major project, but the girl often cancels the interviews. When I asked my roommate why she would rely on this woman for research, she said, "She's very enthusiastic and that's what you want for a project like this." She also spends a lot of time at her mother's, who similarly does not leave the house and recently returned from a European farewell trip to say goodbye to all her relatives because according to Tabatha, "She thinks she's dying, but she isn't."

Regardless of her foibles, she is a nice person, but I'm afraid she's just too attached to Shmick.

The Shmick updates continue and begin immediately when I walk in the door. Tabatha remains on the couch, slumped over, enthusiastically reporting the minutia of Shmick's day.

"Today Shmick was screaming and crying every time she had to pee or poo. I think she has an infection."

At that moment, Shmick walked over to her litter box, peed quietly, and looked me in the eye to let me know Tabatha was exaggerating.

"Seems fine now," I said.

"I'm just telling you what I'm seeing. My cat had a urinary tract infection; they get them all the time. Should be treated. I'd take her in."

It was the case that Shmick hadn't been drinking water lately or was it that I was dousing her already wet food with too much water that made her stop drinking? Perhaps there was a problem there, but I didn't know if it was a Shmicken or the egg – too much water first or not enough water later. Online research revealed reports of serious damage to the kidneys and potential death if cat bladder problems weren't treated immediately.

Two-hundred dollars later, the vet advised me to cease drenching her food with water and that no, she did not have a UTI.

“But the findings are unusual. Her pee doesn't resemble cat pee, which is always concentrated. It's more like human pee,” said my vet.

This scientific fact confirmed that Shmick is not really a cat, but I knew this already.

The other day, when I threw the small bouncy ball to play the chase game, Shmick ran to it in her usual way and waited for me to run around the apartment so that I could continue amusing her. Tabatha took it upon herself to interfere and threw the ball. Shmick did not respond and proceeded into her infamous abusive stare.

“I wonder why she's responding to you and not me,” the animal-competer-for-Shmicklicious-love said frowning.

I wanted to say, “Well, honey, Shmick is my cat, so it makes sense that she likes me better. Chill.” But I couldn't say that, so I shook my head and responded, “She's playing with you too. Just not that one time.”

In another instance, I was playing chase around the apartment when Tabatha intercepted the game and began chasing Shmick with me – or sort of against me. Tabatha is not a small woman and the apartment is filled with random large and unmatching Euro-

trashy furniture, so a chase in a tiny West Andersonville apartment becomes more like an obstacle course/Olympic sport. When you add two 39-year-old women thumping around with a miniscule bouncy ball, you get a frightened, terrorized five-and-a-half pound cat.

There is no solution to the roommate problem. I cannot have a talk with her and say: *Please stop paying so much attention to my cat. Stop stroking her all day long and having prolonged very loud chats with her. One animal cannot be the center of your world. You must let go; you must move on. Plus, I have weird cat jealousy issues.*

Since I have to live with another Shmick obsessed individual besides myself, I think it's time to level with you. It's nearly impossible to write a chapter about procrastination and institute any kind of arc. The very content has overcome me with a wave of exhaustion – a Shmickelish ennui if you will – and this nonsense has taken over the form of the whole thing. Every half hour to forty minutes of writing this chapter, I find myself in a slumber,¹⁵¹ needing to take a brief rest, and wonder, what is the essence of the plot here? What do I really want to say? Why the lack of strong scenes and conflict with other characters and only fragmented moments, uncharted moments of the blasé?

I need to stay with people longer on the page to build real conversations. My characters need to talk.

Theme People

One night after a rip-roaring fight, my photographer boyfriend decided to relay a little knowledge into my flip phone around 11 p.m. (the origins of his deep insights often occurred late on weeknights). I had just dropped \$1100 on two separate credit cards for a

¹⁵¹ I just finished another ten-minute break, which consisted of lying/laying on my bed and looking upwards for several moments at a time.

new catalytic converter, and things weren't looking good for keeping up with my rent. The boyfriend offered to drive me to the nearest Midas because of the cranky death call and smell my old car was emitting and added, "I'll drop you off, but I'm not paying." Since he had mentioned this little refusal the day before and I hadn't asked for help, I was annoyed. It's one thing not to offer but it's quite another to say I'm not offering.¹⁵²

My deepening cash flow issue was compounded with his prior suggestion at Midas – that I drive the old Honda as it was – sans converter and all because it was still safe except for emitting a few pollutants and having some loud indigestion. Imagine a silent argument at Midas before he took off and left me sitting in the garage stewing. So the next evening, when we were arguing about the collaborative corroborator, I mean that thing that was really wrong with my car, he decided to get all philosophical on me.

"People live by a theme, don't you think?"

Cheese fries churning in my stomach.

"What are you talking about?" I asked.

I knew he was going to tell me about me in a way I detested. The me portrait he painted – never attractive or alluring – often came out of the undercurrent of a fight or a bubbling problem unrelated to who I was or who I believed I was but deeply related to a momentary belief of who he thought I was conflated with a present frustration on his part creating a who he thinks I am in the present rotten sandwich that was spoiling and smelly and steaming in the background, just so he could throw it back at me and force me to swallow it in the midst of a quarrel. This kind of girlfriend profiling was his strategy to get back at me for being upset/angry/mad instead of dealing with the issue directly such

¹⁵² Two months prior, he had lent me over \$600 to purchase ergonomically correct furniture due to my back problems. This was very kind. Refer back to Diss Leave chapter. I would love (overstating) to give him a photo credit, but you will soon learn why it might be best not to disclose his identity.

as, in this case, not wanting to help with the combustible catalytic converter but the catalyst being his potentially feeling guilty about it, I suppose since I am a broke grad student not finished with this dissertation. Mea culpa, dammit. Mea culprit. So there he was doing it again, taking out his droopy paintbrush – or based on my contemptuous mood while writing this chapter – kindergarten finger-paints – to outline and dab out my profile, filling in the details with swirling grotesque clichés and negative images of femaleness that I pride myself on denying.

“I don’t know what you’re saying right now,” I said.

“Yes you do,” he said. “You know.”

He was starting to do the thing. To tell me what I knew, what I understood; the damned lecture had begun.

“Don’t you think everyone lives by an approach, like one thing that they tell themselves every day and then act on it?” he asked.

My energy began waning. I prepared for battle and sunk into my white down cover. Shmick let out a subtle meow by gently lifting what my roommate referred to as her perfect chicken lips, a mild squeak while perched on my mahogany jewelry stand. I would get no more writing done tonight.

“No, that’s simplistic,” I said, beginning a depressive yawn that I knew might have been a prelude for hours of dreary combat. I wanted to put the cabash on his theme idea, but it would be easier to kill off his argument slowly and through the Socratic Method. If that didn’t work, I could start by bringing in naysayers in the interrogative about breakthroughs in cognitive psychology or the complicated processes of the brain or even call upon good old Freud’s unconscious to deconstruct the absurd notion of people

living the span of their lives by a single theme. I couldn't be a sledgehammer if I wanted to strip his logic; the abrasive dagger approach would bring me down to his level and result in getting tuned out with a dismissive, "We just don't think in the same way" which translated into "Your point of view is irrational, skewed, and emotional and therefore, female." So instead, I would allow his archaic logic to slowly turn on itself and mirror his ideas if I was slippery and deliberate enough. I loathed the content of his platform, but part of me enjoyed the end result of winning because I found his conclusions about me (and sometimes the world) myopic and mean spirited. Then again, he might have been trying to help me in some way that I cannot condone. This is still the problem.¹⁵³

"I think some things are simple," he said.

"Right, but people are complicated."

"I don't know about that."

"There's plenty of literature about it. You could"—

"What, read?" he asked.

"Well, yah."

"Nice," he said.

"Reading adds layers to thinking," I said.

The photographer doesn't read much although he's been caught perusing photography magazines as of late. Once or twice, I eyed him taking notes, writing in the

¹⁵³ If indeed we are still dating. He's not picking up the phone. I'm editing. Tonight, I had to go in again for the Honda, but this time the censor broke and it was another \$500. He didn't offer to help and things are weird because he left an obscure message about a loan but then called and said he didn't have a lot of money and never mind.

margins. Possibly preparing for a meeting or infusing himself with industry ideas. He's damned practical.

"What are you doing?" I had asked one day while he was flipping through a glossy on the special ergonomic chair he had helped purchase.

"Can you believe it? I'm reading," he said.

"Do you ever read things outside your industry?" I enquired already knowing the answer.

"Reading is a luxury. I don't have time."

I dropped the conversation because of what was unspoken. He had a real career and it was imperative that he make money. I was living in a fantasy world of frail dreams that would most likely never come to fruition. He had sweat to start his own business, lost money on a condo, maxed out several credit cards, helped save his mother from cancer, seen real hard times. He perceived my idea of trouble occurring when I felt a professor looked at me the wrong way or when my cultural capital waned in the parental approval department every time my father asked, "Graduating yet?" He never said these words directly, but it was sort of understood that I was the baby girl and that he was the adult in the relationship.

"I have to read because it's what my career demands. It's not my luxury. So, this theme stuff? What's my theme? I guess you're saying this because it's been a hard week for me. I get a theme!"

"Stop it," he said.

"My theme is whining?" I asked.

“Everything is how you look at it. You get really upset,” he said. “And I internalize your stress.”

“That’s because I don’t have extra money if something goes wrong. And something eventually goes wrong, like a cattalactic convertible.”

“Funny girl.”

“Which is upsetting for me. You don’t have to internalize it,” I said.

I was beginning to feel tightness spread across my solar plexus. Silence again. Why did I defend myself and fall into the same trap every time?

“It’s your choice to do all this,” he said. “And there’s nothing wrong with it.”

“Do all what?”

“Graduate school,” he said. “It’s a choice.”

“I don’t feel like you’re being understanding,” I said.

“I know you don’t.”

“So what’s my theme?”

At this point, it was something I should not have proceeded with, but the hint was there; I was being charged with some kind of terrible theme, worse than Disney or any American park. A wobbly raft was I, a misinformed boat in bad weather sighing “Ode to the Wind” waiting for a treacherously misguided theme to carry me to Never Never Land where I would collapse waiting for Peter who would not come to save me. I was a miniature train tooting itself in the wrong direction. I was a bad MTV video, too Emo, an Ethan Hawke sadly swaying all anksty to that Phil Collins song, “Two Hearts” on a dingy in a harbor full of gas fumes and the boyfriend was going to tell me all about it. Hawke and Collins, oil and water. Me howling “Two Hearts” on a deflated dingy.

“What do you think your theme is?” he asked.

He was doing the Socratic nonsense on me. I needed to be better at this.

“I don’t know because I don’t believe that people can live by one idea, so you tell me,” I said.

“Yours is victim. You feel misunderstood and express that a lot. Everyone lets you down,” said.

I had asked for it but was never prepared.

“Oh my G-d. That is so myopic.”

I waited and felt the silence ripen with the hopeful potential that he didn’t know the word myopic.

“You think life is hard. You think things are a struggle,” he said. “That’s how you live.”

The photographer’s voice hit an upward lilt on the word live. He was pleased with himself¹⁵⁴ as he realized his stream of his syntax was beginning to take shape and draw battle lines.

You know what, I’m filled with such glee remembering his pure joy upon his themed discovery, **-VICTIM-** that my words are just jumping, I mean dancing off the page....It’s a musical moment! Wait, dammit, I can’t find the words online, so I’m going to have to listen to **“Pleased with Myself”** again, but I’m not super-committed to it, not enough for .99 cents- plus, I was in the show in the 90’s and should remember the words...I’ll give you the gist.

(several 1970’s characters are snapping in unison)

¹⁵⁴ “Pleased with Myself” is a song from the 1977 musical *Starting Here, Starting Now*. Here is an awkward rendition: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2vZiAbM0uIk>

Woman:

What makes this whole wide world start boppin along? (snapping plus brash giggle)
 Why can't I stop my fingers poppin along?
 Well, I have to tell you my, my
 Must be that I'm sky high
 Just found myself my guy
 When I'm feelin' pleeee-eeesed with mah-self.

Man:

Ooooooh, she's very pleased!
 Found out my baby loves me what do you know-
 Somewhere G-d's rhythm section starting to
 (can't remember the rest so skipping a bunch)
 Well now everybody hey there, you can't swing and sway there
 No body can stay square when I'm feeling pleased with myself

Bridge:

Oh, did you ever reach high?
 Grab something out of the sky?
 Do, what you doubted you could?
 You say that you did? Don't it make ya feel goood!
 Don't it make you want to sing and dance and shout and(I'm not buying the entire
 song because I forgot my iTunes password) but it gets really, really happy and loud here!

Back to the serious dialogue:

Recap:

The moment before the musical theatre break, the Photographer said, in a pleased
 with himself way, "You think life is hard. You think things are a struggle," he said.
 "That's how you live."

"I am okay with the process. Anything worth fighting for is hard," I said.

I was speaking in clichés. He had taught me that.

"It doesn't have to be."

"I don't know why you would want to date someone who you think acts like a
 victim," I said.

There. I said it. (I kind of miss the 1970's singers but ok)

"I don't think you always act that way," he said.

Apparently sometimes I acted like a victim – like when something went wrong and I was upset – and sometimes when things were going my way, I was a regular person, un-victim-y and so on. More regular. More the kind of girl he wanted. If this sounds exhausting, imagine writing it. I probably became frustrated and tired and hung up the phone and then called back two or three more times to continue the same conversation.

Lara, The Boyfriend's Ex-Girlfriend

I've never met her or seen a picture, but I have enough information to glue the pieces together to make an open-ended oblong. They dated a year-and-a-half, the precise amount of time to commit and then break up in a way that stings. I'm sure she still hurts. He talked about her like a fond but distant memory; the kind of cliché that sticks to the tongue after it's been spoken.

She's wonderful for doing that, for sticking with him when she was uncertain if he would commit. She held on as long as she could in a female heroine way without complaining and then one day asked for what she deserved. Like *The Rules* book tells you to do. (except she waited an extra six months, a time lag speaking only to her hopeful patience, something I don't have). When he realized he couldn't and wouldn't follow through, he ended it. Perhaps he didn't need to follow through because she had never forced his hand. Marriage was somewhere haunting the background of their day-to-day tranquility, but it wasn't expected and certainly not demanded.

When it ended, I'm sure she cried a little – but not too heartily. An amicable split so that he could potentially return to her – just in case. He didn't suffer too horribly because he wasn't fully in love with her, not in the way he thought he should be in his own mind. She liked him very well in a way that was good and simple and whole. It was like everything she did: good and simple and whole versus everything I do, scrambled and fragmented and with the jolt of a lightning bolt. The constituent parts of Lara that I am made of only = enamel, blood cells, membranes, eyelids. Our souls play different music and our pulse beats to `contrasting frequencies. I think it's a fair guess considering he has nothing bad to say about her and plenty rotten to complain about me.

Ode to sweet, sweet, Lara. I could think about her all day, and lately I have been. I don't really have a visual, especially since I made the mistake of relinquishing my creative vision of her.

“She's blond, isn't she?”

“No, her hair is red,” he said.

Well, that sort of ruined the whole thing for me, but in my mind, she's still blond. Sort of. I'm trying to make her blond. Dammit Lara, be blond. Be the essence of femaleness in a blond way. Red is too close to the stuff on my head and we are opposites, so fuckin' be blond You are blond, Lara. You are blond because I say it. Sometimes the photographer and I snuggled up with Shmick and fell asleep, between his mouth guard and my melatonin induced blur and the five little words I whispered softly: “I wish Lara were here.” I want her vibe, her gentleness. I want her to tell me what almost kept him around for a year-and-a-half because it's been not quite a year, and I'm the living phoenix of dump city rejuvenated.

You can imagine my disappointment to learn she didn't cook well, but I'm sure by now, she's a very good cook. In fact, since it's November and she's dating someone new, let's suppose she's making some sort of pumpkin stew and wearing her Christmas socks, all cuddled in a cashmere blanket watching some sort of re-runs on Netflix with her new guy. The very nice new guy is kind and patient and a little less judgmental than the photographer, just a little, and since she is a lot calmer than I, almost every minute of the day and night – including sleep time, the two of them are sort of quiet in a somnolent wintery way for a night of stew. The stew is spiked with a little rum and although this is starting to sound gross, I promise it's delicious because her boyfriend – um – Stew? Her boyfriend Stewart loves her pumpkin stew, especially in November when the windows are just beginning to frost. Okay, work with me here dammit, so sweet Lara is making her sweet pumpkin stew for Stew with a sort of half smile because even though she became distracted by the icing windows and the stew burnt just ever so slightly, Lara doesn't become cross. This is an actual fact and potentially one of the only facts about this Lara essay. I guessed it and the photographer confirmed it one day.

“She never got mad, did she?” I asked during one of my regular Lara obsessional moments.

“Well, one day when she thought I was trying to get a rise out of her, she said, I don't fight. It's not something I do,” said the photographer.

What woman doesn't ever fight or become upset? A Greek chorus taunts me by answering, “The superhuman cosmetologist almost blond but really sort of red headed kind.”

Lara is a cosmetologist, which really gets me going. This means she knows exactly how to put makeup on someone's face and make it look good. Making makeup make your day. At a time when he used to answer my probing Lara questions, the photographer relayed some significant information about her career.

"I used to judge it. I thought it was superficial," he said.

"Oh, it's not. Makeup is like super hard to do well," I said, always standing up for my sisters.

"Yeah, anyway, then she explained it's about self-esteem."

Oy. But I realize there's more to this profession; perhaps it is even an art, and I'm likely to believe it based on how difficult makeup is to do right. I've tried for years and it always soaks straight into my face; my pores guzzle it down like a college student downs a 312, never to be seen again. I've purchased expensive undercoating, special moisturizers, even stains, but the stuff doesn't stick on. I have a non-stick face. Lara could make me pretty and make the makeup stay and not slip and slide or soak in. That's why I need her help. I need her to help maintain a finished look, but I don't think we'll meet unless it's an accident and oh, what a terrible day that would be. Her perfectness would quickly confirm that he either should never have dated her or he needs to dump me immediately. (he has done this five times and threatened to dump a sixth time five more times).¹⁵⁵

"Does she wear a lot of makeup?" I asked the boyfriend recently.

He gave me a look like why do you keep asking questions about my ex but answered, "No, not really."

¹⁵⁵ Officially dumped. Does it really matter when? Refer to the boyfriend timeline.

That really gets me going. Of course she doesn't wear visible makeup. No *need*. And she probably was wearing it when they were together, but in a perfectly natural way that appeared like no makeup at all. Because she knows how to wear it. Women who know how to wear it and keep it on. How? From whence did they come?

Lara and the photographer's mother were besties. I believe this pleased him and he felt pleased with himself in a very 1970's way telling me. This closeness was due to Lara's soft willed, slightly passive nature, and his mother's more assertive one. The mother knit, baked cookies and made brisket, all things I have never done, and I'm guessing that although the rumor is Lara isn't a cook, she could knit a nice pair of cookies. Both possessed fairly normal interests in regular things. I'm sure they shared basic similar values in taste, movies, cooking, television shows. I'm certain Lara and the mother laughed at things they both found amusing when they took turns cooking for one another. (I realize that this is the second factoid I'm screwing up. I've been told that Lara doesn't cook well, but that totally does not work here. And it's fair to guess that she made attempts and the mother tried to help her, so dammit, they cooked together). Sometimes the photographer joined them in their cooking soirees, but it wasn't necessary.

Once upon a time, in the midst of summer on a Sunday afternoon after Lara may have gone to church, she arrived unexpectedly at the mother's condo with a white-laced picnic basket, a bottle of chilled white wine, and a slightly low cut sleeveless flower patterned dress. Breathless and feeling lovely by the mere force of seventy-two degree weather and a light wind, the blondish reddish haired (but much more blond) (she had tied her wavy-straight-I'm not sure if it's truly curly but probably not curly and slightly

wavy but not messy) hair into a ponytail with a purple ribbon and smiled with all her body. The mother's doorman embraced Lara's feminine announcement.

"A picnic present for Mrs. X?"

"Yes, it is, Alfred."

"Is that a daisy I see?" he asked, chucking a little.

"Why yes, it is, Alfred. I did not think it was truly noticeable."

"Course it is, doll. Nice touch."

Wait, wait, wait. Lara is not at all affected or period in her speech, but perhaps on this day, instead of her usual, "Uh huh, sure, yeah, it is," her diction elevated a little.

She called Alfred Alfred because she knew the doorman's name. She had visited enough times to know his name and sound out the two lovely syllables, Al-fred in a perfect Midwestern diction, wide "a" and all.

I have been to the mother's house twice. Once I ate her pasta and brought a salad. My mother taught me that you bring something. I think I put a lot of stuff in that salad, and it was in a large bowl. But I still don't recognize the doorman.¹⁵⁶

Lara took the elevator to the top floor to meet Mrs. X. Upon arriving, they kissed one another's cheeks furiously until both were reddened and supple, held hands, and began baking chocolate chip cookies. The basket waited until the wind slowed and the sun cooled. As they licked the bowl and gorged their tongues with cookie dough, they walked over to the couch for a snuggle, arm in arm. Lara delicately rested her head onto Mrs. X's bosom until the two dozed into an afternoon slumber with the anticipatory picnic basket patiently erect at the exact center of the white living room floor rug.

¹⁵⁶ This chapter has been interrupted by an animal hospital ER and vet visit because Shmick ate another foreign object.

Getting Shit Done

My plan was to work on my dissertation while the photographer responded to emails at a local café with good ambiance and terrible service meaning lots of empty tables, no draft, enigmatic music and unobtrusive art. The senior storeowner hobbled to the back, returned, and slowly filled the cup of the bedraggled hipster in front of us. This action ate up fifteen minutes, but I forgave it all because this was the kind of place I could stay for a while and be productive.

“Good find,” I told the boyfriend and put my hand out to slap him five. He had mentioned not feeling so appreciated as of late, so I was filling in the gaps with authentic praise.

I had *Too Good to Be True* on the square table in front of me, a failure memoir that I was hoping to incorporate into a paper about failure without failing at the paper as I had previously leading to feelings of marginalization pouring into every crevice of my porous pores. Poor me.

Scene break: more post-prelim obsessing

I had recently coerced a professor to help me rethink my prospectus into a failure manifesto, a theoretical paper describing this book. Inconclusive findings regarding his feelings about the wide-eyed crazed sweating-through-her-pits student in his office.

“It’s not necessary. You passed your exams,” he said, staring at me with perfectly symmetrical, sharp brown eyes.

“Why are you writing another paper? To prove you can write a paper?” he continued.

That was exactly what I was doing, astute devil. I explained the exam experience for the thousandth time.

“Let me see the paper,” he said.

I handed him the thousand pound weight on my psyche, “Treading Water in a Sea of Middle Class Despair,” which now, as I ponder the title, should more realistically be called, “Drowning in a sea of student loan disrepair.”

~~So sick of writing and thinking about this. Writing leads to thinking and thinking leads to writing.~~

~~I’m still troubled by my work being so quickly rejected after months and months of preparation, and looking it over—even now—it doesn’t read *that badly*.~~

~~“As today’s middle class vanishes, the memoir peaks in popularity with literary critics disregarding the genre as low brow dirty laundry. The disenfranchisement of the average citizen opens a literary space for women, minorities, and the generally downwardly mobile to shine in the authorial spotlight.”~~

~~Maybe a little cliché, but not terrible, right? I mean, not offensive or dumb...? Later on, I attempt to compare an erratic market with the failure to produce believable therapeutic trajectories in the memoir...~~

~~“An explosion of non-redemptive memoirs or what I call the anti-therapeutic memoir began attracting wider audiences during a moment of economic volatility”~~

~~I will never fully comprehend why this paper failed. I¹⁵⁷~~

In lieu of my befuddlement post-exams, a boyfriend at the time (Gene) lent me *The Craft of Research*, which “really helped” during his Masters at U of C. (It seems it

¹⁵⁷ Get over it already. Sigh, I can’t.

helped him so much, however, that he did not get into a PhD program). I've read the introduction of *The Craft of Research* and used some of it to teach a comp class, but it's really a bunch of questions that I'm not interested in answering...My students found it helpful, but it was very dense and a bit dull.

~~I don't know where I meant wrong with my papers, and especially the main memoir paper, but at this point, my guess is that my committee's eyes soured when having to go through plotlines of *The Kiss*, *The Surrender*, and *Prozac Nation*, because they're not literary enough, and no one enjoyed reading about low-brow incest, anal sex, and Prozac. Who doesn't like all that? Maybe their feathers ruffled because some of the paper was written in a stream of consciousness style. I don't know if they didn't welcome my innovative, genius approach or if I'm a total idiot, but most of the time, the latter feeling gunks my porous body like molasses, a slow, sugary, oozing, murky substance. (Jena?)~~

I wrote three stupid papers.

I wasted two years of my life writing three stupid papers.

(I am insane for doing that).

I wrote lowbrow schlock for academia.

I am offensive and marginal.

I enjoy bad art.(true)

My papers were so horrific that they didn't deserve comments.

No one read my papers beyond page three because they were so terrible.

There is something wrong with my brain.

I am not a hipster. (random).

If I was a hipster, I could write better papers.

This prof, who agreed to help with my second prospectus, is a laser moving in a lovely linear line towards something. He's lanky-fit and his exacting, direct style is a great comfort to me. A few years ago, I had produced a paper for him about Freud's Dora and finagled a comparison to Franz Fanon's case studies. He commented that my approach was too presentist and critical of Freud, but overall, I had been engaged in the subject matter.¹⁵⁸ Regardless of the moderately irritating name dropper, the course allowed the exploration of a psychological lens into literature and left a trace of the professor's marked alertness, almost convincing me that academics indeed do not have to be dead, removed, or socially inept. This mark was so instilled that even years after receiving little to no feedback about my academic work¹⁵⁹, I convinced myself that this man was my last hope in making sense of this beast. Freud and let's just call him Professor X became my imagined key for finding a theoretical apparatus, regardless if the little analyst from Vienna is frowned upon in my department, which is not fair because he was around before neoliberalism existed.

"I can't leave here without being able to talk about my work intelligently or put it in any tradition," I pleaded, leaning in as the asexual, neutral, non-gendered human I had learned to be inside university walls.

~~For the past seven years, as I attempted to remain standing despite the wind tunnel surrounding the English building, upon entering the stone phallic structure, I was stripped of my personality, any traces of sexuality or femininity, and passively accepted my~~

¹⁵⁸ Great class despite one ass kissing colleague working in "Foucault" and "Hegel" every other word taking up half of class time when there were only three other grad students. I recall suppressing a sigh and enraged look around the room every time that little scholar dropped another name. The worst part of all of this is that it seems that little guy knows how to party. And he knows Foucault and Hegel like besties.

¹⁵⁹ Comments pertaining to my creative writing were plentiful from both students and writing professors.

~~negligent status as another vague candidate who barely glimpsed a memory of a former life.¹⁶⁰ I compensated for my lowly status by wearing a smile coated with lipstick and to cushion the insistent jagged edged rejection, padded my ass with comfortable clothing, extra socks, thick boots. Still, I felt the sharp pains of disappointment jab into my ribs, upper back, and shoulder blades. (whining/boring)~~

“Nothing is wrong with the paper except it’s too broad,” said my newfound Newfoundland, my flashlight in a blackout, my ever-burning Hanukah oil, my professorial Messianic prayer, and handed it back to me.

“Who wrote those notes?” he asked, pointing to a few marks I had scribbled in the margins before the meeting.

“I did, I said in as monotone of a voice as I could muster – being my neutral non-feminine, plain self.

Were my notes smarter than the paper? Were they at all smart? I can’t ask him now. I want to ask him. Do you admire my notes? Are my notes *good* notes? (He will read this: triple humiliation)

“You need to finish, right?” he asked.

I leveled with him.

“They passed me **marginally**, (zzzz) but I was told I’d never receive a recommendation from anyone in the room,” (double zzzz) I said brushing my non-descript long wavy hair away from my plain, neutral, non-gendered, non-ethnic (that’s a lie) face.

His bright eyes sharpened into mini-daggers, and his chess puffed out rooster-like.

“Who said that?” he asked, leaning forward.

¹⁶⁰ Why did I give my power away? Who really wanted it anyway?

“I can’t say.”

“Tell me who said that.”

“It wouldn’t do any good.”

“Give me a hint.”

“No.”

“Okay.”

“One hint.”

“Can’t do that.”

“Okay.”¹⁶¹

After some cajoling, he agreed to help with the failure paper, and as I left the office, he placed his hand on my right shoulder, a healing technique performed by biblical sages and prophets. I’d take it.

General progress has been slow lately. I have been avoiding writing because I’ve been busy reading failure memoirs and planning a nonfiction syllabus around failure themes while trusting that all this attention to failure won’t distract me from finishing. I will acknowledge that failure research is generally slowing me down. The content can be a bit depressing, and now I’m not completely prepared for the failure independent study. The good news is the topic of failure created so much anxiety for students who signed up for my course, that several dropped, so I have fewer papers to grade. But in terms of getting more done, overall, the topic may not lead to optimal success.

¹⁶¹ I have reason to believe a happy committee has been created to address PhD students and the dean could be involved. But one student’s nightmare could be another one’s bliss. Who am I to blabber?

“I’m afraid I’m a failure reading about failure,” I had once suggested to the photographer.

“Really?” he had asked.

“I don’t know, maybe,” I said. “Maybe not. Never mind.”

End of digressional obsessing. For now.

Shabbas For Mortals

My mother planned a Shabbat dinner for the photographer and me, and it was just a skip, hop, and jump away to North Evanston, an hour or so from his place depending on traffic and how much fighting time detracted from actually stepping into the car. I had been on my mother’s shit list for several weeks for failing to remove and organize numerous boxes in the attic, now her office. Apparently, my old pack rat need to cling to memories problem was clogging the attic’s Feng Shui arteries.

“Since I’m the only one who lives here, now they’re after me,” I told my boyfriend. My theory is, the daughter who remains in town is the one who gets shit. (I am almost certain my sister would have a very different take on this one).

I have approximately twenty large boxes of books and papers smattered throughout my parent’s attic and basement, a garbage bag of old cassette tapes, including Rick Astley on the top of the heap, (Never gonna give, never gonna give, never gonna throw you out) another two garbage bags of summer clothes and shoes, multiple journals,¹⁶² old French books, Russian history papers, report cards, a crumpled pink and

¹⁶² After perusing several diaries from kindergarten to sixth grade, it is clear that my idea of a confession was listing a bunch of boring plans and so-called observations such as: Today I played with Susie. Later I will return phone calls to six people including Jessica, Rachael, Sarah, Angela, and Nabeela. I’m a girl in

purple tutu from age three with sequins for arm straps, postcards from old boyfriends and relatives, heaps of letters from girlfriends advertising their love of my unique “spaziness,” a term mentioned several times, a love letter from a guy named Gage who I probably met on vacation and didn’t like romantically but my sister somehow coerced him into buying me a plastic diamond ring to my chagrin, yes, I think that’s him, a letter from Nabwany Nabwany, **Begin flashback** the Druze from Israel who didn’t speak English and wrote an adorable letter on yellow paper with red lines: “I love motorcycles, I love Lyndee.” (most likely translated by his Druze friend near Haifa) I believe I found a picture of Nabwany’s wife on the internet, but I’m still working on formalizing a letter:

Dear Nabwany Nabwany’s wife,

I met your husband in Israel when I was sixteen, which was like, let’s just say for all intents and purposes, in the 90’s, and he was really hot with sea blue eyes and tan skin. We don’t have that in Chicago. I know he doesn’t speak English, and I don’t remember how we met because he was definitely not on the “Roots” trip where young Jews are indoctrinated into Pro-Israel army doctrinations, etc, etc. and my Hebrew wasn’t great then and still isn’t. I probably met him on the street. Can you ask him if he remembers me? If not, sorry, it’s the wrong Nabwany Nabwany, but I can only find your picture, not Mr. Nabwany. Oh, and thanks for supporting the Israeli army because I know that’s what Druze do, even though I don’t want to get into a political discussion about it because I really, really hate war. (When I had to do the Gadnah, they tortured the Americans and I had like ten extra bullets in my M16 and it was too loud even with those earmuffs and the shells burned my right arm. And we had to do a beauty of the gun

fourth grade writing this in my diary and one day I will read it and say that I was a girl writing in my diary in fourth grade and so on...

ceremony, and that did it for me. Since then, I really, really don't do war. Won't even touch a gun) But so cool about your secret religion. I won't tell anyone ☺. Haha.

Seriously though, very cool.

Cheers,

Little American Ding-dong

(and if you guys are getting a divorce, I have a fantasy of having a Druze kid and it's getting on the late side for me to have children, not that it's your problem. No disrespect but give him my number if it's appropriate. We had a spiritual connection I think. I'm guessing you two don't have that. You probably had to marry because you're from the same village or something. We met like kismet)

I also found an NYU research paper, a review of "Dah-dah-ska-dah-dah," a performance art piece, inscribed with the following comments:

*This is one half of a good paper. Did you run out of time? Or What?
You use specifics well but don't bring them to any particular resolution.
You can do better than this –*

These comments surprise me since I've always thought of myself as an overachiever. I also found grades from my first semester at Playwright's Horizons at Tisch School of the Arts; apparently, I wasn't adjusting too well to the rotten apple. During my first year at Playwright's, the department head caught wind that I pushed my way into a musical theatre course for seniors and by the time she found out, it was too late to kick me out of the class, but the department was furious that I disrupted their rigorous structure, which was already an overwhelming schedule of ten classes three days per week. Age eighteen, adjusting to New York City, and a heavy studio schedule with academics the other two days. I remember convincing myself I was anorexic because I didn't have time to eat plus it was in vogue with the other actresses. I went to the nurse,

and got a pregnancy test because that's what doctors order for college women (I was a virgin) and it turned out, I was dehydrated. I didn't have time to drink water.

Helen Cook, the studio head, was just plain mad at me, and I didn't care for her or her class. She taught a generic course called "Introduction to Playwrights." She was less respected for teaching a core history course without a particular specialty while other teachers at playwrights were known in the theatre world. Her comments:

Lyndee is a young woman in a hurry- I sometimes worry she is getting ahead of herself. Is she really able to absorb everything that she should be learning? Her exam showed that she had gleaned a good deal of information from the class, but she missed the point of one of the questions completely. Lyndee did contribute a fair amount in class. Perhaps she should slow down a bit and go more deeply into the things that she is working on.

Someone named Royston Coppenger (who apparently is a known playwright) taught some sort of seminar, and I have no memory of him. His comments are also atrocious:

Lyndee did not do work this term that was sufficient to the requirements of the class. This is unfortunate, because she obviously has more on the ball than she exhibited to me. Lyndee's written work was thrown together too hastily, and this is a college course, it's time to learn that those things are important. She has to engage with the material consistently and not just when it strikes her fancy. She has an obligation to herself and to the class to enter discussions freely and with an open mind. I expect this student's work will be better next term.

Wow, was I rude in discussion or something? I am always respectful in discussion. Makes no sense. I obviously didn't take his course seriously either, and he must have caught wind from other teachers (who I actually worked for) that I wasn't a ding dong.

Below you will find a voice and speech report from Susan Finch:

Progress: r, “L,” “ju,” genre, would, obey, z, stir. Good focus and clear understanding of I.P.A. Strong, committed class participation. Goals: “s,” “Pat,” R-coloring (esp. schwa endings), prefixes of “will.” Blend “my,” make clear distinction between fair-let, all-fathers.

There are no words.

Musical Theater class is the final report card I will hoist upon you, a course limited for upperclassmen ready to leave conservatory life and make it out in the world. Strangely, this course was my highest studio grade.

Lyndee has been a great asset in class this semester. Her comments and support of her peers is commendable. What she needs to do now is take that support which she so freely gives and apply it to her own work. At times she appears to be apologizing for her talents and judging her work instead of investing totally in herself. Her work is good but she needs to believe that. Her choices are becoming more active and her performances more committed, but she tends to hold back her voice, on herself. Once Lyndee believes she can succeed, she will fly.

When I couldn't hook into the song “With You,” he gave me the moment before it begins, the backstory of the scene, which helped me fill the emotional tenor of the first chord. My teacher, David Bucknum, acting as a stand in for my imagined romantic partner in the song said, “That's it. I'm leaving you.” When I sang, I soared because I was actively doing whatever I could to keep him.

With You

I said I'd fill my life with you
 One look and what else could I do
 That smile that lights your face
 Drew into every empty space
 And made me see a better me inside of me...
 And when a gift like that comes through
 I have to thank my starts forever
 And so I'll stay with you and fill each day with you

And always know that I'm complete in every way
With you¹⁶³

End Flashback

I requested that my boyfriend help carry a few boxes and organize since I had a very knotty upper back brought on by bad posture, mild scoliosis, and stress.

“I have to clean out boxes in the basement that I’ve been putting off. And do laundry. I’ll need some help, so let’s get there early,” I told him.

“Jesus.”

Dating me was sort of a marathon in patience and endurance – at least it seemed that way when I peered at the reflection of his exhausted eyes and empty silences between sighs. Sometimes I felt sorry for him. Other times, I thought he was lucky to have a girl like me to keep him awake.

“We’re so different. It’s exciting,” he’d say. I wondered if he was trying to convince himself of “excitement” via iteration.

After schlepping four large garbage bags of dirty laundry to my parent’s basement, I ripped open a few allergen free samples of detergent onto my clothes, all sticky fingers and panting. I had momentarily left the boyfriend with my father and hoped they were happily grunting about whatever sports event was on television. The garlicky Chicken smell wafting from the white corian kitchen made it seem well worth the drive and several text messages from my mother and sister demanding *where are you*. I had been my usual fifteen minutes late and felt a twinge of self-loathing as my family waited seated in the dining room.

¹⁶³ David Bucknum contracted a rare disease and committed suicide. He was a beloved mentor. I wish I had stayed in contact. Maybe it’s not too late to soar again.

“Sorry,” I said dashing into the dining room and sinking into one of the colorful upholstered chairs around the retro rectangular table. I was late and arrived empty handed, two counts for rudeness.

My almost six-foot blond younger sister squeezed me to her chest and then looked me up and down. She had always claimed I took “fashion risks” and no doubt she was observing one of my dangerous wardrobe malfunctions. Recently she had cut out foods that troubled her stomach, upped her exercise, and by the looks of it, had nearly lost twenty pounds. She was all leg and breasts without the type of curvature that women often lament. I wished I had been working out more regularly. Regardless of easily fitting into a size four, I was not toned like she was. The blond who once wore sweats was prancing about in tight fitted, expensive clothes. Her height drew more attention to her newly toned figure. I slumped into the upholstered chair a little more.

My Aunt reminded me of almost turning a particular certain age with a smile, “Are you really turning what I think you’re turning?” Within hours, I was staring at a reflection of magnified crows feet spidering from my eyeballs like decadent webbing. I wasn’t one to fret about age or having babies or rushing to marry or estrogen thighs or never having a childhood because I ignored my dreams or whatever the heck it is that real adults complain about – never had a 401k or stocks to worry over... But there I was, thinking about my eye corners and wishing for a new body and wondering if my boyfriend really wanted me or if it was just sort of the situation where he was thinking, *She’s the best I can get being several years younger than I am. At least she’s not rotting and her boobs ain’t drooping.* But I know this is absurd, crazy talk and somehow the glossy magazines have penetrated my creative process despite my refusal to open them at

the hairdresser. I mean, I just don't open them at all. Through osmosis, I have been infiltrated by the advertising industry, and now I am advertising insecurity and self-loathing in a memoir. Just great.

My mother had made matzo-ball soup so I knew something *special* was up. The meal began with small talk and a sweet smelling challah. I remember the feeling that the entire dinner was beginning in a surprisingly pleasant way. We were engrossed in light-hearted conversation about nothing particularly memorable for a good twenty minutes, a real feat for the our household. No one had brought up bowel movements or HIV or starvation or China's takeover or the Japanese spill navigating it's way to LA. No orated or performed prior therapy sessions, no burps, belches or farts were iterated, and my parents actually had the heat on over fifty-two degrees. Things were looking up.

"So is there something you'd like to do for your birthday?" my mother asked.

A fair question. A nice question. Even thoughtful. In this case, the question slapped me with a quick, sharp pain.

"Oh please," I said.

"What's wrong?" asked my sister. I think she was grinning. Was she grinning? Being three years younger, she had a bit, just a bit, but a bit is a bit, a bit of youth on me and a keen awareness of the disparity.

I sipped my white wine.

"I don't want to talk about it," I said, probably trying to look cute for the photographer, grinning knowingly without knowing what I was grinning about.

"Why?" asked my dad.

My gaze landed upwards at the silver ufo-looking chandelier that I have never, ever gotten used to, I mean never, hated that monstrosity from age three, and I longed to jump on it and zap myself into space to avoid whatever was coming next.

“Did you like turning seventy?” I asked my dad.

“Not really,” he said.

“What is bothering you exactly?” asked my mom.

This was the moment I could have dropped the subject. I could have said, “It’s no big deal. I just need to finish my book and time is ticking. 2014 is a time to refocus, and I’m looking forward to it.” Or maybe a moment where I could have said, “I’m happy we’re all here together having a nice dinner.” Either of those remarks could have deflected the potentially disastrous transition. A normal family dinner could have hatched under UFO lighting, and tonight there would be no theatre in the round- just regular chicken eating matzo-ball stuffing Jews engaged in fairly polite dinner conversation.

Why couldn’t I do it? Why did I feel the compulsion for constant confession of my inner world? Why, why, why, why, why?

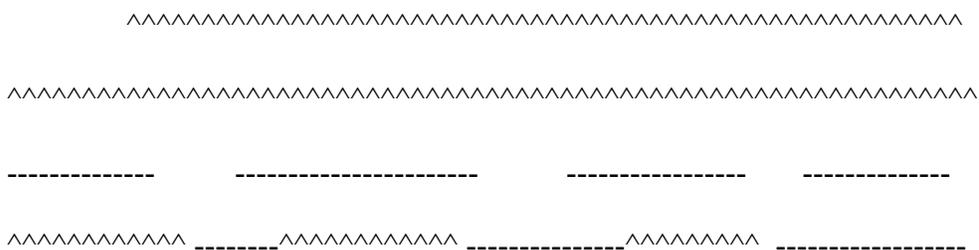
“The other day, I noticed a few wrinkles by my eyes,” I said.

This is the kind of remark that elicits an automatic compliment. Throughout my life, I have been continuously told that I look very young, a good decade younger than I am, so naturally I expected the kind filler response such as:

1. *No one would ever guess*

—or—

2. *You look great, are you kidding? What are you worried about? You look amazing!*



Wrinkled ripples wrinkled ripples sss

What is a butt wrinkle?

“Yeah, I’d have to say it’s purely physical. I don’t want to look old,” I said.

“Well then, I don’t know what to say,” said my mother, not taking the bait, not complimenting me. Not helpful.

“It’s inevitable,” said my dad.

My sister saw what I was up to and wanted to be part of the fun.

“You don’t look a day over thirty-four,” she said.

“What?” I asked, choking on a matzo ball chicken bone.

“That’s really good. You look four or five years younger than your age. I look exactly my age,” she said. “You’re lucky and should appreciate it.”

“That’s not good! That’s hardly anything. People tell me I look much younger.”

“You should be happy,” she said.

“What? I can’t believe you.”

“I don’t know what to tell ya,” she said.

“Yeah, that’s life,” said my dad.

The topic of my wrinkly face rickshayed into a deeper philosophical platform. Somewhere between the soup, sips of white wine but before nibbling on the pasty grocery store carrot cake, possibly the moment before I cleared the dirty napkins, my

eyes settled on my parent's well decorated Southwestern themed home – all in blues and rusts – not quite a suburban masterpiece or mini-mansion, but a comfortable and expansive dwelling situation. My eyes traveled to the outdoor porch, designed by my cousin's sexy ex- who had never quite divorced during their courtship; (she didn't quite find that out until later) it was all crisscrossed and church like, smelling of pine. The fireplace in the main living area, once a natural brick, had been painted white. Above the fireplace hung a portrait of a young tan girl about eight wearing braids, swinging white sandaled feet. A low seated aqua leather couch perched outwards from the living room windows perpendicular to two square rocking chairs (back to the Southwestern theme) that glided easily to and fro. I glanced through the dining room door into the white corian kitchen, at my father's small observant eyes, my sister's angular face, and my mother's intense cat-like stare. I looked at my very still photographer and wondered how it would all work out.

“I don't want a house,” I said.

“What?” asked my dad.

“I don't want a middle class lifestyle.”

I was in my pronouncing, slightly hostile lecture mode saved for special occasions when I get anxious. It was the only way to get my family's attention.

“What do you mean by that?” asked my mother.

“I don't want to be tied to real estate.”

“Real estate is an investment,” said my dad.

“I know, but we’re living in different times. Nothing is guaranteed now. I have friends who got stuck in their homes and couldn’t sell, couldn’t leave,” I said. “I don’t want to be trapped.”

The photographer shifted in his seat. I thought I saw my father nod knowingly. I had heard him complain about taking care of a house for years, as if it was one of his asthmatic patients without cure, just constant maintenance. Instead he responded differently than expected.

“It’s not a trap. It’s stability. You get equity. You can choose where you live,” he said.

“I don’t know where I’ll get a job, so I have to be flexible, I said.

“What’s wrong with a house?” asked the photographer.

“Nothing is wrong per se. I haven’t traveled. I want an alternative lifestyle. If I ever marry.”

Everyone looked at the photographer who remained expressionless.

“Come on, it’s not like I just planned a funeral,” I said.

“That’s not funny,” said my sister and then raised her eyebrows for a second punishment.

“He has a condo, but it’s a one bedroom. We couldn’t fit in the loft with Shmick,” I said and then realized I had not been invited to move in anyway. I was making myself out to be a terrorist to the middle class, to Judaism’s reproductive imperative, a real feminazi, as my sister referred to me.

“You shouldn’t say that kind of thing to your boyfriend. It’s not right,” said my sister. She peered around the table and flexed her tiny, perfect muscular arms.

“You guys know that I’m very traditional,” she added. “Boyfriends pay for me. They pay for meals or help me with purchases. I’ll stay home and take care of the kids. I do the mother role,” she said.

“What role? Is there something I should know? I mean, are you secretly married?” I asked. “And you work. You are building a pretty serious practice.”

My sister attended a prestigious graduate school but still possessed a timeless conventional dating mantra.

I began flashing my teeth in her direction. She responded with unintelligible noises, “ayyyaiyaiiiiayiii.” I shook my jaw and breathed air through it. She picked up her napkin, threatening to throw it in my face.

“I double dog dare ya,” I said.

“You want me to?” she asked.

“Yeah, go ahead. You’ll see what happens,” I said sticking out my tongue.

“Whatever beyatchi,” she said.

“Ok, time to stop,” I said. “It’s annoying.”

“Oh, yeah, who’s annoying?” she said.

“Just observing you two is so interesting,” said my mother, tilting her head and speaking in a soft, authoritative tone. “When you’re around each other, you regress to a younger age. It’s fascinating. It’s kind of competitive.”

“That may be so, but I think they are there for each other when it really matters,” said my father.

My sister, an LCSW added: “Our dynamic purely represents the teachings and nurturing of the primary care giver.”

The room became quiet.

“Dang!” I said. “Busted!”

“Why don’t you want a house?” asked my dad.

“Houses are expensive. I don’t know what kind of money I’m going to make, but I’d rather use the money to travel or to live more freely. Plus I have major loans.”

“You won’t need to worry about money if that’s your concern,” said my dad.

“Aw come on dad, not that kind of talk,” I said.

“It’s true. You won’t have to worry about us when we’re older,” said my mother.

“Jesus, I don’t want to discuss that right now,” I said.

“This is how they talk,” said my sister, explaining to the photographer.

“We have excellent long-term care,” said my mother. She also gestured towards the photographer. “What do your parent’s have?”

“Mom”—I pleaded.

“No, it’s okay,” said the boyfriend.

I had a sneaking suspicion he was enjoying himself.

“My father has a life insurance policy. My brother and I have been contributing to it every month. I’m not sure what my mom has,” he added.

“Please, this is kind of morbid,” I said.

“It’s life,” said my dad.

“With my mother, for example, we didn’t realize that Willie¹⁶⁴ was taking care of her for so long financially. He was keeping her alive,” said my mom.¹⁶⁵

¹⁶⁴ Willie passed away recently. He was my grandmother’s love for the past twenty-five years before she passed, and was like a grandfather to me. He sold hot RCN products on Maxwell Street back in the day. He was also wedding crasher with Nonnie. (grandma)

“I don’t think your mother was ready to go,” said my dad.

“We kept her at home as long as possible with the morphine to keep her comfortable. But that night when she couldn’t breathe and Willie called”—

I’m not writing any more of this scene. It’s not fair to anyone. You get the general idea. I don’t enjoy reliving the natty gritty of my grandmother’s death. Now it’s clear to me why I’ve been putting off writing this chapter. This is all I can do for now on this subject.¹⁶⁶

I don’t have to write ever-y-thing. This is my book. I can stop and start where I want.

Almost Gary Shteyngart

I was teaching a nonfiction course at *Alligator University to juniors and seniors, without a syllabus, but I knew the course would be themed around failure. When I typed in “failure memoirs” on Amazon, my good friend Gary Shteyngart showed. (No, he is not my good friend). The last time I taught Multicultural Literature, I used Gary’s (Do you mind if I call you Gary?) *The Russian Debutante’s Handbook*, but the meat of his Russian bourgeoisie leanings sandwiched with sci-fi episodes was not ideal for an introductory nonfiction writing course. Although my students were of a certain Mexicana, African-Americana, Asianicana, and Indianicana group of mixed nuts, that is, they were ethnic in some way, none were Russian and something was lost in translation

¹⁶⁵ Extra, extra sting. My grandmother left money to my mother and my mother discussed it with her and gave a chunk to me. I spent a lot of it on my cat and things I don’t know what because it’s gone. I didn’t use the money to visit Willy before he passed like I should have because I was too scared to watch him die.

¹⁶⁶ Notes and plans to finish the chapter: Nonnie’s death, Willie’s death, on hospice, ass wiping that I plan to do for my parents one day, sister and I ask who makes the final decision if a parent is hooked up to a machine or dying and they refuse to answer but clearly have made a decision, I go to clean out boxes and we leave. No, I’m not going to write that stuff. It’s offstage.

from the kopek to the ever-waning dollar. The more I attempted to explain the stereotypes, the more I was teaching a course in Russian Jewish stereotypes. One day I asked my students to bring in examples of Jewish-American male personas in the media for starters. Somewhere between Seinfeld, Woody Allen, George Castanza, and Kramer, (I had to explain ad nauseam how Kramer did not fit the mark) it became clear that I wasn't contributing anything healthy to the Jewish-American canon – if there really is such a thing. (I don't think so).

But Shteyngart (if you know the Gary-ster) is zippy and funny and smart, so why not? Maybe he would be done with stereotyping (No, he's not done). Regardless, I certainly couldn't fail at teaching *Little Failure*, could I? One caveat: Shteyngart's memoir didn't come out until *after* my nonfiction course began. I chanced it without imagining how far from failure the guy is, was, and ever will be. By the end of reading *Little Failure*, I was deeply convinced of Shteyngart's overwhelming success and my own idiocy in a way that made me have to, just have to, write this chapter.

*As far as I know, Alligator University doesn't exist.

Subheading:

How I failed at Being a Little Failure

1. Almost Russian

Gary (and I) – (if I may be so bold) have some things in common. We're both of Russian decent and Jewish. But in every way that he is purely Eastern European, I am a mere descendant, a watered down Ruski, which is like great vodka doused with buckets of shitty water. So while his parents are OTB, my father's father was from somewheresville Russia. The only purebred Russian in my family is this grandfather

person, and my single memory registers as months before his death, watching him spill pink liquid medicine on my parent's wood floor living room. This spilling episode is etched into my memory as the Ruski's inability to hold things, and for a little girl scared of adults, this meant he was so old that there was something sad going on. I believe my father was estranged from his pink medicine-spilling father because I have no other great Ruski memories. I've been told that my dad was forced to plan his older teenage brother's funeral when he was still a child, a bad thing. My father was also left out of the great Ruski's will because he could "take care of himself" as a doctor (which he did and still does) while the daughters would potentially flounder in a weak, gendered way. (there are various theories on one of the daughters and her gendered floundering, searching for fish food and the like). I don't think the great Ruski's leaving nothing to my father was out of malice, but I won't ask. I'm not going to ask. Unlike you, Gary, I was not given permission, and I cannot interview my parents because they won't have it. So I'm filling in the blanks the best I can. Is it possible that this great pink leaking Russian sadness makes me Russian in an oozing medicinal way that brings me closer to the Russian soulfulness of all this storytelling? My other grandfather Moe was born in Canada. He had the habit of bringing in communists and other street people while smoking cigars and downing hard alcohol.

2. Breathing problems in early childhood (not your terrible asthma)

Gary's parents are hard on him. I believe I have that one down. (Mom and dad, I know you don't agree. I will admit being both spoiled, loved, and *somewhat* critiqued Is that fair?) Of course, I was never referred to as "failure," or "little snotty" due to asthma, but coincidentally, upon traumatically exiting my mother's warm womb, my schnozzle

(nose) was clogged; I couldn't breathe. I was a pre-me, a tiny five pound dollop with slimy black hair and a face that was mostly nose. (says my mother) Something happened in the hospital and it could not have been good because the story goes that my dad, a fairly newbie doctor wary of giving circumcisions and least of all, a helping hand during pregnancies, had to step in and grab some tubes to help me breathe because the "a" "h's" (as my grandmother would respectfully refer to idiots) didn't know what the bleep they were doing. (idiot jerks). Having my father save me at birth comes with a daddy hero complex that no man can ever live up to. How's that for family drama, Gary?? Got you! (no, I don't). (sigh). It's really not so bad.

So we both have suffered from a breathing problem, the Russianness, critical parents (sorry again Mom and Dad; I think you're critical, but you're very, very cool people. I would be afraid to clean out Katrina mold and climb macho picchu and we're both writers. Dayenuinu!¹⁶⁷ Well, this would have been enough, but there's more.

3. Solomon Schechter Syndrome: I was *almost* exposed to the SS.

Have you ever almost been on the trajectory of a famous, talented person's life but not quite gotten there? (not even close). Well, here's where it gets eerie. Gary, my friend, if I may, may I call you Gary....I understand that you attended Solomon Schechter, the educational institution where my mother recently retired after thirty years of ramming left winged social studies and attitudes into eighth grade impressionable minds to the horror of right winged (somewhat entitled) parents. It was decided (sanely) that I would not attend the SS Jewish Day school where my mother taught. Huge mistake. Gary, you wrote about being traumatized at the SS and struggling with social

¹⁶⁷ A renowned phrase sung on Passover, "Daneynu" meaning, All the wonderful ways G-d has already helped the Jews or "This would have been enough." It's not enough, Gary; it's not enough.

pressure, a new language, and young women with blossoming 80's perms, but you lived through it. You made it! And that school molded you into a thirteen-year-old workhouse, with its double-curriculum and right wing leanings – to many of which you once ascribed because, let's face it, just defending right-wing politics is exhausting. All of this hard work put your boodie in gear. You either come out dead or the president. Gary, you are the president of your own life. (Hell, you are the president of mine) Gary, if you don't mind my calling you Gary, my mother spared me the cut throat junior high experience and as a result, I'm not half the man you are. My friends that came out of SS during that time (mostly from my mother's class) are serious success stories. (Tripe S: Serous Success Stories, Gary) They made it. They have reproduced Jews (there is actually a book polemically titled *Reproducing Jews*) and want to do it and pay their condo assessments or whatever adults do, putting up super happy Facebook pictures and meaning most of it. Maybe all of it. Sparing me this workhorse Jewish trajectory of expectations and piles of relentless homework was a terrible, terrible mistake. Instead, my left leaning parents do me a tragic disservice by enrolling me in Martin Luther King Junior Laboratory School where regular junior high students fully immersed in competitive pre-teen mantras referred to us as lab rats (they were so right). MLKJL School was the kind of institution that allowed me to transform an oversized closet into a small version of Africa for FIVE MONTHS. I repainted the entire room with black walls and large trees, a permissible jungle with my dear friend Esther (a very good Jewess with children living in Skokie) while greeting parents and teachers with "Jambo Rafiki and welcome to our Maasai home," a Kenyan tribal hello. I could have been struggling with a new language at the SS, (Hebrew) but I was busy painting and saying hi like the Maasai,

sharing my feelings – all the time. All this kumbaya crapola does not prepare a child for life and especially not the impending high school experience. Please.

4. Shrinks and mentors: yours were better and helped you more

The Etchings that Never Etched

You elegantly mention your “benefactor” in chapter twenty-two. He loved you so much that he “deposited you in front of the New York Psychoanalytic Institute” and paid for it (included with a promissory note that you pay him back monthly) to give you a dose of reality that you were being a total dickhead, living off his money and faith in you, running around on mushrooms and bad hair post Oberlin.¹⁶⁸ I had a mentor named John too. I wanted him to be my bestiest adviser, but when I was sixteen and he was sixty-something, this high school college counselor asked me to come upstairs and “see his etchings” after giving me a ride home on a rainy afternoon. I remembered hearing that line in a movie and asked John, who was a bit too old to be a father figure, “Isn’t that a line from a movie?” I never went up there to learn the meaning of this sexy artwork I had experienced only cinematically. Instead, we wrote letters for ten years until one meeting in New York when he showed up with a cane and a story about a new wife.¹⁶⁹ I decided to reveal my feminine strength that day in Central Park by refusing to allow him to buy me lunch and with a flame lighting my face, I scolded him for inappropriate behavior because that’s what I thought I should do. What did I get from this lecture? Neither sexual experience nor a feeling of mentorly fulfillment. He seemed to shrink and age with

¹⁶⁸ Idiot jerks rejected me from Oberlin when I wrote my personal statement directly onto the application in print. My essay pertained to feeling like a "caged rat" in high school- a dramatic rant. In your memoir, you rail against the easy admissions process. Thanks a lot, Gary. Just thanks.

¹⁶⁹ I can no longer find his recent whereabouts on the internet.

each bullet that flew off my tongue. I had grown to love him after multiple talks about Russian literature, sharing respective family troubles and dreams. Ten years later and after a few treasured water-colored love letters, I offered a pointed moral lecture. Then he was gone. I wanted a mentor, Gary. I didn't get one. Is it too late? Is there an age when finding your one true mentor is no longer apropos? I'm going to go on.

Therapeutic Discourse

I go through therapists like toilet paper. It's a long wipe, but eventually they get discarded. Now Gary, if I may be so bold as to refer to you by your first name, you said therapy saved your life. Those ten plus epic years of being on the couch equate with your successful memoir and references to a happy marriage.¹⁷⁰ Okay, you're a little anxious, but you've got grounding, Gary. That psychotherapist changed your life in tangible ways. While I'm dreaming up lists of how I was almost you, you are producing another book and making passionate love to your wife. I am worrying about my cat that lives in a dog cage when I'm not home so she won't kill herself by eating inedible objects. I'm on suicide watch for Shmicky and this dissertation and you are, well, a huge success.

¹⁷⁰ You suggested therapy as a *savoir* when I saw you read from *Little Failure* in Chicago in 2014...I sincerely hope one day, Gary, my dear friend, (no, not really) that you will hear me read from this book.



Meeting Gary Shteyngart at Chicago Humanities Festival
(earmuffs are an unfortunate detail but it was a miserable Chicago winter)

I firmly believe my failure to be you is deeply connected to your therapeutic success and my, let us say, interminable relationship with it.¹⁷¹ I remain in therapy because I'm not a Jewess who throws her hands in the air and gives up to live in the gutter but still, Gary, still. You were relaxed when I saw you read, and I don't know what shit you're on (please, oh please let me know so that I may try it) but clearly it's working. I have tried a few psychotropic (no, not the psychedelics you were on and probably another reason I'm failing because my mind needs altering) drugs to no avail:

¹⁷¹ See Freud's *Terminable and Interminable*. As always, Freud is skeptical of drinking his own Kool-Aid.

Prozac: SSRI: too activating	<i>cut off feeling from the waist down</i>
Lexapro: SSRI: sleepiness	<i>cut off feeling from the waste down</i>
Celexa: SSRI (Lexi's cousin. Heyy Lex!)/nothing	<i>cut off any feeling from the waste down</i>
Zoloft: SSRI: too spacey to remember	<i>cut off any feeling from the waste down</i>
Effexor: SNRI: nails driving into temples	<i>cut off any feeling from the waste down</i>
Prestiq: SNRI: too happy to do any work and had to wear rubber bands on my feet for circulation	<i>cut off any feeling from the waste down</i>
Xanax: benzoic Terrible shit-no thank you	<i>feel like such crap that sex is not an option</i>
Clonazepam: benzo/sleepy but doesn't help nervousness on flights until flight ends	<i>feel like such crap that sex is not an option</i>
Adderall: Amphetamine: edgy, hot flashes	<i>sex is possible but so edgy I'd likely pick a fight</i>
Hydroxyzine: antihistamine: sleepiness (good for sleep and allergies at a low dose)	<i>NA, too sleepy for sex</i>
Lamictal (LamickyShmicky): mood stabilizer (neurotic much?)...no boyfriend/sex not an option neck pain, dizziness, and my first case of vertigo!	

Why am I revealing the attempted drugs? More importantly, who would care about how many psychotropic drugs a Jewish girl from Evanston has tried? It's just too stupid for me to be a little, insey, weensey, baby little failure, which is **Why I'm a Super-Duper Big Idiot**. I cannot make a structural change in the capitalist system¹⁷² while being a super duper big idiot. But queer theory says I can! Have I tied the critic's hands sufficiently, S&M style? I fit the bill for your structural critique of my failure to address structures, and I welcome all of you with open arms. (but I have the cuffs, hehe) You are invited, and that is my contact for you!¹⁷³

Now for a case study, Franz Fanon style minus revolutionary experience. Gary, you have succeeded in being a little failure; you were small and you felt small. But you did pretty darned well as an adult. Here is a small sampling of my hugely messed-up

¹⁷² Still suffering from PhD PTSD. I'm at a university where you must attack "structures" like capitalism or anything terrible and prison-like that Foucault says you can't get out of- to be considered a top scholar. I am extremely insecure about words like neoliberal and post-capital and anything having to do with money - probably because I'm a super duper big idiot who CHOSE not to have any. This is not a privilege; this is huge mistakee. (Hold on, going off Lamicky and suffering from a bout of TMJ vertigo, which includes suffering from "too many jerks." (Steve Stillman asked to receive credit for this; I'm not sure why)

¹⁷³ I will uncuff you when I'm good and ready.

therapeutic relationships, unlike your experience at the Psychoanalytic Institute near my old stomping grounds by NYU.

Franica (no, she's not)

My NYU therapist in training “totally” enjoyed chatting with me. Not more than five or six years older than I was, we had a friendly thing going and she kept the sessions young and hip save for me not finding her cool. She was so nice that I never felt pressure to say anything too stirring. She would begin each session with a slight smile, giggle and say, “So, what’s goin on?” And then I would tell her about who I was currently dating and mention a make-out session or a bit of groping. (I didn’t go too far) At one point she suggested that I should choose men more wisely or I might “get hurt.” I had no idea what she meant.

Dr. Irving Something or Maybe His First Name Was Irving

I don’t recall how we met, but Irving/Dr. Irving/Washington Irving worked out of his home in some fancy pants digs in the West Village that was all textured with ornate wood, books, and Eastern art. I was twenty-four sensing my money was running out and thought it was a bargain to complain for over an hour at the grand rate of ten dollars per session. Irving man was in his prime, he told me, retired, divorced, seventy, and living an invigorating bachelor’s life. He used the word invigorating. This idea seemed a bit grotesque, but he had a good Beatle’s haircut. I never saw the LCSW certificate or any certificate per se, but for ten bucks, I couldn’t make demands.

With the progression of each session, I became more agitated – to the point where I was sleeping less and less. I began observing the sessions with a closer eye and realized they were being structured like soap operas, leaving the patient, in this case, me, with a cliff hanger at the end of each session. So the meshugas I walked in with was amped up 180% by the provocateur throwing out a whopper as I walked out the door. After a session discussing a boyfriend, I opened the door to leave and he said, “Just remember, 50% of marriages end in divorce. Think about it.” Another time, when I was struggling with my publisher at the newspaper, he said, “I just hate to see you struggle like this. The world is unkind to you.”

One twilight evening walking to Irv’s/Irving/Washington/Dr. Irving/whatever who cares/ a dark car came very close to running into me and fortunately only tapped my knee. Naturally, I was upset, and growled at the young man in the driver’s seat. He unexpectedly proceeded to accelerate into me, almost running me over to which I responded, “You almost killed me! Are you crazy?” to which he responded, “Get out of my way, bitch!” I snatched a nearby policeman and told him the story. (Lots of po-po running around in the wild of the West Village in the 90’s) While the policeman was surmising the situation, I called Irv to tell him what had occurred around the corner from his downtown office.¹⁷⁴ A few minutes later, Doc Irving arrived on the scene and crossed to the officer, down stage left.

“Officer, I’m Dr. Irv (ing), this young lady’s therapist. How can I help?”

What the hell was that, Irv? I mean, what were you doing, Washington? What is up with you, Irvy? Irv/ing slapped his card into the cop’s hand as the law enforcer gave me a look that read you’re a real weirdo girl with a weirdo quack.

¹⁷⁴ His house really.

So much for confidentiality.

Isabella (no, she's not)

A real therapist with a real degree and a Fifth Avenue office. No more ten dollar days. An asexual creature and purely clinical, I was mesmerized by the fact that her feet didn't touch the floor when she spoke and she would swing, swing, swing her legs like Gilda Radner. I wondered, Why is she swinging her legs? Is she bored? Is she having fun? Is this some manifestation of girliness or repressed womanhood? When did she start swinging her legs? When did I first notice the swinging and why? Is it asexual to swing your legs for forty-five minutes? Are those nurse shoes she's wearing?

Before terminating, Isabella suggested that one day I would need deeper analysis, (could she tell I was focusing on her swinging?) three to four times a week. So Gary, I should have had that kind of analysis, the kind you had, but I just never did. I think I still owe her a few hundred dollars, but I'm not entirely certain. About eight or nine years ago, I believe I paid her the remainder of what I owed, but I can't be sure.

Arsynthia (nope)

Recommended by my mother to be a woman who "deals with older female issues but a good all around therapist, Arsy focuses on breath and energy work and runs Kundalini yoga workshops. A directive, smart lady, I didn't always like what she told me. Things like *why would you want to be with a man who treats you that way?* –or – *How old do you feel when you have that thought?* The problem for me was not so much her

confrontational approach, but the main tool she pulled out of her toolbox—the dreaded breathing exercise.

Mindful breathing involves counting on the inhale and exhale (focusing on longer exhales to relieve stress) and giving a feeling a shape and color and rating its intensity from one to ten. The number is supposed to go down, so it's easy to win the game. You just make it go down.¹⁷⁵

I tried to make the little pink swirls or knives or curly cues (depending on their mood, those little fuckers change shape) smaller each time, but the darn things would either stay at the same number – at least a five or six – or grow larger and more unwieldy – to a seven or eight. Sometimes they would turn into small cutlery and start chasing me into an all out massacre. I started to get the feeling I wasn't playing right, so it was either lie and admit my interminable fatal flaw or worse, my inability to heal or just calm the heck down and make those little foofers run the other way.

“What number is it now?” Arsynthia would ask earnestly and hopefully, her lovely sixty-something-year-old smile lines expectantly dancing into the air, her short blondish bob bobbing along in anticipation.

How could I let her down?

“Um, lemme see, well, you know, those swirly little guys are stubborn. A five? Six?”

“Interesting. Still a five or six...”

¹⁷⁵ The feeling you give a color and shape is supposed to get smaller because it's just energy and you observe it and breathe into it and then it goes away.....

The terrible sensation of her smile lines moving downwards. I opted to not exactly lie but to convince myself that those little swirly jerk-offs were getting smaller.

Sometimes I would beg my imagination to follow the rules.

“Please, swirly evil doers, get out of here. I’ll make you a deal. If you leave now, you can come back later, even bigger than before. I have to pay this woman \$90 at the end of this session, and I need to convince both of us that something is happening here.”

But the incessant jerks wouldn’t leave. (I believe they are marching around this computer now) Focusing on them and my breath made them gremlin into zillions.

Round Head (not a name)

I tried Cognitive Behavioral Therapy with an Eastern European nihilist lacking empathy for American bourgeoisie females. As he plastered a shit eating grin on for about an hour, Round Head would explain that I was “high functioning,” a relative term compared to his schizophrenic clients involved in “hearing voices” workshops. Although I could not measure in craziness, (yes, this is offensive- I do feel guilty being rude about snubbing my nose at mental problems considering I have plenty of my own issues, but not guilty enough apparently) I would override his exhaustion for the “crazy” population he was accustomed by irritation alone. The more he smiled, the more I complained, the more I complained, the more he would try provoking inane reactions:

Round Head gave me homework: one column for emotionally charged thoughts and another to narrate if the emotion was realistic. I took things too far – as I often do – and I made the homework into another frickin dissertation. I created a piece of paper that had so many columns that I couldn’t complete the weekly assignment. Then I wanted to

make the process “easier,” so I decided to color coat it. And then I added a reward system with stickers. Then there was a half a sticker reward, (to be exacting and methodical) and that’s when things got tricky; they were hard to rip, especially the little stars. I proudly displayed a beautifully designed second grade art with a plethora of columns to Round Head, who applauded wildly. (possible maniacally?) As anyone would, I burnt out on the colorful Jackson Pollack therapeutic device. Round Head and I never officially broke up. We just stopped communicating. I owe a bit of money, and Roundy turned me over, but I paid. I think it’s too late for the conversation.

Add charts here

Alyssa (not really)

At Alligator University (no it’s not) where I’m *finishing* this dissertation, grad students see shrinks for free. Alyssa, the psychiatrist, knowing my history of failed attempts at SSRI’s, put me on Inositol, a supplement found in breast milk. It’s like – a vitamin. But not. I am swallowing an ingredient found in breast milk probably since my mother, similarly failing to inhale marijuana like Bill Clinton, claims she didn’t breast feed me because it “didn’t work.” Did I fail to bite properly? Did she have enough milk? Did I dislike the look and feel of a nipple or was there a nipple malfunction? These questions remain unanswered, but I’m fairly certain my cheeks have remained hollow for lack of internalizing a sucking motion. I kind of have dimples, but I have to work pretty hard to show them, and by that point, I’m biting my cheek.

About four months into working with the university psychiatrist, I had forgotten about an appointment I had made with Conner Goldsmith (no he’s not) moons ago, the

family psychiatrist, legended to be some sort miracle cure all for neurotics. The appointment came up, and I proceeded with a bit of trepidation. Did I really need to see an additional quack? Truth be told, I was only taking vitamins and still feeling, well, by now you have a sense of it, feeling kind of like that or this, Gary, if you don't mind my saying, so I reasoned this guy must have had a new bag of tricks for my family to be so "ooh" and "ahhh" about the young-ish genius.

I'm not going to go into the details (no, it's not bipolar: I never get *that* happy), but Conner gave me a diagnosis that Alyssa, my university shrink disagreed with, so Alyssa dumped me over email. Whatever the hell I was diagnosed with, it sounded difficult to treat being all this but not quite that and stuff and according to my school shrink, who said, shaking her head, "That's not in the DSM at all. It doesn't exist."

During the time of my confusing diagnosis, I lamented to the photographer. He told me that if I expressed my issues or concerns, he internalized them. I tried to keep my mouth shut as best I could, which probably wasn't ever. Here is part of psychiatrist number one's dump letter. I have created some footnote meta-commentary.

Psychiatric Dump #1

Hi Lyndee,

I hope you are well.¹⁷⁶

As you know, I prefer not to discuss clinical issues by email.¹⁷⁷ However, I did want to let you know that I received your messages. I understand that the front desk staff has contacted you at my request to schedule an appointment, but that you are not able to meet with me this

¹⁷⁶ You couldn't have thought I was "well" being a client writing a clinician expressing she's been diagnosed with something and not responding "well" to the medicine.

¹⁷⁷ No, I didn't know this. And if you *prefer not to* like my good friend Bartleby, why are you discussing clinical issues OVER FUCKING EMAIL!

week.¹⁷⁸ Therefore, I wanted to convey my understanding that you have initiated psychiatric treatment with a new provider.¹⁷⁹

From what you have shared with me, it seems that your new psychiatrist and I may have different assessments and approaches to treatment of your symptoms.¹⁸⁰ It would likely be confusing, and potentially dangerous, for you to receive treatment from two psychiatrists at the same time.¹⁸¹ For this reason, I am no longer able to provide you with psychiatric services in a safe and effective manner.¹⁸² Your psychiatric care with me has been terminated since you have transferred your care.¹⁸³ However, I understand and think it would be a very good idea for your new psychiatrist to have access to your previous treatment history at the counseling center¹⁸⁴

Take care,
XXXXX (Alyssa)

My response:

Hi Doctor XXXX,

I did not mean to "switch" doctors, but was trying to incorporate someone who had helped my family - which was decided several months ago before I met with you. I should have discussed it, but I was reminded about the appointment a few days ago and decided to go because it was paid for and not something I could afford when I finish school in May, and I won't have access to your care. It wasn't on my mind when we met, which is why I didn't mention it, and I have found our consultations helpful.

I would prefer not to be cut off by email and to discuss this in person seeing that we have an appointment scheduled. I strongly believe it would be detrimental to stop treatment over an email.

I'm very upset about your terminating me without an in-person discussion- despite the fact that you disagree with the other doctor. I do believe that at times, doctors are able work together and consult one another and certainly wasn't trying to end our doctor-client relationship so abruptly. Please consider this.

Thanks,
Lyndee

¹⁷⁸ You were out of town most of the week save for one day that I couldn't make the appointment.

¹⁷⁹ I saw the guy once.

¹⁸⁰ According to Conner, you never disagreed with his diagnosis. Wtf lady. Wtf.

¹⁸¹ Hyperbole much?

¹⁸² Dumping over text and email is so seventh grade.

¹⁸³ Now I'm terminated. What about Freud's *Terminable and Interminable*? You were working your way towards the finale- the abrupt cut off but according to Freud, the work is never solely complete.

¹⁸⁴ Sign consent forms, etc. etc.

After sending this email and not hearing back, I called in insisted she do her dirty work face to face, an in-person dump. (People are so blasé about breakups these days). In person, she shook my hand and kicked me out the door, with a half smile and the conclusion that since my funding was almost out (and time to work on this dissertation) it made sense to turn me over to another doctor.

Princess Loulou and the Cottage of Darkness

I should have known something was amiss when I peered on the princess's bookshelf and saw *Madwoman in the Attic*. Why was it there? Was she the madwoman or her patients? Were we all mad? Her address something + ½ could not have been a real place. It's half a place on a street that doesn't really seem like a street because the street is full of half addresses. This little cookie cutter cottage rented by Loulou for the purposes of toasting small children offered a cozy sitting room surrounded in neutral walls attached to a large vestibule – country flavor style – with an array of generic green and black tea, coffee mugs, comfortable chairs, and a white noise machine reminiscent of a primal scream adjacent to her chamber doors. A hint of burnt sage lingered in the air.

Problem one: nowhere to toss the used tea bag. The garbage can didn't have a liner. A metallic sink but no place to dry the mug or spoon, so if you happened to be a water or tea consumer waiting for your therapist, you became the "a.h" to messy the place, to leave your dirt everywhere. This was the kind of waiting room that could turn mother Theresa into an inherently bad person – simply for trying to sooth yourself with a cup of tea while waiting for the Princess of Darkness. And if you chose to pee, you came face to face with *Madwoman in the Attic* jutting out from the shelf, beckoning for a read,

making you a madwoman at whatever number and-a-half street with no place to put your tea bag, filthifying the community sink and contemplating your insanity while pissing out guilty, guilty liquids. Where do all the used tea bags and dirty spoons and tea cups go in the cottage with the ½ address? They are embedded into Princess Loulou’s soul.

Madwoman-and-a-Half Has Tea with the Photographer and Me

I’m trying to remember the last session before everything went to shit,¹⁸⁵ the moment before he walked away – two weeks before my very *special* birthday. The camera man must have timed the dumping – as photographers are often princes of good timing.¹⁸⁶ Princess L beckoned us by slowly creaking open her wooden door separating the waiting room from the abyss of doom awaiting. In the three visits, Loulou was at least thirty minutes late, a fashion statement of mental health. I meandered cautiously into her fearful cave. Similar to the tea bags, this dome of hell deceived with an aromatic therapeutic stench, light chatter, and soft water colored paintings and more walls of neutral beige. Beneath her easy posture as she sat back into a large, plush armchair and filled the room with resonate chirping, a dangerous toxin lurked, a threat to all wobbly relationships – Princess L’s darkly spinning narrative. The spider lady with chin length blondish graying hair and wide smile, expansive (and expensive) hippy clothes of rusts and blues, spun a tiny web of pop psychology, licking it sticky together with secretions of happy contempt from her pungent clinical saliva. She called in all her resources to make

¹⁸⁵ We had only been to see the evil princess two times prior.

¹⁸⁶ He had also ended things previously on Thanksgiving. I was dressed up for his friend’s yearly “Friendsgiving” party when he called to say, “I can’t do this anymore.” Months later, he told me I was “the one” and put a wedding mix together. Apparently, I am not the one. I am not the one. I thought I could be the two. I am not the three.

the appropriate spell for the challenged couple over an invisible cauldron elevated from the room's center, and as she stirred the pot and called:

Oh gender politics, with historical grime, turn to slime
 Female insecurities of not being heard, I give you GERD (gastrointestinal reflex)
 If the man doesn't know, make him feel slow
 Come hither dreaded three: gender, insecurity, verbal and non-verbal
 Squeeze this relationship to its death
 Ever so tightly (before it bursts)
 Like an overstretched girdle.

Our session began with the witch explaining her billing. The photographer leaned in towards me, tentatively, appreciating my being there after I had refused couple's therapy for several months.¹⁸⁷ The witch continued to rattle on about the state of the Internet and how she recently purchased a new iPhone. He and I sat closely next to one another on a small couch, almost touching. When I didn't respond to the small talk, he jumped in with her, yammering about insurance companies, and Loulou suggested some were paying her "better these days." Fifteen minutes into the session, we had used up all insurance speak. Was this a conversation to ease the tension of my being new to their sacred territory and prior relationship?¹⁸⁸ Or was she trying to get a tight wad to pay her without directly asking?¹⁸⁹ I wrestled with finding a comfortable position on the brown clothed couch and blotted the sweat building underneath my knees by crossing my legs repeatedly. If the Princess was as indirect as the photographer, I was screwed.

Twenty minutes into the session, we were still rambling about the weather, the drapes, or whatever it was, when the photographer began jabbering about how the

¹⁸⁷ I knew that one session had ended things with the cosmetologist a few years prior, so I was wary. "Lara found a list of pros and cons I had written about her after the session and got upset," the photographer said, explaining their breakup.

¹⁸⁸ The Princess of Darkness had been the photographer's therapist for years, not a psychodynamic situation that is ever recommended. I do not recommend it.

¹⁸⁹ "Tight wad" is a bit unfair since I wasn't paying, so I should shut up now.

placement of the sun affects his work and how many hours he is normally on his feet. That's when I exhaled, tightening the girdle she had provided from her spell, not quite ready to burst it.

"Do you always begin your sessions with stories?" I asked. I had quickly adapted to the passive aggressive rules of the Cottage of Darkness.

The photographer remained motionless, expressionless. I feared his hatred.

"This is how xxxx begins his sessions. Xxxx, why don't you respond to Lyndee's remark," she began.

"I guess I usually begin with a story," he explained.

"As an ice breaker?" I asked, graining back because I read sitting like a queen was a strategy to claim status.

"I don't know, just a story."

"Well, it seems like it's taking a little while to get into this, and I don't mean to get impatient, but I am feeling a bit – like – I don't know, hurry up?" And I made a circular stirring motion with my palms.

The Princess smiled on cue, almost prophetically with gleaming white teeth, mustering her tope scarf around her shoulder, Bette Davis style with hippy connotations.

"What do you think about that?" she asked the photographer.

"I don't know."

"I'm sorry; I feel like I'm being impatient. Maybe that's one of our issues," I said.

"That motion that you made with your hands to hurry up; this is the crux of something. Is it like your motor is running and you want to push him along? A fast motor?" asked Princess L.

I had never thought of the motor running analogy nor did I prefer to think of myself as a small, insignificant boat hurrying myself along with skinny fingers. A yacht perhaps in a large harbor with lots of room and a very large motor. But then I recalled the rules of therapy. Stay open. Don't be dismissive. It would be stupid to put up a firewall of negative transference so early.¹⁹⁰ I would breathe in everything and think about it later.

"I don't know. I never thought about it like that," I said.

"Would you say that's about right?" she asked him.

"I wouldn't argue with that," he said.

He wouldn't argue?? What did that mean? Did he just agree for the sake of agreeing? I mean, was he just along for the slow motorboat ride until the gas ran out or worse, a gas leak? Or, if I was the crazed motor boat, he was a turtle with a bum leg and double the shell. I mean, what the hell? But I would remain open.

"I'm watching and learning about your dynamics just through these exchanges," she informed us.

We had been "relating" about ten minutes. She had formed a pretty defined opinion already.

"What do you think the problem is? He's not as verbal, so let's start with you," she said.

I looked over at the photographer; he was still breathing after being bitch-slapped. He cleared his throat.

"You okay?" I asked, and he nodded. I continued, "I think he finds that I complain a lot. In general."

"Is that true?" she asked the defeated picture taking statue.

¹⁹⁰ I remembered what Freud says about negative transference. It's negative.

“At times she will vent,” he said.

“Is it too much for you?” asked Loulou.

“Sometimes,” he said and exhaled.

“I think that means yes,” I said. “He thinks I’m being negative, but I’m not. I’m just expressing myself if I’m frustrated. After I talk about it, I let go of it.”

“Forgive me,” she said, eyes gazing intently into mine. I noticed that for most of the session, she rarely glanced in his direction. “This is a very typical male/female exchange. I realize, you don’t mean to set it up that way,” she said and again, looked at me, harder this time. “But if you continue this habit, you will be a very, very unhappy young lady. It’s really not good for you,” she said.

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“You have the power. You can make things work or fail in this relationship.”

I had what power? If I had any power, why was I captive in the cottage of nightmares or wherever I was at 13-and-a-half badlucksville trying to work things out with a mute? I would remain open. The photographer sat statically like one of his stills. He was drinking the Kool-Aid. I think he was. I took a sip.

She smiled, and I was learning how it worked. She grinned before saying something mean.

“You are each living out your childhood dramas and have found each other to work it out, to heal. Now, this is an old wound. You weren’t listened to as a child, were you?” she said to me.

“I guess not,” I said, wondering if she was listening.

I admitted that when the photographer failed to respond to me, I would repeat a question and continue to angle the conversation over and over again in an attempt to coerce an answer. Conversely, the photographer would shut down and repeatedly ignore me. It was a beautiful thing, this dynamic what she referred to as the male-female conundrum.

"When something is bothering me, I quickly change to a positive thought. And then another one. It puts me in a good mood," said the photographer.

"Yes," said the dark princess. "This really works. It's helpful for brain chemistry. I'm going to give you an assignment," she said, looking at *me*. You can vent for ten minutes, time it, and then no more. Per day. Use a timer."

"Ok, I mean, it seems a bit unnatural but ok," I said.

Taped mouth= keeping the photographer.

He nodded.

"Wait, what about him? Am I the only one with homework? Is it all on me?" I asked.

"Good point. Let's see. You had to take care of your mother for so long that your resources are depleted," she said to the photographer. "You have become obdurent."¹⁹¹ Try not to become obdurent.¹⁹² We have tried to deal with this for a long time in here," she said.

It seemed that Loulou was not of the Rogerian school. So much for the patient does the digging on their own. My then boyfriend shook his head again, but his posture lacked compliance. He didn't twitch; I wondered if he was verbally constipated. He had

¹⁹¹ Obdurent is not a word. I think she meant obdurate, an adjective, not a noun.

¹⁹² After the session, I asked the photographer what obdurent meant. He didn't know.

always been so protective of his mother and anything that sounded close to a criticism was suspect. I also wondered how this push/pull diagnosis could be redeemed or if it was redeemable.¹⁹³

¹⁹³ After the session, the photographer wondered if Princess L called him “slow.” I similarly questioned if she suggested I was impatient and hyperactive.

Footnote This¹⁹⁴

¹⁹⁴ “There’s so much pressure with Valentine’s Day and your (big) birthday coming up and your graduating soon,” said the photographer. “It’s a lot of pressure. I’m feeling overwhelmed.” I told him not to worry, but he made daily requests that I create a big event for my upcoming birthday while feeling burdened by the expectation that I didn’t possess. He continued to push me to have a large to-do, so finally I organized a party at my parent’s house on my own, a sort of sweet sixteen all over again except I was kind of old and embarrassed. But the Yamshons throw a hell of a party.

I wrote Princess Loulou a detailed email about the photographer’s increasing anxiety, and she ignored me. Two weeks before my birthday, the photographer refused to watch the Oscars with me. (He said something about not caring about the Oscars. I don’t care about the Oscars either, I told him. It would just be nice to see you, etc.) That evening, he showed up at my apartment saying, “I can’t do this anymore. Maybe we’ll get back together when you graduate and you get things together.” I asked if we could put a big breakup on hold until after my birthday, and he shook his head. I asked him, “What should I tell everyone at the party?” He said, “Just have fun. You have a lot of friends.”

I wrote Princess Loulou again, lamenting how the photographer had terminated our therapy and relationship without warning, and she ignored my second email.

Post-dump occurrences: a happy birthday text, one thumb’s up on Facebook after bragging that a chapter of this novel was published in an anthology, and an alleged letter from Shmick written in sketchy cursive writing with no address full of kitty like birthday proclamations and unsettling remarks about watching me. In addition to the unsigned Shmick letter, on my actual birthday I received a package of Addidas sweat socks waiting for me outside my door. (I wonder how he got through the outside door. I never gave him a key) I can’t make this shit up.

(only urban citing’s of the photographer’s whereabouts)

For the first time in my life, I have not responded. I am not seeking a response.

A third package arrived from the post office, but I missed it every time. A mystery package. I don’t know if it has been returned to sender or if it’s waiting at the post office. It will have to wait forever with the rest of the dead letters.

This time I make my own metaphor.

A Letter to You, Gary

I was duly warned that contacting you would result in – nothing. But I need to feel like I'm undoing all the foot shootings of my life, all the feelings of worthlessness, the sense of being trapped in Midwestern politeness that has so far served me in – nothing. When I told one of my dissertation committee members and beloved writer that I wrote to you, he said, "Gary S-gart? No. That's like asking Babe Ruth or God." But I did anyway, you Goddish Babe, Book of Ruth, and you ignored me. Or didn't get the email. Or it wasn't your email address. Or your email is full. Or you block people you don't know. Or it went in the other file. Or it went in the spam file. Or you don't really check that email. I didn't find you today, but one day, maybe. And maybe not. And that's okay. Because I wrote the email:

Subject Line: Stuy Town Lady Teaching *Little Failure* to College Students

Dear Gary? Mr. Shteyngart? (no, that's not right)

My name is Lyndee Yamshon, a name I bet was butchered when my grandfather came from Russia. The horrible "Yam" was probably attached to "ski" or something like that. I hope you're still reading.

I worked as the Associate Editor for Town & Village Newspaper and covered local news for Peter Cooper Village and Stuyvesant Town for years.¹⁹⁵ I met you after reading *Little Failure* in Chicago, part of the Humanities Festival I believe, and spoke to you briefly about Stuy Town. I don't expect you to remember me, but if you do, hurrah!

I've been teaching *Little Failure* to my nonfiction writing college students, and I'm finishing my nonfiction dissertation with one of my final chapters titled, "Almost Gary Shteyngart" because, well, I couldn't breathe as a baby due to an overwhelming amount of snot but didn't have asthma, my mother just retired from the SS Day School in Northbrook, IL after 30 years of service but never enrolled me because she thought the school would be too restrictive, I didn't get into Oberlin, (ridiculous, I know) I've had lots

¹⁹⁵ Gary attended Stuyvesant High School.

and lots of therapy without the same type of success...(poor me) Ok, you might see where I'm going with the chapter, and I'm incorporating the experience of teaching *Little Failure* into a course based on failure themes.

If you are still reading, I was wondering if there's a chance in hell that you would ever meet with me and read my chapter. Or if there's an even bigger chance in hell you would agree to serve as the fifth reader on my dissertation committee and somehow I would find a way to fly you in, etc. I would jump on a plane to New York if you would meet with me! I realize the chutzpah in making such a request.

I would like to be the next female Woody Allen, and I think we need one. I'm sorry if you are sleeping right now, but on the off chance you're not, I pray and hold my breath and all that for you to consider spending one iota of a second talking to me.

Thank you for potentially reading this email.

Sincerely,
Lyndee Yamshon

Memoirist Summons Jena

Where the fuck did you come from? I thought you were dead, a golem gone, etc.

Me: Jena, I thought I had no use for me, killed you off, or you chose to walk away. As I near completion, I find myself yearning to talk to someone, someone I know well. I long for a past filled with moments of your construction, and then I slowly have come realize, by writing these words in search of you, you never left. A temporary vacation, perhaps. It was altruistic that you disappeared. You were stifling, and I couldn't continue writing with you stepping on my shoulder like that, so I pushed you off. I'm sorry to have neglected you, but I would like you to return. How about now? Tonight maybe?

(Jena materializes from a flower-pot decorated in ink blotches and book scraps)

Jena: I don't believe you. You, who left me to untangle the confusion of dance school – to decipher what my mentors were telling me without retrospect or narrative guidance. I'm still on the dance floor, practicing. Can't you feel the vibrations? This vertigo hybrid is terrible!

Glissade assemble glissade jete
Coupe assemble faye assemble

I know you felt pulse at night, the moment before twilight sleep. Is it possible you didn't feel my swift step and boundless energy beneath your heels, ticking, taunting your fingertips at the keyboard? You left me dancing and dancing is what I've become. I am the essence of dance.

Time has stopped, the rules of temporality suspended when you ceased writing me and trying to solve my problem. Then I suffered the most damning humiliation – you unwrote me with the claim that I wasn't a real character. I would spit in your face, but you haven't written me active or with enough violence, so I may only speak in these long-winded phrases. I'm hardly comfortable speaking at all. I prefer dancing across the page. Can't you produce that effect? Why aren't you dancing? Get up!

Me: Who are you, Bartleby? Characters can't have preferences to enforce on their creators. I won't go for your outrageous demands, but I'm sorry I left you there; I had no sage advice. I'd only gotten that far myself, so I couldn't help you. I'm still not any farther along. I actually summoned you to ask you – for help. What is strange, I don't recall writing you so cheeky... This is odd.

Jena: I'm tired of your stifling me. I only had the power to do what you told me, and I am certain that you are in control of each word, even now as I speak. I hate this dialogue.

Me: I admit it! It's bad! Quite terrible! Terrible, indeed.
(Author sits on a bench to contemplate)

Jena: Perhaps I can help you with your little problem if you free me.

Me: I don't negotiate with half-wits...I'm sorry, but – please don't ask me that. I couldn't bear the loss a second time. And it doesn't seem to work. You're still here.

Jena: Silly tragedian, this is neither your hour nor mine. Neither of us are dying today, and that is precisely my point, my one wish.

Me: What is it?

Jena: Stop calling me death drive.

Me: But you are.

Jena: You don't know what I am.

Me: Ridiculous. Is that all? Ok, I won't call you that if that's your preference. I don't see how that makes a difference.

Jena: Let me dance.

Me: Is it possible by page 95,937 words, you still lack the grace to perform without inspiration or entertainment? Have you nothing better to do than stoop to such blanketed word games of self-consciousness and overwrought psychobabble?

Jena: Neoliberal!

Me: Take that back. I'm warning you –

Jena: Not until you own that you are responsible for my disappearance, just as you are bringing me back. You make me speak.

(author stands)

Jena: Now we are ready to communicate.

Jena has tea with the Memoirist and tells her what's what

"I don't like how you're conducting your life," said Jena.

She was scantily clad in a partially see-thru summer dress with her whitish hair loosely tied into a bun, a few wisps falling from her lacy red bun cover. She appeared few years older than how I left her last and momentarily licked her small cherry lips. I suppose she had begun wearing makeup, but I hadn't written her that way, so what the hell? I suspected she was no longer a virgin. I wondered if something had happened to her between the time I stopped writing her five years ago and the moment I began my memoir.

"One thing at a time," I said in an attempt to control the scene and avoid allowing some mucked-up character takeover. Her voice had become oddly judgmental.

"I certainly didn't expect to find you here or anywhere really," I said, noticing my syntax was weirdly stilted and overtly imperative for no single reason.

"Where else would I be?" said the sass, "But here. Since, I mean, you called me here."

"In the remnants of my imagination, waiting in a small European café, waiting to tell me off, come on. It's totally cliché"— I said. "It's all very unexpected but still, as always when you're around, the speech is overwrought, the narration nauseating."

"I hardly believe you," she said. "As far as my showing up, I think it's more that you planned this all along. And I'm not convinced you think it's as bad as all that. You're too obsessed about what everyone else thinks. Unreliable author. I'm choosing to abstain from delving any further into your prose dig. Next subject."

“So as far as my life choices and not continuing your story, I just didn’t know how. And I’m not a planner.”

“Woof,” said Jena.

“Excuse me?”

“It’s a retort,” said the character.

“I see. I mean, I know what it is! Argh, are you trying to quip?? What the hell are you wearing, girl?”

“Something you wish you could wear yourself,” she said, her clear eyes scanning my body. “I see you’ve gained about five.”

“Listen wasp- girl, that may be true, but why the anger? (sigh) Ok, you’re mad. But do you really find me fat?”

“You know the scoop. You don’t exercise enough and instead you made me in perfect shape with the best nose and teeth and all the right proportions to juxtapose your wiggles. I’m the super athlete that you almost were before you gave up – woof – and now you’re just kind of... Well, you know this already.”

“Actually Jen-aaaa, you are not in perfect proportion. You look fine as a ballerina, but in the real world, you’re a bit thin. Skin and bones, really.”

I shook my head in feigned disgust and couldn’t help but observe Jena was no longer bone-thin, had a bit of shape to her, nice cup sized ‘b’-breasts as opposed to the triple ‘a’ from the past, curvier hips, and a slight sensuality new to her aura. Or did my eyes fool me? Was I projecting something I wished for Jena outside the scope of my creation? Was I trying to masterfully conceive the perfect female between what I was and

the fictional her? No, no, it was certain. She had been slightly sexed up since I had last known her in my early thirties.

“I’m not here to argue,” said Jena.

“All right, then what?”

“Please take ownership.”

“I need a drink,” I said. “Shouldn’t I be writing some setting in here? It’s past due. I’m afraid I’m all flummoxed. Where the hell are we anyway? I can’t really see anything.”

“Please don’t involve me in your job.”

“Fine.”

The café was white—and uh—kind of open without windows. No, there were windows. But they didn’t seem like windows...

“Ok, ok, stop. What are you doing?” asked Jena as she cracked her neck and arched her back. “You can do better than this.”

“Right, hold on. It’s not easy when you’re being watched.”

“Tell me something I don’t know.”

“Okay, hold on...”

This was the moment before I would write a real fictional scene. Every instant in my life had culminated to this, and now, my breath was stunned to stiffness as Jena, sitting in a blue chair in front of me, floated above my consciousness in her ghostly way, waiting for my failure. She was forcing me back into fiction when the /retrospect/memory/ healing genre aborted its finishing moment. I sat alone at the café staring at the ghastly dancer who grew paler by the moment, waiting for a waiter who

would never arrive, a non-existent latte that would never be prepared or sipped, trying to discern words jumping from her skull to mine and back again out of proper order, while swallowing dry, hard air.

“Why didn’t you just have me write the whole damned thing?” she asked. “Word games suck. Do I have to spell it out?”

“Stop your playing now,” I ordered.

“Fine,” she said, and the jumping words dissolved. “But answer the question. I could have written it for you and now we’re in a huge mess because you didn’t let me. Explain yourself or forfeit,” she said.

“Jena, I’m going to tell you something. But first, stop floating about and doing magic bullshit. Sit down in a real way. For once in your life, be real.”

“You don’t know if I’m sitting or standing. If I’m fiction or whatever. You can’t tell the difference. Hahahahahaa.”

“Nonsense,” I said, focusing on my exhale. I continued, “I realize that what I’m going to tell you may hurt your feelings, and I realize you are sort of capable of many things that I wasn’t aware of. I appreciate that; I really do. But there are limits. As a fiction person, I mean character, this will not be easy for you.”

“All right, since I’m only partial to half characterization, my ego can handle it,” she said, raising an empty latte glass, pretending to drink.

“Where did that come from?”

“Ach, too much foam. Did you see the waiter?”

“Jena...”

I attempted to grasp her palm, but it slipped away, but not soon enough, leaving a thin sheet of pinkish ice molded to my right hand.

“That will help,” she said, winking.

“I said stop it!”

“Okay mamma, okay,” she said, sinking flatly into her chair, almost one dimensional to the form of a piece of paper.

“Jena, as your creator and your protector”—

“Woof.”

“I know, I haven’t always done a good job. This is never something a mother wants to tell her child.”

“Rephrase,” she said.

“I mean, a writer never wants this for her protagonist. But – here it is. People don’t like you. I’m not sure I meant to create you or that I even wanted you. I don’t know why you’re here at all. Every time I’m making progress, you reappear some way or another, unwanted. Jena, you are not wanted.”

“Excuse me?” she said, loosening her bun and drawing out her hair. She ran her spindly hands through the whiteness of her locks, and it was as if hand and mane merged forming a perfect pale light around her head.

“You’re scaring me with those tricks now. Please listen. I’ve introduced you to many, many readers. Some friends, some foe. Family. Mentors. Lovers. Acquaintances. Your reviews are lukewarm at best, girl. I’m sorry. You’re not loved. I made you – sort of – badly.”

“Biscuit likes me,” she said, zombie eyes twinkling with a fiendish scarlet hue.

“Mr. Biscuit? The literary critic? The fucking theorist?”

“You know what he said,” she said.

“He hates identity and since you have none, it makes sense.”

“You know what he said,” she persisted.

“Don’t say it.”

“Too late. Everyone is writing bad memoirs, but the idea that fiction can undermine and haunt your memoir...is compelling. Remember?”

“No!”

A small wind stirred in the café. The sound of clinking glasses, wind chimes, papers rustling, numerous theoretical books emerged and began knocking into each other, rubbing, creating sparks and a small fire. *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, *Death and Dissymmetry*, anything post-Marxist, (no titles but all covers matched) *The Rules of Art*, *Looking Awry*, *The Logic of Practice*, *The Politics of Life Itself*, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, *The Ideology of Aesthetics*, something with Inaesthetics whipping by, slapping me in the face with their covers, numbing my cheeks.

“You’re still not making sense. This is why I stopped writing you. Where are the novels?”

“You know there are no novels anymore!” she laughed.

“Can you make this stop?” I asked, shrieking over the wind sound, ducking from the weight of book covers and loose papers and used backpacks, student loan extensions, Shmick fur, and failed chicken noodle soup recipes.

“Can *you* make it stop?” her voice full of echoing resonance in the weightless room.

“I don’t know!”

“Admit that he likes me!” she wailed.

“I can’t imagine he’s interested in your story. Only a rare few ever were. Wait, ouch! The post-Marxist covers are sharp.”

“They’re supposed to be,” said Jena.

“He’s never going to read your story. It’s not his bag.”

“You asked for it!” said Jena.

New titles began stirring faster, with greater velocity. *Crime and Punishment*, *Emma*, *Tom Jones*, *Bartleby*, *Mrs. Dalloway*, *Metawritings, 1984*, *The Poems of Emily Dickinson*, *Robinson Crusoe*, *The Painted Bird*, *Tristram Shandy*. Books flew towards me slanted. I knelt to the ground and crawled, wiping the inky debris from my eyes, unable to find a direction.

“Don’t you want to end this now?” Jena roared.

“I can’t! I don’t think it’s finished enough to sell!”

“Why not? *1984* was 88,942 words and now with this sentence you’re at 97,361.”

“I didn’t realize. But there’s a lot I wouldn’t count. It’s not polished enough.”

“You don’t get to decide anymore,” said Jena.

The books disintegrated, the wind froze, a baby cried. Jena rose above me swirling into pink.

“Use retrospect and finish the fiction,” she said.

I’m alone in a blank white room. I reach for a pen.

Vita

LYNDEE MICHELLE YAMSHON

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 Literature/Creative Writing -
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EDUCATION

University of Illinois at Chicago, Chicago, IL, graduation, December 2014
 PhD, Literature and Creative Nonfiction

DePaul University, Chicago, IL, June 2004
 M.A., Literature

New York University, Tisch School of the Arts, New York, NY, June 1996
 BFA, Drama

PUBLICATIONS: CREATIVE

“Diss Leave” (excerpt), forthcoming in *Eckleburg Review*, March 2014

“Daddy Issues,” nonfiction essay, *Packingtown Review*, February 2015

“First Name, First Name” (excerpt), *Prague Review*, February 2015

“The ‘N’ Train, Two Planes, and Journalism,” (excerpt), *China Grove Literary Journal*, awards edition, December 2014

“Frankly F**d Up in E-Town” (excerpt from novel-length manuscript) in
Wreckage of Reason II: Anthology of XXperimental Women Writers,
 edited by Nava Renek, Spuyten Duyvil Books, April 2014

PUBLICATIONS: OTHER

“An Interview with Cris Mazza,” *Bookslut*, November 2013

“Parent’s Given Hope” published on *Autism Treatment Center* website 2008- today

“*Autumn Leaves*,” Pulse of the Planet Radio Show, National Geographic, 2004

Chicago Tribune – freelance journalist/Metro section and “The Beat Column,” 2002-2004, articles available upon request

Town & Village Newspaper of NYC – numerous beats covered from 2000-2002, articles available upon request

BOOK REVIEWS:

“Janet Burroway Frames Loss,” *American Book Review*, December, 2014

“Between Two Realities,” published in *American Book Review*, September 2013

HONORS/AWARDS

Skidmore Summer Institute, nonfiction writing scholarship with Phillip Lopate, Summer of 2012

Glimmer Train, short story finalist, March 2012

Nonfiction representative from UIC for AWP Intro Awards, March 2013

CONFERENCES/PAPERS

“Story Week: Festival of Writers,” Columbia College, March, 2014

“The Material Baptism of Words” *The Life Of The Object: An Experimental Workshop And Conference On Production, Consumption, and Creative Reuse In American Culture*, Conference, The University of Wisconsin Madison, April 2011.

“From Autobiography to Memoir: Writing into and out of Illness,” *Writing Lives and Life Writing*: The Biennial English Graduate Conference, Boston College, March, 2011.

“Representations of Jewish Marriages with diasporic visions of homeland in biblical Israel,” *Ethnic Literatures and Transnationalism Conference*, Santa Clara University, April 2012.

“Double Portrait,” *Louisville Conference of Literature and Culture*, University of Louisville, under consideration, February, 2015

TEACHING

- “Underrepresented Faces of War,” Composition/ENG 160, Fall 2014, UIC
- “Interrogating Failure in Non-Fiction Writing,” Spring 2014, UIC
- “The History of English Literature: 1660-1900, Fall 2013, UIC
- “American Literature until 1900,” Fall 2012, UIC
- “Intro to Creative Writing,” Spring 2010, Fall 2011, UIC
- “Multicultural Literature,” June 2010, UIC
- “Urban Sprawl: The Changing City,” Composition/ENG 161: 2008, 2009, 2011, UIC

RELATED EXPERIENCE

- Research Assistant, Asian American Studies, University of Illinois at Chicago, academic year 2011 and 2012
- Literary Publicist, JKS Communications, May-August of 2013
- Drama Editor, *Packintown Literary Review*, 2011
- Script Editor/Intern, *WTTW/Channel 11*, 2003
- Editorial Intern, *The Chicago Reporter*, 2003

INDIVIDUAL READINGS

- Women and Children First, “First Name, First Name,” March 2015
- University of Illinois Reading Series for *Wreckage of Reason II, An Anthology for Experimental Women’s Fiction*: April, 2014
- Fabcakes Photography Exhibit, creator of architectural poetry panel, “People, Like Buildings,” August 2013
- University of Chicago, “Black Swan Panic,” January 2012
- Skidmore College, “Yoga Barbie,” July 2012
- University of Illinois Writer’s Series, “The German,” September 2011

OTHER EXPERIENCE

“Bob, the Musical,” book and lyrics (Chicago)

Musical memoir based on well-known jazz musician, Bob Mamet. Mr. Mamet is collaborating musically and orating the details of his life for this musical memoir. Under consideration with a Broadway producer.

Kill Me Tomorrow, feature film, actress, screenwriter (NYC)

Investigation of the performativity of “camp”
(Translations in German, Russian, Britain, etc.)

USO Show, tour, actress, singer, writer (NYC)

Constructed through historical interviews of WWI veterans and performed in elder care institutions following a Q&A.

Starting Here, Starting Now, actress, singer, dancer (NYC)

Performed “I Don’t Believe It”

An interrogation of couples performing compulsory heterosexuality