

Fall 2013

Share the blame

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Recommended Citation

Siegel, Matthew Haber. "Share the blame." MFA (Master of Fine Arts) thesis, University of Iowa, 2013.
<https://doi.org/10.17077/etd.cafm8xyd>

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SHARE THE BLAME

by

Matthew Haber Siegel

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the Master of
Fine Arts degree in English
in the Graduate College of
The University of Iowa

May 2013

Thesis Supervisor: Professor Bonnie Sunstein

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CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

MASTER'S THESIS

This is to certify that the Master's thesis of

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has been approved by the Examining Committee
for the thesis requirement for the Master of Fine Arts
degree in English at the May 2013 graduation.

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CHAPTER 1

MY 1988 DEAD STOCK VELVEETA ORANGE L.A. EYEWORCS FRAMES

Meryl Streep: Like a yogic exhalation. A cleansing breath.

Meryl—and I can call her Meryl—Meryl’s aesthetic has always fascinated me.

Meryl is very into textures: chenille, silk, gauzy cashmere. Diaphanous materials. I imagine the contents of her closet constantly billowing.

Casual Meryl: An oversized men’s dress shirt tailored for a woman in grey linen from Lord & Taylor paired with a flowing pant, perhaps equally linen, but in black or camel. Spa clothing draped over her indiscernible body. Top three or four or five buttons undone, exposed décolletage adorned with a turquoise and silver necklace she purchased on a reservation whilst filming that sad movie from the nineties outside of Santa Fe. Silk panties she’ll dole out for despite her inherent practicality; she knows \$150 per pair is exorbitant, but she’s earned comfortable undergarments at this point in her career. Bra professionally fitted, by appointment, boutique doors locked, in Paris where bosoms are their specialty. No, she didn’t travel abroad for a bra sizing, she was there accepting a commendation, and her friend Donna (Karan) had told her about this aged woman who “literally changes lives” via her bra-fittings.

In public, day or night, rectangular frames with barely tinted lenses in periwinkle, lilac, or peony pink, obscure Meryl’s familiar china-man eyes. You can’t tell if she’s rested or exhausted, au naturel or altered. She may or may not be looking at you. If you manage to finagle a *tête-à-tête* with her, she can discreetly monitor the area around her without causing offense. Someone is always waiting for her in the periphery.

Barely-tinted colored lenses in a chic frame are must-haves for the upper echelon of actors, the critically acclaimed actors whose careers began on stage, who do not appear in tabloids or on network television. They are rare pieces of eyewear that can be worn indoors and out, at day and at night, at once an understatement and overstatement. They serve as a subtle acknowledgment of the need to shield oneself from an ever-present public gaze. In L.A. and New York, I scrutinize such people.

I'm standing in line at the CVS pharmacy on Beverly and La Cienega with my friend, the late actress Jill Clayburgh, some six months before her passing from Leukemia. Jill shared a similar aesthetic to her longtime pal, Meryl, sporting a slinky tank top, silk yoga pants, Birkenstock sandals, her eyes shielded by a pair of chic frames with barely-tinted colored lenses in dark amber. I watch the middle-aged woman behind us register Jill's unusually wan face. "Oh my goodness! You're Jill Clayburgh! You defined my generation! I was going through a divorce when your movie came out! What was it called?" Nobody answers her. Jill offers a gracious, perhaps too gracious, smile as gratitude. Only an exceptionally deft actress can deliver a smile so nuanced that it says both thank you and goodbye at once. The woman turns to the customer behind her. "Do you see who it is? God, she looks great!" Jill gives her name to the pharmacy clerk. "That voice!" the woman shrieks. "What a voice!"

"I hate that," Jill mutters on our way out.

"But she loves you," I say. "That must make you feel good, no?"

I take my 1988 dead stock Velveeta orange l.a. Eyeworks frames (originally from their [Kim] Novak collection) to a Lens Crafters in Coralville, Iowa. I want Meryl lenses

put in--something in cerulean. To get to the Lens Crafters, I have to enter through a Barnes & Noble in a sad mall. Sad malls are the most devastating places in the world, post-Katrina New Orleans. I hold my breath; I'm not trying to breathe all that consolidated mall air. Vexing sounds of children reverberate, ping ponging against the unmanned carousel in the food court, the country-style wagon stocked full of flat irons outside the chain music store on the brink of closure, the department store I have never heard of. Younkers? Gesundheit. There is nothing here for me except Chick-fil-A, which I, as a mostly self-respecting homosexual, can no longer patronize.

Periodically, I catch a mall-crawler gawking at me—an innocent glance sustained and turned ugly. As a visible outlier, I endure a well-earned paranoia, but, like stereotypes, my psychosis exists for a reason. While I revel in the all-too-rare look of admiration for my keen sense of style, my patrician, my overall swagger, I go dark at the bemused expression of a weak-chinned mother gaping at me, thin-lipped mouth slightly ajar. Granting her the benefit of the doubt, I turn my head right, left, and behind me seeking the actual object of her attention. When I rejoin eyes with the woman, she blinks rapidly and looks around as if waking from an unsettling dream. I detect fear more than antipathy, as if I represent the possibilities for what her son might become. Next, a man leers at me, gives me a good up-and-down, daring me to react. I accept the challenge. Whipping toward him, I spit, “WHAT ARE YOU LOOKING AT?” jutting my head and bulging my eyes like Bette Davis in the oppressive heat of so many exasperating moments. “Goddamn!” I say aloud as I march away, “Let a bitch live! Shit!” My body quakes as the adrenaline dissipates; I remind myself that I have just committed a public service. That evening, the perpetrator will report back to his loved ones about the man he

saw at the mall today, the one carrying the purse and the gait of a lady, the one who went off on him for no reason. Meanwhile, I'm at home with my dog scouring the Internet for cheap flights out of town.

"This will be easy," declares the Lens Crafters clerk, placing my 1988 dead stock Velveeta orange l.a. Eyeworks frames in a tray. I bide my time in this dungeon of gray, glass, and backlit displays, perusing towers and walls and cases of mass-produced eyeglasses. Does Karl Lagerfeld know they're selling Chanel frames at Lens Crafters? With imitation Swarovski crystals dotting the interlocking C logo, no less? I don't imagine he does.

I'm in the waiting area of the attached Cain Family Eye Care Practice skimming a 2008 issue of *Redbook* when the sales associate approaches me with an apologetic frown on her face. "So, your frames actually broke while the lab tech was removing the old lenses. We can super-glue them back together at no cost and give you half off a pair of any frames of your choice." The frames of my choice do not reside here.

I opt for super-glue and a discount I will never use, grimacing at my newly defective 1988 dead stock Velveeta orange l.a. Eyeworks frames, in a state, in a part of America where I don't want anyone to notice me.

CHAPTER 2
SUICIDE NOTE

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CHAPTER 3

AMBIENCE

I'm lying in bed rubbing an unnumbered page of *Vanity Fair* against each wrist *as if it were the first time*...per the Chanel No. 5 ad.

Nearly-thirty-year-old bespeckled gay me, face dotted with Retin-A for occasional bouts of adult acne with the added bonus of wrinkle prevention, sucking on a \$700 night-guard in my Iowa City apartment, my gem of a dog next to me sighing audibly, him longing for my Ambien to kick in so he can return to his Orvis-issued enclave. Selfish me, I startled him from slumber to accompany me in preparation for my slumber, to delight me with his seemingly edible preciousness while the hypnotic works its way into my blood stream. On the nights he chooses to stay in bed with me, we curl into fetal positions, back-to-back, creating our own interlocking double-C.

I'm not sure why I began taking Ambien—I'm inclined to say out of boredom—and my Los Angeles psychiatrist who had me on three other drugs simultaneously was a fan of what he referred to as psychotropic “cocktails.” I didn't appreciate the barroom terminology for it too easily connoted the HIV drugs of yesteryear. Speaking of, my favorite thing to do in LA was to find a man on the internet to have sexual relations with, take an Ambien, drive to the man, have sex with the man, and black out only to find myself on a good day, in a suite at the Standard Hotel, or on a bad day, somewhere in the valley.

The lucidity of the Ambien state: aware of the dream, able to control the dream. I almost always used condoms.

CHAPTER 4

FUNNY MAN

“Is this Matt the Hat?” A pet-name from my childhood.

“So what’s the poop?” I already explained this to his wife, Leslie, via email, making a ransom note-esque proposition: *If you deliver my father to me for a face-to-face interview, I will never contact your family again.* Over the years I have mailed them art postcards: a photograph of Pablo Picasso and his son playing on a beach (*Bon Anniversarie!*); a painting of crows pecking the remains of a cowboy’s body (*Thinking of you!*)—just to keep them on their toes. If I was hiding the fact that I had two adult children from my teenage sons, I’d make sure my contact info was more than a Google search away.

“Why? Are you dying?” I very well may be dying: his gay son demanding to see him after 18 years. He probably thinks I’ve contracted HIV, and want to bid him farewell. So as not to spook him, I say I want to meet with him once more during either of our lifetimes to hear what he has to say about *things*. Once we’re face-to-face, I’ll explain that I might want to write about him, me, us, family, and would it be okay if I record our meeting. He’ll be so seduced by the importance bestowed upon him by my digital recorder, that he’ll mindlessly agree to it. And, “it,” is an interview, on the record, that I will ease him into with the aid of many questions pilfered from the “Proust Questionnaire” on the last page of every issue of *Vanity Fair*. And I am a writer with nearly two decades of utter distance from my subject. Time is indeed a great healer, if healing is burial.

“What is today? Tuesday? Wednesday?” He mouth-breathes so hard I want to hold the phone away from my face. It’s Monday.

“Let me think...When can I ride my fat ass up there?” The Orange County coastal village where we plan to meet is an hour’s drive south from my home in Los Angeles; he’ll ride his bike 30 miles north from San Diego.

“What’s Jodie doing these days?” Jodie, my mother, his ex-wife for 26 years now, having “found her voice” in group therapy, has created her first non-housewife job transforming an instinct for bargains and style into a gig personally shopping for female executive-types at discount department stores like Loehmann’s.

“Yeah, she always liked that type of shit.” I begin to divulge more innocuous details about her life in a tone that indicates a half-legit indifference on my part.

“Whatever.” He interrupts in a way that begs me to remind him who asked.

“Try to be there on time so neither of us are waiting.” A bold order coming from a man who, alleging malfunctions of engine or emergency veterinary visits for his cocker spaniel, “Bugsy [Siegel]” (named for the mafia boss), would leave eight, nine, ten-year-old me darting from window to window trying to convince G-d to make his garish red sports car appear in the driveway. On those occasions when the car materialized, I’d bop out the backdoor, wipe his passenger seat clean of red pistachio nut shells, and relish the beginning of a much-needed recess. Time to curse, ask sex questions, bitch about my family. On our way to a park, he’d tell culturally relevant jokes: *What’s Pee-Wee Herman’s favorite TV show? “Diff’rent Strokes.”* I didn’t get it, but I loved that show. Steering with his left hand, his right hand alternated between the gear stick and the top of my thigh—a more male-related proprietary gesture than a sexual one. At the park he’d

shove the swing with such vigor that the chain would pause, jerk, and drop before whisking me back to him. I feared the velocity would send me flying backwards over the swing-set, my neck unceremoniously meeting an iron pole. He once dangled me over the railing of a pedestrian bridge high above a major Atlanta thoroughfare, teasing that he would drop me.



Loretta Lynn’s “D-I-V-O-R-C-E” blares from the cafe’s outdoor speakers while I prepare to see my erstwhile father for the first time since ’92. Several songs post-Loretta, I’m inspecting anyone in cycling garb for those hyperthyroid pop-eyes of his. When Bobby Siegel, that half of my equation, and his eyes saunter toward me in sea captain yellow spandex, I am unmoved save for a low-grade lurch in my bowels, which I experience before meeting any stranger, be it for a business meeting or anonymous sex. I remain seated as he blathers: the bike ride was terrific; impressive that I found the place; how long did it take me to get here?

Eighteen years. And you?

[recording]

Do you have any heroes, real or fictional?*

I always admired George Patton except that he was a little bit nuts. ‘Cause he was a get-it-done guy and he didn’t care who got in the way, he was gonna move ‘em.

Are you a get-it-done guy?

I don’t know. Maybe that’s why I admire him—cause I don’t get enough done. [giggles]

*Indicates questions taken directly from *Vanity Fair’s* Proust Questionnaire.

What is your most treasured possession?*

My bike.

Intangible?

I guess—uh—happiness.

Are you happy?

Yeah, when I'm on my bike I'm good.

And when you're not on your bike?

Oh yeah, yeah. I'm pretty happy. You know I don't have any issues going on. I'm healthy. Not necessarily wealthy but healthy.

Which living person do you most despise?*

The guy that's in charge of Korea: Il. "Ment-a-lly ill," that's his brother. Mentally ill, get it? I think he's a real jerk—fucks his whole country up.

What is the proudest moment in your life?*

Well, the *happiest* day was the day I left your mother.

Why do you dislike her so much?

She would talk out of both sides of her mouth: two-faced.

Aren't most people to some degree?

I mean she'd say, "Hi, how are you?" to someone and then to me: "What the fuck does she want?"

At what point did you know you had made a huge mistake?

When she was walking down the aisle. [laughs]

You kind of look like Don Rickles.

[guffaws]

Do people tell you that?

Let me tell you the first lesson in physics: mass trumps height. [giggles] I have been told that hundreds of times. I go into Ralph's supermarket: [old person voice] "You look just like Don Rickles!" and alluvasudden, everyone's telling me I look like fucking Don Rickles. He's like 88-years-old!

Well, he has appeal.

So I thought I should memorize a couple of his routines off of YouTube. You know: [Don Rickles voice] "You fuckin' hockey pucks!" Then I thought, you know that show *The Shield*, Michael Chiklis, the guy who has that human penis look? See, when my head is shaved, people will say, "Oh it feels so good," and I'll say, "Yeah, it's the human penis look." [Don Rickles voice] "I'm a real dickhead."

What are your best and worst physical characteristics?*

Worst is that I weigh a lot more than I wish I did. I weigh 185 pounds and I'm five-eight.

You've been fatter.

[guffaws]

You have, right?

When?

When I knew you, you had a huge stomach.

You remember it that way? Well you're right. I got as high as two-twenty. I don't know how the fuck I did that.

All those red pistachio nuts.

You remember that?

Why did you eat *red* pistachio nuts?

‘Cause I liked them.

They’re no different than—

No, red has a different taste when they add that dye. But you don’t see those anymore.

But then you shake hands with anyone or you touch your shirt—

Hot pink.

Yeah! They were good. I remember those. You know, this is funny. This is like an old uncle comes to see the guy: [old person voice] “Oh you’ve grown. I remember when you were playing baseball.”

Who’s the uncle? Me or you?

Well, you, because you remember so well that I was big.

Yeah, you don’t look fat now.

No, not really.

For your age I think you look totally fine.

Well for 62—nobody can believe I’m 62. They say, “Bullshit, you’re 50.” Yeah, I’m in good shape. See, here’s the official bike rider legs. [peels bike shorts back] If somebody says, “I ride a bike,” let me see your tan. If you ain’t got one: fuck you.

What’s your best physical characteristic?*

I’m strong as a bull. [puts hand out to squeeze mine] See, if we kept this up I could crush it. You’d be out first. See, I don’t give. [laughs]

You named your happiest moment but what is your proudest moment?

Well, most people say, “the birth of my children,” but...proud? Hmm..proud...

When is the last time you cried?*

I cried for about eight seconds when my mother called me and told me my father died.

Were you close with your dad?

Yeah, fairly. I mean—not adversarial. He didn't like some of the things I did, like when I joined the cops—you know I was a cop once—in Atlanta. My mom says, “Bobby, do something, but do something legal.” She was afraid I might become like a gambling guy or something—you know, betting on football. I said, “Don't worry, I'm doing something legal.” See, I'd already joined the police force—she didn't know it—they were already out here in California. Then they came to Atlanta for a visit and I get home from the job at like nine-thirty at night dressed in my blue uniform: gun; badge; handcuffs; hat. My father took one look at me: “I don't believe this.” He's walking around like he had a bullet up his ass, and then he goes, “You know, you don't go to Vietnam to get shot in the woods, but you wanna get shot in a liquor store?” ‘Cause I didn't go into the army like him.

Did you duck out on the draft?

No, they stopped the draft at 195 and I was 202. That was a near-miss.

Were you scared?

O-ho-ho-ho-ho, I used to have dreams of bullets cracking by my head! I actually got shot at once when I was a cop and that'll change your whole fuckin' life. I mean, all of a sudden, this good guy, Bobby Siegel, who stops you for speeding and doesn't give you a ticket—I'm getting shot at, and I go what the hell is this? So I said, “Done.” That night. [laughs] Thirteen thousand a year with a college degree? I don't think so, I don't think so. I turned off the siren and the blue light and said, “See ya!”

How long did you do that for?

Six months. It was long enough.

Tell me the Tyrone story.

What?! How did you know about that?

Because you told me.

Tyrone and the cops? Oh that was the funniest thing I ever heard. Okay, I'm in with a veteran officer, right? And he was a real bigot from Alabama or some place like that, and I'm not a bigot, right, and the whole area we patrol is black—southwest Atlanta. So anyways, he's talking about, [southern accent] "You see Lucius over there, he's probably fuckin' sellin' drugs, and Tyrone over there, he's probably beatin' up his wife, and that's why we have to go over there," you know, domestic cause. Then, alluvasudden, someone broke a speeding rule, or, you know, a small traffic violation. So he says, "Okay we're gonna stop this guy and you pay attention to what I do." So he gets out of the police car and walks up to the driver's window and says, "Alright, Tyrone. Let me see your license," and the driver goes, "How'd you know my name was Tyrone?" [guffaws] And I was dying back there, it was so funny...That was the boy's name...The black guy's name.

I never forgot that story.

It's funny you should remember that.

Well I have a good memory.

Apparently.

What role does sex play in your life?

It doesn't play a big enough role! Ha-ha-ha, that would be true! You know what happens with women? [whispers] Menopause. And once that happens, it's like they could care less. On the other hand, I told Leslie one time, I said, "If I stop lookin' at girls, shoot me. On the spot."

No offense, but you don't strike me as someone who could be faithful.

Well, I may have a wild hair. It's one thing to look. When Leslie asked me to get married I told her I could be loyal, but not necessarily faithful—expecting her to back off. Instead she said, “Just don't do it in our bed.”

What is your motto?*

“Do unto others before they do unto you.” Just kidding. Ummm...[under breath] “Do unto others before they do unto you,” or “If you don't cheat you're only cheating yourself.” No, I'm just kidding, I'm just kidding. Umm...Umm...What goes around comes around.

You used to have a police scanner in your car. What was that about?

Just to see what's going on. I always like to know what's going on. Especially when I was a cop. I was always like, “Whoa, what's going on around here?”

You weren't a cop when you had the police scanner. You had it after the fact.

Yeah, I had it after the fact.

So what was that about?

That was like, “Oh, I'm not a cop anymore, that's so sad.” Yeah I would have stayed with it if my father hadn't gotten in my face about it—and if I hadn't gotten shot at.

You used to go and watch fires if you heard over the scanner that there was one happening.

How'd you know that?

You took me with you.

I took you with me? When was that? You must have been ten or eleven. I don't remember that. Jesus. The only thing I really remember is you coming over to my house and throwing a ball with you in the yard, and we went to some parks.

Are there times when you think about me and my sister?

Yeah there were plenty of times when I wondered, you know, what was going on with both of you. But when I moved out here I felt like I might as well have been in Guam.

Yeah, yeah, yeah. I used to wonder.

What is your relationship like with your sons?

Good. [Pause] What else do you wanna know? [laughs] I mean, how do I answer that question?

I used to play tennis with Jeffery when he was coming up, but I was too competitive for him. Alex, on the other hand, is very competitive, so Alex is more my mode. Jeffrey took thousands of dollars worth of tennis lessons but wouldn't practice on his own. It's like going to school and you only take class only. So I ask him, "If you don't read the books, you don't do the homework, don't do the projects—how good of a student you gonna be?" I might as well have been talking Swahili. When I was a racquet ball player I would stand at the 37 foot mark just three feet from the back wall, and hit backhand after backhand, and if I didn't hit 95 out of 100, I would stay until I did. So I was good at it.

You owned a racquet ball club in the 80s, right?

70s and 80s. '77 through '84. I loved racquet ball. I was good at it.

It was crazy there, right?

What kind of crazy?

Well, that's when you were doing lots of coke.

Coke?! Where'd you hear that?

My mother.

Yeah she didn't like that; she made me throw it away so I did. But I tried it once, and the ball was *this big*, and back in those days nobody knew anything about the badness of it.

So, enough of that.

How long were you actively using it?

Just in that area when I was playing tournaments, then I said enough of that. That was bad stuff. You don't wanna be messing with that, and that's my comment on that.

Moving right along.

I prefer downers, myself.

It's like this: If you think you're having so much fun doing an activity sober, it is *so* much more fun high. I didn't know anything about drugs. I was as far away from that as you are from being a space-shuttle pilot. So I was playing in a tournament, and I'm walking tired because I had had a very tough match, and I had to play in the afternoon. So I'm in the locker room between first and second game dying, just dying; I hadn't got two heartbeats to put together. And one of my friends said, "Here, try this." I didn't know what the fuck it was. I said, "What will it do to me?" [giggles] He gave me a little spoonful and I went back on that court and I was [whispers] *so good*. I'm diving into walls, I'm all over the court; I'm winning. I'm good. And I said, "What the fuck was that? Give me some of that!" And so then I always had a little bit just for events like that. My peers would go to a place called the Slimelight—the Limelight. It was a disco back in the disco era—you know, Donna Summer and the Pointer Sisters—so they would go there and the sign of "I'm doing well in my job" wasn't buying a Mercedes like it is

now—it was having a big ass bag of coke in your pocket. One night we're at the club, and they wanted to leave a tip for the lady—the waitress—and they left her a line of coke that we called an I-75 line because it's so long and wide. Then everybody started doing it involving sex and then we found out that girls who we'd call “coke whores” would spin on their heads if they could to score some coke.

So what years were you actively using?

Just for...you know '84...'85...'86—somewhere in there. But then I stopped. Everybody did coke, we didn't give a shit, and nobody felt like we were doing a criminal activity. We were very cavalier about it.

Why did you and Leslie choose not to tell your sons about me and my sister?

Why? I don't know. It was such a bad era of my life. I put Jodie behind me like it never happened. I didn't like her much. And when I was done, I was done. That may be another earmark of me: When I get done, I get way done. [laughs]

Do you think that they'll find out?

I don't know. In retrospect...because, you know, you're alive, maybe it was a bad idea. It wasn't something I consciously thought of, like, “We gotta keep this a secret.”

Do you fear the day that your sons find out?

I mean, I don't know.

What would you say to them?

I don't know. I haven't thought about it.

Well, think about it.

Well it's not going to happen, is it?

No, no—not from me. But, with that said, I feel like they’re going to find out at some point. So what are you going to say?

Oh, I don’t know, I’ll probably just tell them what I told you.

What if they say to you, “You didn’t like the wife, but why did you leave the kids?”

Welllll...that, that particular item is probably a lack of good judgment right there—that particular part. Okay. It’s not like you said, “Gee, I wish I could be born to you, Dad.”

So, that, I would say on my part was a lack of good judgment. That’s like handing you a gun with the barrel pointed at you. You never do that, right? Well I think this is the same kind of bad judgment.

Did you and Leslie take the time to hide your wedding photos? We were in your wedding.

I know. No, no we didn’t.

There are still pictures of me and my sister in your wedding album?

Uh-huh.

And your kids don’t ask?

Well, they don’t look at it, but one time Alex saw your sister in one of those pictures and said, [in child’s voice] “Oh what a cute little girl.”

Why did we stop seeing you?

Who? You?

Why did I stop seeing you? Do you remember?

Why?

Yeah.

[blows air through lips like a horse] I have no idea.

Do you feel any guilt about it?

Well.

And you can be honest.

Oh can I? [laughs] Uh, yeah, yeah, especially if one of you had turned out to be a serial killer or something like that. You know, like, “Oh, my father abandoned me.” But apparently that didn’t happen, right?

Right.

So that’s good to know! [laughs] You didn’t kill anybody!

No, not yet.

I hope not today. I had a sense of that. You said in your email to Leslie that you’d probably never see me again, and one of my friends said, “He’s probably gonna pull a gun out and shoot you.” [laughs]

[end recording]

I have what I came for. Despite his knack for animated storytelling, everything I have heard about him is validated—confirmed and exacerbated by the funny man himself.

Bare pleasantries will do at this juncture—a handshake and a thank-you—but his chatter shows no sign of abatement. Nuanced gestures are all but lost on him: the closing of a notebook; the capping of a pen; the placement of said notebook and pen in backpack.

First, a self-congratulation—and nod to me—for voting against Proposition 8, the California initiative to ban gay marriage. Which leads to his next topic: HIV and other sexually transmitted infections, naturally. “Man, am I lucky I never caught anything.”

While living in the penthouse of his parents' tony Atlanta hotel, his goal was to "fuck a different girl in every single one of the rooms." In five years he stained his way through all 314 rooms, one-and-a-half times for a grand total of 471 different women—no condoms—charting his success on a piece of poster board.

I place my backpack on my lap.

Then there was the vacation at Club Med in Martinique. "Oh, you gotta hear this!" He imitates a woman, a young nurse, who he was about to fuck. "I want you to use a condom," she told him, his impersonation a whiny child's voice with protruding bottom lip. "So I said, 'I'll pass.'"

And the account of the day he lost his virginity at the Bulldog Inn on the University of Georgia campus: like "sticking [his] dick in wet hamburger meat." He alleges that he ejaculated with such force that he launched the woman off of him: "Tossed her across the room."

I scoot my chair back and stand.

One more tidbit as we walk toward the parking lot. "I'll tell you something about your mother on your deathbed—but only then." My deathbed. "What?" I ask coolly, "She fucked on your first date?" Laughing, he rams me flat-backed against the brick wall of the café: some sort of masculine non-verbal version of *OMG!* "She did something to me that I'll never forget." He wants to disclose information that I imagine I would choose to disbelieve, so, as to avoid any disturbing imagery, I opt out of this revelation. Apparently, I still have feelings for my mother.

I pat myself down for car keys.

He prattles on about the bike, the wind gusts, and the state parks he's about to ride through. "Well, thanks for doing this," I interject. Any pangs of sorrow or fear that this is the last time our thyroid-diseased eyes (his too fast, mine too slow) will meet, elude me.

Clicking helmet straps together, he wishes me luck, mounts his bike, and in a theatrically solemn, low-toned voice adds: "Goodbye, my son."

I scowl at him. He giggles.

"I say that to everyone."

CHAPTER 5
SHARE THE BLAME

The men in Berlin look like Men: six-foot-plus, jagged jaw lines, military shoulders. Next to them, I am a bearded lady.

Sam gets all the long gazes when we're together. Sam is two inches taller than me; he has a taut body that he flaunts in tank tops. I'm never fat but I've developed the beginnings of a belly or "tummy," as annoying people call it. On a recent trip home to Atlanta, I resorted to purchasing a Spanx For Men "Zoned Performance" tank top, which is essentially a binding akin to the multiple ace bandages a female-to-male transgender person might wrap around his breasts. Ree Ree, the ancient black woman who irons for my mom was at her station in front of the television when I entered my parents' home, Nordstrom's bag in tow.

"Hey, Ree," I say, standing in front of her. She looks up at me from her chair ever-unsmilingly.

"You got fat."

My eyes widen, lips purse, and chest rises inhaling a calming breath. I'm the haughty rich woman struggling to keep her composure.

"Really, Ree Ree?" I ask in an affected-unaffected tone. (This is the same woman who decades ago proudly reported that she had "jewed" someone up on a price at our yard sale.) "Where?"

Her amphibian eyes fix on my mid-section. "Yo' stomach."

She dissolves behind a veil of spray starch like a truth-telling apparition. As a comfort,

my mother makes up some racist ideology that in old southern black culture it is actually a compliment to appear portly.

Sam speaks to the mirror as he preens: “You never know what sweet-looking boy you might see when you’re out and about.” I wait, always impatiently, wearing some variation of my pajamas. Sam is not a gym-queen obsessed with his appearance. If anything, he’s a post-modern, queer, new-age, easy-going, hippy—a reaction to years of working in soul-sucking high-end retail. But Sam still preens. He desires and thrives on the validation of a gentleman’s longing gaze despite having a loyal, attractive boyfriend. I can’t help but resent his preening, for I need the validation more than him, and he knows this. What do I want him to do, make himself ugly when he’s with me? Yes. Yes I do.

If only Sam’s admirers knew how gross he is: how his fingers are constantly excavating his nostrils; how he farts deadily; how he belches constantly, tilting his head back, and blowing each one into the air like Bette Davis with tobacco smoke. How he uses “sweet” to mean cute. How he personifies bric-a-brac: “Awwww, she’s sweet, isn’t she?” he’ll ask about a vase. How he addresses any “sweet” animal he encounters as “kitty.” How he smacks like my stepfather when he eats; how he compulsively tugs at his moustache, twirling the hair between fingers; how he does that same twirl with the line of hair from his belly button to the top of his pubes; how he describes the coiled shits he delivered or the soupy diarrhea he spurted. I wish I were more tolerant.

As Sam and I are biking down Kottbusser Damm, he cranes his neck back at me: “Did you see that tall drink of water?” “No, I didn’t, *Sam*,” I reply in prickly staccato. “I told you I’m not looking.” I had made a decision to fend off any potential feelings of

rejection by refraining from eye contact with all male passersby. I punctuate my reactionary Sam-scolding with a friendly smile to balance out my tonal irritation in an attempt at passive aggression (as opposed to my standard active aggression). My efforts to explain my feelings for Sam always end up resembling a trite note from a friend written on the inside cover of a high school yearbook. Will it suffice to say that I love Sam; that I owe it to him to shut my mouth and not roll my eyes in his face? So, I will look away and do it.



Jan, as in Janice, is John in German. Sounds like a Midwesterner saying *yawn*. Jan is attractive, but too hip, too late. His side-lip piercing: passé; floppy hair with heavy one-eye-obscuring bang: predictable; Karen Carpenter collarbones accentuated by an American Apparel deep V-neck: okay, we get it. I have arrived at his flat for a “sexdate,” as the website we met on refers to it. “Ah, but I had been waiting for your response,” Jan says while scanning my person. I’m not much to look at: shirt, shorts, shoes, hair. “I cannot do it now. I must go to the post office.” He’s lying. Some aspect of me has instantly repulsed him. I’m already half way on a mind-trip to a personal hell mired in the deep-rooted shame of being ugly when he asks if I would like a sip of water. A sip of water? I didn’t come here for a sip of water, motherfucker. “No, I’m good,” I say, and turn to leave—manners are unnecessary; I will never see this fool again. “Wait, I join you,” he calls after me. He apologizes while boarding his bike. “Maybe another time,” he says and bikes away. To my surprise, I sense the emergence of tears. I embrace them since my other much-needed release has fallen through, but the tears, too, unceremoniously dissipate.

Jan messages me a few days later inviting me over again, potentially disproving my too-ugly theory. I'm not horny, but find myself on a bike pedaling hard, not out of excitement, but out of a familiar desire to—what does that repugnant, white trash comedian say? *Git-R-Done*? I process nothing of the cityscape, bidding the travel time by compulsively running my tongue across two holes in the inside of my cheek. In a few weeks, I will develop an ulcer on my gums preserved by a grayish film. Oral afflictions are always the first sign that my immune system is in jeopardy, yet I persist: cigarettes, cappuccinos, grapefruits, and other various irritants.

His breath is still moldy with morning at three in the afternoon, or fifteen o'clock as it's known here. He gorges my mouth with his taupe carpeted tongue. Had my mouth been available, it would have emitted a groan. I roll my eyes as some sort of external acknowledgment, an attempt at creating a sense memory I might conjure the next time I seek out sex with a stranger. His eyes are forever closed, which I take offense to—my visage too offensive to gaze at. Absent is the fauxmance—that sham of intensity and passion, which I had come to rely on during these encounters. Jan is a sex fiend, and I am some other sort of closely related fiend.

Whilst being fondled on murky sheets that hold the steady stench of unwashed hair, I recall my friend Mark's parting advice: "Don't get HIV while you're in Europe." "Ugh, I know," I replied, "and they're all uncircumcised, and I read that those dicks have a higher rate of transmission." Not to mention the fact that I still find a turtle-necked member somewhat unsightly. This is immature of me, I know, and I remind myself that once upon a time, even I had foreskin, and maybe those anti-circumcision people are right and it *is* genital mutilation. Mark loves foreskin and fetishizes the Latino Angelino

boys who tend to have it. He taunts me, saying that he likes to nibble on it, followed by sounds. “Num num num num num.” Sick, I tell him. But that’s neither here nor there because I won’t look at Jan’s penis. I’m definitely not putting it in my mouth—I mean, for what?

While his very average, presumably uncircumcised penis is in my ass, Jan’s female roommate knocks on the door. “Nein!” he yells, hovering above me. She persists, barking something in German about her iPhone. Jan keeps pumping. Sound of a door opening. What does she see through the partially filled IKEA bookcase that doubles as a partition? A foot dangling? Eyes rolling? A concave ass bucking? “Nein! Nein!” His exclamations grow louder, and I am finding them a bit abrasive in the moment. She retreats. I take this moment as a good out for me, too. “Nein,” I tell him, and dismount his dick. He rolls over on his side nonplussed, his back to me. “I watch a video,” he says, and brings up porn on his computer. I locate the nearest towel, and without asking, wipe myself half-clean, drop the soiled towel onto the floor, get dressed, and exit. I am pleased to leave on my own volition.



Guido is his name, “like *Jersey Shore*,” he types. “Ha,” I reply, through an Ambien haze. Shame on me for being on the hook-up site especially after ingesting my pill which I know has a way of inducing hypnotic lapses in judgment and inhibition. Guido, whose online moniker “Scatafiasco,” has nothing to do with anything scatological in nature, lives in my neighborhood, Kreuzberg, lists himself as a social smoker, vegetarian, and self-proclaimed “folk music-loving party animal” seeking sexdate, friends, and/or relationship. A plus that he is circumcised, as I have yet to fully embrace the foreskin that

swaths the continent. His photos depict a large-toothed, shirtless, hipster type. Those large teeth are straight (though discolored) unlike the other 85 percent of the German population marred by lack of childhood dentistry. On the website's scale of "shy to forward," he rates himself shy. On the "pedantic or chaotic" scale, he leans more towards chaotic. (I have to look up the meaning of *pedantic*, and it turns out I lean more thataway.) He participates in "soft" sadomasochism only, and "always" engages in "safer" sex. I appreciate the website's use of "safer" vs. "safe."

I email him under my moniker, UhHuhHerr—a reference to the German language (Herr meaning "mister") and the name of an album by my favorite melancholic female rock music spirit guide, PJ Harvey—at 2:06AM, introducing myself.

Guido replies: "You looking for love?"

"You call it love, I call it NSA anonymous sex." Ha. That's a good one, me.

4. [scatafascio](#) 17. Jun. 2011 - 02:10
and wha tyou have special to give?
5. [UhHuhHerr](#) 17. Jun. 2011 - 02:10
the illusion of love and tenderness
6. [scatafascio](#) 17. Jun. 2011 - 02:12
i give you my body, but i sleep in you place tonight, i wake at 8,30 you have mattress post coitum?
7. [UhHuhHerr](#) 17. Jun. 2011 - 02:14
you mean a mattress for you to sleep on after sex?
8. [scatafascio](#) 17. Jun. 2011 - 02:18
yea or just a mattress inmy place is good but a lot of dust for the works i dont like it smell like loft
9. [UhHuhHerr](#) 17. Jun. 2011 - 02:19
yeah i do actually
10. [scatafascio](#) 17. Jun. 2011 - 02:20
youlive alone?:)
11. [UhHuhHerr](#) 17. Jun. 2011 - 02:20
i have roommate sleeping in other room
12. [UhHuhHerr](#) 17. Jun. 2011 - 02:24
you coming>
13. [scatafascio](#) 17. Jun. 2011 - 02:26
yea wher? but you a mattress fo rme?

14. UhHuhHerr 17. Jun. 2011 - 02:27
yeah i do , do u steal>
15. scatafascio 17. Jun. 2011 - 02:28
no im not steal!
16. UhHuhHerr 17. Jun. 2011 - 02:29
when can be here 65 graefestrasse
17. scatafascio 17. Jun. 2011 - 02:35
im kotti mit taxi 10 min..
18. UhHuhHerr 17. Jun. 2011 - 02:37
yeah my alam iis set for 830 abyways,,we might be abke t cuddle
19. scatafascio 17. Jun. 2011 - 02:41
ok so....i come to you? wher i have to kling ?
20. UhHuhHerr 17. Jun. 2011 - 02:43
65 graefestrasse call me when you get here 01578- 3876410.

I will have no recollection of number 14 but it comforts me to know that even in a fucked up state, I'm on guard. However, I fail in the moment to comprehend that he is mostly coming over for the use of a bed (as referenced in #6-8). In my right mind, I might realize that this barter sounds similar to prostitution, which might or might not stop me. I might also reflect upon the fact that my new flat-mate is a room and shared-wall away, and the last thing I want is to jeopardize my ideal living situation.

Guido arrives at 3AM. He is cute in a haggard, disheveled way: longish, nearly black hair; above-average face that an ignorant American like myself might classify as Mediterranean in order to avoid the olive-complexion cliché. He wears a navy blue and hazard orange horizontally striped long-sleeve shirt; a handsome oversized leather brief case in his hand. And what does he see in me? The other half of a deal with an equally above-average face? A boy with a beard? A girl with a beard? He doesn't look like much of a man himself, scrawnier than me, an inch shorter and twenty pounds lighter.

He explains that he is suffering from "ullurgees" (Huh? Oh, *allergies.*), and sneezes several times onto my pillow. I fetch a Singulair tablet, tissues, fresh pillowcase, and nasal spray, administering a puff into each one of his nostrils like someone who cares. He

attempts to hook up with me—“give me his body,” as he put it earlier—but somewhere between the Nasonex and the crusty tissues, I decide he can keep his body. I push him off of me and tell him to sleep.

I wake up at 7:30 alarmed that my flat-mate will either see or hear Guido. I don't want her privy to the fact that her American roomie is sketchy, bringing strangers into her home for sexual encounters. So in my best kindergarten teacher voice I tell Guido to wake up.

“Nooooo,” he drones, my teenage son who is going to miss the school bus.

“Yessss,” I reply, his loving but insistent mother, “before my roommate wakes up.”

He continues sleeping with his back to me. I put my hand on his shoulder, rocking him gently.

“Come on, Guido.”

Long pause.

“Guido...”

Nothing.

“Get me some coffee,” he whines.

“No, no, no. I need you to get going.”

He doesn't move.

I return my hand to his shoulder.

“One more hour.”

“I can't—I need you to get up now because if my roommate—”

“FUCK YOU,” he hisses, whipping around violently and springing from the bed.

“FUCKING AMERICAN PIECE OF SHIT.” I’m jolted by an unfamiliar sense of patriotism.

Guido snatches his handsome briefcase and storms into the bathroom, locking the door behind him. I have recently developed a new response to emergency situations: freezing and pinching my dick with one hand, as if to ground myself. The first time I noticed it was when my dog was being attacked by a pit-bull. “Please God, don’t let anything bad happen,” I pray. Shit is dire when I turn to the good lord. I contemplate grabbing a knife from the kitchen for protection. What tool of violence might Guido wield upon his emergence from the bathroom? My roommate’s lady shaver? I refuse to end up another dead Jew in Germany just so my parents can say, “I told you so.” Or is he looting in there, slipping my two hundred dollar sonic toothbrush into the interior pocket of his handsome briefcase? Or perhaps worse: spitting on it; dipping it in his piss; sticking it up his ass.

Guido marches out of the bathroom, mumbling. I release my dick and silently stand guard, monitoring his moves like security personnel watching a terminated employee collect personal items from his cubicle. He stuffs his wallet and phone into the handsome briefcase. I open the front door, and once he crosses the threshold, rage supersedes fear, and I find myself fending off the desire to physically eject him with such velocity that he tumbles down the stairs, then, meet him on the landing, grabbing him by the front of his shirt, and nose-to-nose growling: “No, fuck you, you crazy motherfucker. Get the fuck out of here. I will kill you!” but it just isn’t worth the possibility of losing such a chic, centrally located apartment.

Berliners are unmoved by the blue neon sign out front: Ficken 3000. *Ficken* means *fucking*. The name is what initially drew me to what happened to be the gay bar closest to my flat. It conjures images of futuristic robotic fucking, well suited for the anonymous sexual rendezvous I am growing ever so weary of, but upon which I rely for a smidgen of validation.

This evening, the porn on the television monitors comes courtesy of Spankthis.com. A young black man, maybe eighteen or nineteen, is bent over the knee of an old white lump crying, "I'm sorry, suh!" in his best southern accent while a flour hand swats his bare brown bottom. I figure it must be European porn unaware of its blatant racist implications until I hear the old man say, "That'll teach you to stare in my window," in a perfectly American accent. Now I revise the film's origin to be somewhere in Tarzana.

I turn my attention to a sexy but strung-out looking fellow, take the seat next to him, and ask the obligatory, "Do you speak English?" (An angry taxi driver recently informed me that it is rude to assume everyone speaks my native tongue.) "A little," he replies. Many people in Berlin answer "a little" when they actually communicate quite well. Marco, however, is an exception. I ask his age to get some insight as to the severity of his apparent drug use. Something-two, he says. "Thirty-two?" I guess. That seems about right. "Nein. Twenty-two," he clarifies holding up two fingers on each hand. Well, he's looking none too good for twenty-two, like he's been up on a meth binge for days, but I doubt they have meth in a classy place like Europe.

He continues to speak to me mostly in German while I interject flat "yahs" every now and then. Adolescent giggle explosions dot his giddy rants, and he intermittently waves peace signs in the air. He believes I understand him or is too fucked up to notice.

“Pah-tees!” I recognize the word he keeps repeating, half-voguing to the music from the jukebox which bears the bar’s slogan, *Share the Blame*. His hair is oil-slicked from days of pahtee-ing, and his overall grubbiness combined with a blessed bone structure is turning me on. I have always admired effortless allure. He whips out a bottle of bubbles and lights a stick of Nag Champa for ambience. “Tee-mo-thee-lee-ree?” he asks hopefully. “Oh yeah, Timothy Leary, yah.” More indecipherable German and bubbles in my face. I interrupt: “Do you do heroin?” I ask in a way that seems like I might or might not be into it. I don’t care to waste time hitting on an intravenous drug user. “No, no, no,” he says emphatically. “LSD, mushrooms, ganja...” he goes down a list. “Speed,” which he is preparing to snort through a rolled up Euro off of a strategically creased cardboard circuit party advertisement. “You want?” he asks.

Marco is content. His only preoccupation is with the large backpack he keeps rifling through. Contents include: the bubbles; the incense; the drugs; a roll of toilet paper; two Beck’s beers, and cookies which he offers and I decline. He makes a point of telling me that he isn’t homeless, that he is a student. Maybe, maybe not. More importantly, it is evident from his description of the last person he had sex with in the basement dark room here—a “big, black Rasta man”—that I’m likely not his type. Plus, he keeps pointing out the men cruising me as they descend the stairs. “You can go,” he says, nodding in the direction of the stairs. No need to engage him for nothing besides puffs on a spliff and a line of speed that I don’t even want, but do anyway just for the drama of the ritual.

I hunch over in defeat, elbows on knees, and stare up at the young black man on TV. The old white lump is receiving his payback now via a gargantuan black dick. I

process what my brain has branded a devastating rejection, and grimace at both my failure and the images on the screen. “Smile,” Marco says, tee-hee-heeing, his face obscured by a mixture of Nag Champa and spliff smoke. My Los Angeles therapist once recommended that I practice smiling. “Even when you’re alone,” she told me. “You have such a nice smile and you don’t do it enough.” I self-consciously force a smile for Marco. I know the smile. It’s pained, and often appears in family photos. I give up and descend the stairs.

Down in the blackwashed, occasionally red-bulb-lit dark room with its maze of corridors, I have a stride going, a near sashay at high speeds when my face slams into a brick wall. An older man who witnesses the scene follows me and asks if I am unscathed. I thank him, and he bums me a cigarette. He gropes my dick, and I slap his hand away like a prissy southern debutante with standards (*Well I nevuh!*), marching back upstairs in a huff.

I pass Marco who doesn’t look at me, and sidle up to the bar, taking a stool next to Manny from Bavaria, a regular who always dons a car mechanic’s jumpsuit even though he is a home nursing aid. Manny asks how my German language skills are coming along. I tell him about the angry cab driver, and that maybe I should invest in the Rosetta Stone. He suggests a possible short cut in the form of a German-speaking lover.

“How long have you been here?” he asks.

“Three weeks.”

“So why don’t you have a lover?”

“I don’t know.”

“Maybe something’s wrong with you.”

“Maybe.”

CHAPTER 6
SAUL AND THE PULL

I didn't have sex until I was already out of college, and was a social worker, and I...decided I wanted to have sex with um...with men. I said I'll try this and see, and I went with hustlers who were...some of them were attractive, and, uh, but it didn't go well because they were on 42nd Street, and it was a very degrading area and, uh, it was only about money...and then I realized it's really not what I wanted. But I started with the hustlers because that was what was available. It was before Stonewall. So that was what you did. You went in a dark area. You can go to a bathhouse, which I didn't do. You could go to a movie house, which I didn't do. But you could go to 42nd and pick up people who were...that way, so that's what I did.

I only got my information through reading gay novels like *City of Night*, and things like that, and I might take notes on that and use that as a reference. But that's a novel, that's not really historical, so it just didn't fit when I would go to 42nd. The way I'd approach people was not...they did it in the novel, but they don't do that in New York City that way, like saying, *Are you a hustler? How much do you want?* You know? That's what I got out of these books.

The first experience wasn't very good, but I figured nobody knew about it, so... And I had some people that liked me, some hustlers that I became their regular customer—they liked me very much. They had girlfriends on the side, so, um, like once, one guy said, "You're the only gay man I allow. I've broken off with this because my

girlfriend doesn't want me to do it, but I keep you—you're the last one." So I was sort of a...privileged character.

Even if they couldn't perform—some of them were on drugs, you know—I would just leave the money and not have sex with them. I felt good about that, that I just...the guy was so out of it...you could see. So I would leave the ten dollars and go...but we went to the shitty hotels, flea bitten hotels. That's where these hustlers would take you for...the rent was so cheap, it was five dollars for the night, and I'd say I wanna have sex...and he's already out, he's on the bed sleeping, and, uh, uh, drooling a little bit and their noses all red from the drugs, you know. But I paid. Even where it was not dirty and filthy you could still get sick. 'Cause I went...this hustler had a beautiful apartment with fish tank and beautiful bed, you know, just like...and I caught parasites from him.

I moved to California to help my brother in Los Angeles, and I was living in Beverly Hills, and went on leave of absence from my job as a social worker...I was doing really well by the way—got very good evaluations...I went on a leave to help my brother who was an alcoholic. He had that Los Angeles lifestyle of drugs and goofballs and liquor, and my family said, well, go out there and help him. He's staying in bed all day and sleeping and drinking and drugging and all these women hustlers...whores...He had all these street girls—what do you call them? Prostitutes, those types, and he's hanging out with call girls that were, you know, some of them were street, others were really high class. And go and see if you can help him out. I couldn't help him. I myself picked up on some of the laziness. I went to work at one in the afternoon. I used to go to these discos there that just opened up in 1968-69, and I went to the discos, and the guys in L.A. looked much better than the guys in New York...They took their t-shirts off, they had

these beautiful bodies, and they had long hair. And so that's when I started with the...becoming a disco queen...in L.A. And, uh, a place called Zeros which, during the week was a famous nightclub, and it would become The Patch on the weekend. The Patch was an all-gay giant disco. And everyone had a car so I would drive there...I had a white Cadillac...and all these palm trees...the weather was nice, you know. But I wasn't happy because it was the L.A. living, you know, wasn't...no love affair, it was just...all pleasure orientated, you know?

And so my brother's business went under and, uh, when I was in L.A. I became addicted to disco, and I stopped with the hustlers because I met somebody who was walking on the street, who was very good looking, and I didn't know he was a hustler...I thought he was a student or something, and I talked to him and said let's have lunch together. So he went home with me to my house and we had sex and he was very handsome: blond hair, blue eyes, and a hippy with the long hair. Thing was, that I didn't realize he was probably hustling to survive, and he joined the marines to straighten out, and he became my boyfriend. He'd be in the marines and visit me, come flying in from Camp Lejeune in North Carolina. He would fly in, and, uh, I would pay for the airline tickets and we would stay the whole weekend together and then, after the weekend was over, he'd have to go back. And so that was like what I consider to be my boyfriend because he was the only one I had, and I was the only one he had, so he and I hit it off well. But in the end we broke up over money. I couldn't keep up sending him to his family...airline tickets...he needed to go to visit his mother who was very sick, and his brother who was in a car accident. So I'd send him to Louisiana and then bring him back, then send him to North Carolina and bring him back, and I couldn't...couldn't keep it up,

you know? And so he went back into the straight world, but I knew for sure he was gay because this lasted for about three years.

I was a little blue but I didn't go back to the hustlers, I just went to the, uh, the disco world, which was now flourishing in New York. Sybil's had just come over from England. It was Sybil Burton's, the ex-wife of Richard Burton...she took the divorce money and she opened up Sybil's, and I used to go there with my straight friends. Then, I went to another one Andy Warhol had: Electric Circus. This is before I came out as gay, and I would go in and be dressed to kill—sequin jackets and glitter and white fur coat and large platform shoes made in Brazil, and silk pants...you know the look. The look of the Bee Gees, but all super hyped up, and I would go and I would have a good time dancing and all that, but I never found Mr. Wonderful on the dance floor, but I did show up. I went to all those discos including Studio 54. After all, if movie stars go there it must be ok. Everything the movie stars did was good for me.

I went back to being a social worker—this time they needed me as a probation officer. I took the test and I got a very high score and they hired me on the spot and I started to work with teenage kids and I was very good at it...got very good reviews...and it lasted about fifteen years, and the only thing was, that at night, I'd go out cruising these gay bars and go to the gay discos, but during the day I'd be very straight with these kids, telling them that they shouldn't go out dancing and all that. I was still a religious boy going to synagogue, but I'd also be going to the bathhouses and to the back rooms, which had opened up.

The Anvil. International Stud—I went there, it was my first one. I went with my friend, and he disappeared the whole night. Then we went to the Toilet. We went to

Crisco's. These were the names! Toilet, Crisco's, and, uh, there was Asstrick...A-S-S-T-R-I-C...the Vault...Each one kinda had their own kind of thing. Mrs. J's was where people would ejaculate—no full sex, only ejaculation wearing jock straps...The worst one, one I would not go to was the Mineshaft because Mineshaft had tubs where people would defecate into the tubs with men in them, and there were levels of, like, Dante's Inferno, so you went lower and lower, and some men wore masks because they were doing such terrible sex acts they wanted no one to see.

The bathhouses had fantasy rooms, some with trucks inside of them—giant trucks inside a room, because the meat trucks along the West Side Highway were popular sex spots. They'd have other fantasy rooms with pillows and cushions—Arabian Nights. I'd go up and down the staircase—couldn't wait for the elevator. I would just run up and down and up and down—there were like fourteen flights of stairs, different levels of the bathhouse, and I'd go to each one. Run up and then down and up again to see if I would meet somebody, you know?

And when you went to the back rooms you could hardly move, your arms were just jammed against you. And there were people fisting each other, there were people in swings, going back and forth naked in swings. It looked like Berlin in the 30's—it was so decrepit. Downstairs there was regular sex. That was gay men who were not necessarily addicts. Underneath there, there was another floor that was the addicts—those were the ones who weren't doing well with, you know, normal sex, so I went there where people stayed till eight in the morning, and I was very unhappy, and I would always have trouble leaving. I'd say, "Ten more minutes and I'm gonna go," until it'd be eight o'clock in the morning. That was when I knew I was in trouble because I couldn't leave until they

closed the place up! We'd come out...the light, the sun...would get us in the eyeballs. The sun. Like in a movie. It was grueling and exhausting...just to get somebody you think is going to make you happy, and all you got was a little more sex.

I prayed to god to save me in certain places where I could not leave. I was able to finally get out of these places because I turned to God instead of the guy next to me. I said, "Help me out." I said, "God, you gotta get me out of this place. I've been here ten hours and I still haven't met Mr. Wonderful." So, that...that kind of discontinuity, this brokenness of one's life 'cause you've been in a dark place all night...and the smell is awful. Urine, smells of urine and poppers and marijuana got into your clothing. Some people liked it.

But it was very dangerous. People got stabbed. I got robbed several times. They got my jewelry 'cause I wear jewelry. I wear a lot of jewelry because when I was kid we just...lacked it. We didn't have any jewelry at all, and it was nice to have. Now I can wear jewelry if I want to. It's inexpensive stuff but it's flashy, you know? And I find it very comforting for some reason...it's just like, 'cause I didn't have it when I was young, you know? And I have some very very beautiful jewelry. I only wear it on the weekends. Like, I have gold and diamonds that people gave me. Gold necklaces. I wear that on Friday and Saturday for the Sabbath. I really...that's good stuff. This is just inexpensive jewelry I wear during the week. So that, that gives me a sense of, like, uh, abundance? Something like that, you know? But my friend had his wallet stolen. I had someone put the mark of Zorro on my shirt...with a razor blade. I went outside and I felt a little draft and sure enough, this big Z...this beautiful shirt...silk shirt, and somebody had taken a razor blade and put a Z like that on the back. And I once met these two kids there, they

were about 12 years old, having sex there with a man, and it was just, oh my gosh, they're letting anybody in. I didn't realize...I thought that was gay life. We didn't know. We thought that that was what being gay was: Party at somebody's friend's house, disco, bathhouse, afterwards we'd eat ice cream sodas at one of these places on Sheridan Square, and then go to the trucks, and then go to the piers, and after the piers, go into the bushes in Central Park...and that was the gay life. And it was nothing; it was just pure sex. Loads of sex, sex, sex on top of sex, but all in the dark, and...and I remember praying at the baths, "God, get me out!" cause they're all skinny shaved-headed guys on these bunks, and it looked just like Auschwitz, and, "Oh, God, get me out of these bathhouses, I hate it!"

I thought gay and slut and addict is all the same thing...and it's not. I realized that, in South Dakota, a backroom was where you keep the beer. I thought everything was a backroom for gay men, you see?

But there were human moments. Sometimes people used to tap me on the head when I was having sex with them. Tenderness was important—male-to-male tenderness—but what I went through to get that was really not...Was it worth all that effort to get that tenderness? A tap on the head is nice but let's face it, after paying ten bucks and going up the twelve flights of stairs to the fantasy room, and ten flights down again...I had sex with a man once and he was having a wonderful time and he...it was funny because he jumped off this box and landed on a dolly...he had no legs. So he rolled himself outta the back room. I said, my gosh, he has no feet, this man, you know? I said, well, he had a good time...that's...you know...always looking for some positive...he had a good time. But my point is that's how little we knew about people.

What really bugged me was the utter discontinuity in my life between my values and principles and my behavior. Once, friends of mine were getting married, I had just been with a hustler on 42nd Street, and all I had time was to run from the hustler, which was very unsatisfying sex, you know, and it was only twenty bucks in those days...and I remember I went to the temple and the rabbis were all blessing the people, and I couldn't go right in because I had to check my face for pubic hairs. There's holy people, weddings, and me coming from a hustler—this clashing of different worlds that didn't seem to fit. There's this kind of like...something's happened, I've fallen through a crack in the universe and I can't get out. And this sense of sordidness, living in the life of sordid degradation...this awful feeling like you have this filthy rag on your body because you know what you've really been doing. Some people love that, but it wasn't for me—to live a sordid nightlife, which in New York was very easy to do because they had regular bars and mafia bars and regular bathhouses and specialty bathhouses and fantasy bathhouses, and it was very easy to sort of just go from one to another. But that's not what I really wanted, but I thought happiness would be found there, and it was an illusion. Happiness is never found in a back room.

And I'd go home so unsatisfied because the real beauties were not interested in me. The real beauties were interested in the other beauties, you know? They'd have, like, the Greek bodies and blond hair and blue eyes and tall and handsome. So, in other words, you go out for a positive experience, and you would endure rejection after rejection, but even that would feed my addiction because I would say, "I'll have my revenge tomorrow. I'll be back again!" So, you see, that was the pull. That was the pull of the gay life.

CHAPTER 7

REI GUY

Hey! Nice ad and pics. I'm 27, bi, discreet, 5'7, 130 6" c, hwp good looking guy here. Spend a lot of time outdoors, cycling, hiking, kayaking, etc... I'm into j.o and oral, not really into much anal play...

So I met him on Craigslist M4M→Bay Area→N. Bay: Be a bitch and sue me.*

So he listed being bisexual and discreet among his qualities. Well, he is discreet—one would never ever read him as gay. He works at REI hocking backpacks, bivy sacks, crash pads, quickdraws, slacklines, carabiners, glacier glasses, and ice axes. In his spare time, he rides freestyle flatland BMX, spending hours alone in empty parking lots spinning and balancing and smoking pot. I always associated pot use with masculinity. Fags, it seemed to me, were not pot-smokers—they were meth smokers and booty-bumpers. They liked uppers—drugs to fuck on—pot dulled their outrageous characters and sex-drives, pot killed the fresh beats of a Palm Springs white linen waxed chest circuit party.

If it hadn't been Allegra, a platinum blonde pixie-do'd girl at Sarah Lawrence, it would have been someone else there to help spur my own pot use. I wasn't enjoying college, having never before encountered such a large number of downright cunt girls: cruel, well-dressed, attractive bitches prone to giving side-eyes and snarls to passersby. My pot use began there with Allegra and members of a commercially successful emo band whom we would now refer to as hipsters, but in 2000, the term didn't exist in that

*This one-liner regarding a litigious bitch was directed toward my friend Karen Margolis at my 1995 Bar Mitzvah, when she complained to the deejay that The Real McCoy's dance hit *Runaway* was being played for the second time.

way. Sensitive boys who wrote homoerotic love songs for each other, but only dated girls. I liked to be around them, warding off panic attacks, too scared to say anything in case they might not find my gayness palatable, for I secretly hoped one of them would write a homoerotic love song in my honor. I had become both scornful and titillated by straight men during my early adolescence.

REI Guy has a name: Shayne. Coincidentally, he hails from South Georgia (I'm from Atlanta), which explains both his name and its inclusion of the letter "Y." His sister is named Shelbye, with an inexplicable (and I think reprehensible) "E" at the end. Shayne is some kind of mix of something pretty—some kind of Central or South American and Caucasian, I'm guessing. High cheekbones, strong jaw, thick eyebrows, and I'll resist the cliché of describing his skin as having an olive complexion, even though it does. He has long hippy hair that hangs right above his shoulders: black, silky sheen hair, the kind of hair that would be unceremoniously hacked off of a downtrodden Indian woman mid-slumber and sold to a hair extension company. Sometimes he wears it in a haphazard ponytail. I love a messy pony. I always wished I had the kind of hair that could be thrown into a messy pony, but I was stricken with curly, frizzy Jewish hair that only grows out, never down. His body is smooth except for the grossly termed "treasure" or "happy" trail that leads to his surprisingly—pleasantly surprisingly—circumcised penis. He sports a goatee that actually works on him, amping up his camp counselor/river guide aesthetic. He looks like the type of guy who bangs bitches in a tent. I will have to perform in order to ensure my chances of a successful hook-up.

The performance is a sort of watering down of gayness. Less is more. It was an acquaintance and former editor at *Out* magazine who advised twenty-year-old me to *tone*

it down if I wanted to attract men. This coming from a man obsessed with anything Disney-related; the walls of his West Hollywood condo filled with carefully framed *Snow White* and *Fantasia* animation cels. “You don’t need to tell them how much you love Belinda Carlisle on your first date.” “But I do love Belinda Carlisle!” I whined. “Well,” he said, “they’ll find out eventually, and by that point, they will love you, Belinda and all.” While I hate(d) him for saying it, I understood the algorithm: Gay men are men who are attracted to men. The more you resemble a man, the more desirable you will be to a gay man. And vice-versa.

Disturbed by the revelation, I conducted a yearlong college research project analyzing a sample of geographically diverse male-for-male personal ads from the 1970s through the present-day, and the data confirmed Disney Gay’s notions: “No fats, no femmes” was an expression echoed throughout the ads regardless of era or location. There existed a staggering discrepancy between those seeking masculine men and those seeking effeminate men. How tragic that the heteronormative ideals of masculinity which had long haunted me were also pervasive among my own people. So much of my turmoil lies in the knowledge that my resplendent effeminacy hinders my chances of attracting men, and thus, my chances of being loved—that I might have to trick a man into fucking/dating/loving me. So what is a queen to do? What she does best: perform. Unfortunately, it will be the dullest performance of her career.

There came a point when the psychosis created by the aforementioned harsh reality intersected with my biological need for sex. As a result, I have spent an inordinate amount of time seeking out sex to prove to myself that I am desirable. It is the closest I can get to filling that ever-present void. I regularly risk my life meeting strangers in

isolated locales to attain a fleeting fulfillment that ultimately leads me to the same dark place from where I began. It is the cruelest cycle. To make matters worse, I harbor a secret desire that one of these encounters might evolve into something meaningful, even with the knowledge that, as Dr. Patrick Carnes, leader in the sexual addiction field, contends: A relationship that begins with anonymous sex is more often than not doomed to fail. If it happens to survive and thrive, it is *in spite of* the fact that it began in such a way.



I prepare the house for Shayne's arrival.

1. Hide potentially off-putting Preparation-H hemorrhoid wipes that live in the magazine basket next to the toilet.
2. While I'm there, move *Vanity Fair* to the back of the pile, replacing it with neutral *National Geographic*.
3. Hide *Absolutely Fabulous* DVD collection
4. ...and my hardcover copy of *Bette & Joan: The Divine Feud*. Well, maybe not. If he knows the significance of AbFab, Bette and Joan, then he's gayer than he let on.
5. Set condoms out in a decidedly nonchalant manner. Entering a bedroom with lights low, a glowing Yankee Candle in *Apple Pumpkin Spice*, and condoms stacked neatly on the bedside table next to three kinds of lube and a bottle of poppers is too pre-meditated, and thus, reads as desperate. Any indication of a desire for romance is the biggest turn-off in a casual sexual encounter.

6. Place towel that I use to wipe my dog's muddy paws in close proximity to the couch to use as a cum rag. He's not using my bamboo-rayon/cotton blend towels from Tuesday Morning.

7. Select appropriate background music. I can't risk Tori Amos shuffling onto my iTunes playlist, so I finally take advantage of my DirectTV music channels—the 800s. 801-Honky Tonk, 802-Classic Rock, 803-Bluegrass... I settle on 809-Reggae, which will speak volumes about my assumed character. Not only is Reggae almost exclusively male-performed music, but it also tends to include fiercely homophobic lyrics. Perfect.



Floodlights illuminate the peace sign that Shayne flashes at me through the window as he approaches the front door. “Showtime Synergy,” I say to myself, recalling the title character from the 1980s cartoon, *Jem and the Holograms*, about a woman who's able to maintain a holographic alter ego by touching her pink star-shaped earrings whilst simultaneously uttering those words. I wear no cute accessories this evening, however, just my non-descript costume (blah jeans, meh t-shirt), to compliment my assumed non-descript persona: the ignoramus who is only gay in the bedroom (or in this case, on the couch, for a bed would be too intimate). I will have to restrict all of my instinctual gestures, vocal lilt, and commentary.

“You wanna beer?”* I ask, as if I, myself, am a beer drinker. In reality, I think beer tastes like liquid wood, the flavor emitted from chewing on a Popsicle stick, but the previous tenants left a large stash in the fridge. I leave “man” off the end of my question

*In heterosexual, you have to mumble and not enunciate. (“*Would you like a beer?*” No. “*Youwannabeer?*” Yes.)

(*You wanna beer, man?*) because I just can't betray myself to that extent. I recently scolded an Urban Outfitters employee in Atlanta for referring to me as "man" several times throughout our transaction. "Sweetie, Honey, Sugarball," I said, "I'm not upset, but you should know that not everyone appreciates being referred to by their perceived biological sex." It is the assumption that all men speak like that that really burns me—that all of us identify first and foremost as men. None of my gay friends call each other "man" or "dude." We call each other "Mary" or "Queen" or "Miss" or "Miss Queen Mary."

Shayne selects a beer that I will nervously open because I nervously open all bottles—wine, beer, baby—because I *will* fuck it up. I'll leave half a cork in the bottle's neck, and be forced to poke it down into the wine, picking wood bits off my tongue for the rest of the evening. I always admired the guy who could use a lighter to crack open a cold one, the guy who girls and fey boys like myself hand our bottles to at parties. I block the beer from Shayne's view, successfully opening it on the second try. Tonight, Shayne is my "bud." Just two buds kickin' back with brewskis and jerkin' it. I'm dying inside, yet my eye is on the ball, to use sport-speak (and not to use some sort of lame sexual innuendo). I escort him to the couch where we sit, and where I have trouble looking him in the eye. Only a truly sociopathic imposter can look his victim in the eye.

He leans back into the corner of the couch, splaying his arms out, taking up space, as men are prone to do. He's a Chatty Cathy, which is a relief, as my character will not hold up under lengthy conversation—my voice will eventually go gay without an amount of effort that I am unwilling to expend. He reflects on pot: "*My spiritual guide, who I go down to the Amazon to trip with, he tells me to eat cannabis, and before eating it, say a*

prayer to the spiritual god of Ganja, you know—to its spirit—give offering, give thanks.”

His long-term aspirations: “*Yeah, I just wanna get on my bike, do some shit, bring my camera and a couple things and just fuckin’ inspire people to get outside and do shit or just, like, change their lives, you know?*” I cut in here and there, if only to gage his interest. The more he talks, the longer he stays, the longer he stays, the greater the likelihood is that he wants me, or some aspect of me. I ask if he’d like another beer. He accepts, signaling that he will, in fact, stay and hook up.

The period from meeting to hook-up is taking too long, and I’m growing increasingly bored, so I place my hand on Shayne’s inner thigh. We move closer, and instead of kissing me, he unbuckles his belt, pulls his pants down, and gingerly guides my head toward his lap—a gesture I have never appreciated. With my tongue and fingers, I feel two bumps beneath the head of his penis. I’ve had bumps beneath the head of my penis before and they’re typically known as genital warts. As a result, my hard-on dissipates and I know it ain’t coming back any time in the near future. I move my face close to his to initiate a kiss. I need him to feign more of a connection, create an illusion of intimacy to heighten the experience. Despite the kiss, I can’t get hard, so I tell him not to worry about me, and to just go ahead and come, which I won’t be helping with besides some *oh yeahs* and the occasional *Shoot that load*.^{*} To further expedite the process, I ask where he wants to come. “Where do you want me to?” he replies. Ugh, god, I don’t care. How about at home in a sock? He finally settles on his stomach, and while he’s still huffing and puffing, I deliver my standard exit line: “You wanna towel?” I get up and

^{*} Ew, *load*. I hate using that word in a semen-capacity.

toss one at him because my character likes baseball. It's an underhand toss as not to give myself away.

Shayne wipes the towel across his stomach a few times, and much to my chagrin, remains naked on the couch drinking beer. His prattle continues: *"It was the Moors that came into Europe during the dark ages to show the Europeans the fuck how to live!"* *"I'm 27. Gotta get my shit together. This is the age when all those musicians died—Janis Joplin, Jim Morrison."*

"Morrison," I can't resist.

This interaction is reminiscent of the times I've spent with my pot-dealers. You make the purchase, take a few bong hits together, but then you can't be rude and leave immediately because you risk jeopardizing the weed connection, so you stay and listen to the stoner wax poetic on whatever sloshes around his airy noggin. I eventually interject that I have more work to do (read: Vacate the premises immediately). Is he so naïve that he doesn't know that the point of these acts is immediate satiation, drive-thru validation: In-N-Out; Kum & Go; ~~Burger King~~?

Shayne takes the not-so-subtle hint and quickly puts his clothes back on. When we're at the door, I deviate from my charade, and reach to hug him goodbye. He retreats, only wanting to shake hands or bump fists, I imagine. *"Your dick was in my mouth,"* I hear myself say. He concedes and hugs me.



Over the years, I've created a number of email accounts for the sole purpose of orchestrating anonymous sex. Part of the fun was selecting a pseudonym and email address for my assumed persona. My go-tos were the actual names of my childhood

bullies: Adam Kepler, Robert Glass, Aaron Lacy—sexy, authentically homophobic names. I had to keep creating new ones because I would frequently declare an end to my harrowing search for love anonymous sex, delete the email address associated with it, and subsequently return to that depth of desperation and loneliness and continue the perilous cycle. Though there is now less of a need to use personal email addresses to conduct hi-tech sex hunts thanks to membership-based websites and smartphone apps, when getting back to basics on a site like Craigslist, I just use my regular, old email address with my real name. I figure that someone like Shayne is either too stoned or disinterested or careless to take the time to conduct a search. Besides, if one were to search for me, he would have to sift through many articles about the famous Matt Siegel—the Boston-based radio host of *Matty in the Morning*—before discovering the treasure-trove of revealing and potentially off-putting information about me—written and performed by me, to boot.

“The Unabashed Queer” was the name of my column on a popular online gay magazine. I always maintained that I was not *the* Unabashed Queer, rather, that I strived to be *an* unabashed queer, supporting others and myself in exorcising identity-based shame. Among the provocative topics, I candidly explored my own experiences with gay sex clubs, HIV scares, sissy-phobia in the gay male population, as well as my unfortunate stint on a reality television show. Then there is my mildly successful YouTube video series, *This is She*, which opens with the voice-over, “I’m Matt Siegel, and I’m too lazy to get a sex change,” and usually features me in drag. In regards to procuring a man, this information is unlikely to do me any favors.

Thanks to the obscure spelling of Shayne’s name, “Shayne + BMX” was all I needed to initiate a mini background check. I might have gotten to that background check had I not been sidetracked by all the sexy images of him—from the ESPN website, no less—with his hat on backwards, wearing a t-shirt that says “Primo,” standing beside his butch BMX comrades in front of a wall of graffiti. There are even videos of him doing his BMX thing...“tricks,” I think they’re called. I know about tricks.* I emailed select images and a video link to my friends with subject lines like “We’re fucking” or “He fucks me!” One friend replied with an image of a Backstreet Boy who looks unsettlingly similar to Shayne. My pal Kate said she wants my sloppy-seconds: “He must go both ways!” And he does—ish.

He says that hooking up with women makes him nervous, and that he hasn’t done it in two years. Well, it makes me nervous, too, and that’s why I haven’t done it in thirty-one years. He’s quick to follow that by saying he could never envision “marrying a man”—uttering the phrase as if the mere idea of it is grotesque and absurd. No, he could never envision marrying a man, or living the “gay lifestyle.” This makes him the second man I’ve been with to declare the “gay lifestyle” not for him, leaving me to wonder what the fuck, exactly, said lifestyle is. Is it a Palm Springs white linen waxed chest circuit party? Is it lisps, limp wrists, and sashay parades? Is it depraved, underground, unprotected sex with multiple same-sex partners? Is it safe, vanilla sex with one same-sex partner? Is it Anderson Cooper and Doogie Howser? Is it here and queer and should we get used to it?



* A reference that would be lost on Shayne.

Shayne rarely sees a hook-up more than once. He must like me. Or this. Even with such knowledge, due to superstition, I have yet to enter his contact information into my phone. It seems the moment I do, the relationship goes awry. Until proven otherwise, he will remain a mess of digits, identified only by area code, and never committed to memory.

At 9:35, I receive a text from a 7-7-0 number: it's Shayne. "Hey, you down to hang tonight?" My heart rate accelerates. I change into pants that accentuate my ass, which Shayne will be dining on this evening, and which I have thoroughly douched using Fleet Naturals—a non-laxative enema, "*for any time you want to feel fresh.*" I plug in the holiday lights, which adorn my window—I am a firm believer in lighting and its potential to affect one's mood. I switch on a lamp by the couch, and then turn it off. Then on again. I'll leave it on. The TV goes off—I imagine Shayne has a "KILL YOUR TELEVISION" sticker affixed to his Nalgene bottle. I toss a book on the couch to create the illusion that I've been leisurely reading during his 40-minute commute to see me.

In addition to the possible genital warts which Shayne assures me he has had examined, it seems I have a difficult time staying erect for guys who I find especially hot, confounded by the reasons they are settling for me. I want to perform well so I journeyed to Secrets Adult Superstore in Santa Rosa in search of a cock ring. The clerk was a rough-and-tumble man, explicit in both his and his wife's personal reviews of the merchandise. "Her favorite is the Triple Clit Flicker Vibrating Cock Ring, for obvious reasons." I appreciated his candor and settled on a gelatinous twist-tie looking number in fuchsia, adjustable in size, and able to squeeze both the balls and the base of the shaft. When I returned home to try it on, I found the aesthetic of my cock and balls strangled by

a hot pink noose, combined with the accompanying stinging sensation from lack of blood-flow to be both worrisome and off-putting.

From the couch where I am not reading, but checking Facebook, headlights hit the back wall of the living room. Showtime Synergy! We make no physical contact upon Shayne's entrance. My dog, who is used to being fawned over, appreciates Shayne's coyness. I, on the other hand, have never been one for coyness, and am in serious need of a good fawning-over. I offer him a glass of Chardonnay—twist-top. He doesn't usually drink Chardonnay, he says. He prefers the earthy tannins of a red. I prefer the airy crispness of a white, as does my mother.

Shayne blathers about a Chinese family he helped at the store today. They spent an hour with him and didn't buy anything. Foreigners always do that, he says, and which he has permission to say owing to the fact that he's half-Iranian (not of Latin descent as I had suspected) according to the low standards of political correctness that I have set forth in my mind. He repeats stories and I pretend it's the first time, the way I pretend to still be interested after I've come and am waiting for him to do the deed. Out of politeness. "Alright," I announce, moving in on him. We kiss, and I wonder if he does so solely for my benefit the way I suck his dick for his, not because either of us particularly want to. I always gag—an embarrassing audible gag to the point where I nearly vomit. Could my inability to engulf an entire dick be further evidence of my lack of masculine prowess?

Shayne removes his shirt revealing his sinewy upper body: hair in only the right places; small waist; broad shoulders; flat stomach. I follow suit, attempting to appear confident as I struggle out of my t-shirt, like a child who needs help from mommy. Perhaps I am prolonging the moment until I have to expose my chest and stomach

covered in hair like some sort of punishment from G-d. No matter how many times he's seen it, I dread every unveiling. I was the first boy in junior high to sprout all that unwanted mess, and I remember thinking how spiteful G-d was to do that to me out of the 39 other boys in my class. Wasn't I busy fending off homophobic children? Why turn me into some hyper-male-bodied mutant? Not nice. As soon as I have the funds, I will endure six to eight sessions of rubber-band-snapping laser hair removal.

Bossy Bottom that I am, I tell Shayne to fuck me. "Fuck me," I demand—just like that. "Do you want me to fuck you?" he asks back and kisses me. What is this *Simon Says* bullshit? YES, I JUST SAID THAT. Oh, it's some kind of verbal foreplay. I give him a choice: my bedroom or the bed in the loft, which we will ascend a ladder to get to. "The loft would be cool," he says. I throw the Astroglide upstairs and pray not to suffer some sort of calamity while climbing the ladder. He pulls a condom out of his jeans pocket. *Kimono*: a brand I have never heard of. I hope it isn't some baa-baa-black-sheep lambskin condom that provides zero protection against STIs. "America's thinnest condom family," per its packaging. *Condom family*? I resist the urge to make references to small-dicked Asians and their "condom family."

It turns out that the loft is a good place to fuck due to the slanted roof which provides something for me to prop my flailing feet against. Shayne is sweating because of the heat emanating from the wood stove below. I'm not sweating, because in addition to being a bossy bottom, I'm a rather lazy bottom. When we're finished, he asks if I want a towel. "Yeah, get the one behind the door, on the shelf," I tell him. "This one hanging on the back of the door?" he asks. "No, look down. The one on the shelf." He's graduated

from the dog's towel to the towel that belongs to the owners of the cottage—the one they probably wrap their child in after a day at the pool.

When we get in bed to sleep together for the first time, the room is pitch black. Shayne remarks that he can't see anything, and pulls me ever so close, frequently alternating positions as if to explore the possibilities for the melding of our bodies. This is my favorite part of our physical relationship to date. He squirms and giggles. Apparently, when the lights go out, he feels free to get a little gay on me. I like that he's taking these risks. I will become his only outlet for this. He'll need me.



Something happened while I was out of town the past week visiting with my mother in San Francisco: Shayne began sending me texts, chit chat texts, “just cuz” texts. “I just got broke the fuck off up here in Tahoe snowboarding, so damn icy up here!” Once I googled “broke off + snowboarding” and learned that it means to fall off or crash, I replied with some lighthearted albeit lackluster comment about him returning in a body cast. After coyly not replying to his subsequent message, he sent another one: “I thought you said something about your bday, too, so if that's going on, happy birthday.” Ah, to have a guy remember my birthday.

Shayne comes over the evening that I return from the city, greeting me with a Tupperware container containing three hastily iced red velvet cupcakes full of marijuana-infused butter. “I made these for you,” he says. When an addict gives you their drug of choice, well... I am gaining power. I am succeeding in making him care about me.

He asks about my week in San Francisco. Taken aback by his interest, I realize that I have very little to say about it. I haven't revealed very much about myself due in

part to the fact that I have been scared of repelling him. “The truth is, Shayne,” I might have said, “My mother and I went shopping the entire time— an activity I imagine you hate. I was the gay son she has dreamed of, taking her to upscale vintage and consignment shops, yaying and naying potential purchases. I realized this week that she is a compulsive shopper. Every store we entered, she threw a fit over at least one item, and offered to buy it for me. A one-hundred dollar t-shirt from James Perse. ‘I can’t condone anyone paying that amount for a t-shirt,’ I told her, to which she commended my prudence. Later, I shared my concern that she might have a problem, which, shockingly, I observed her take into consideration, and ultimately half-admit. I received a text from her today boasting that the only shopping she did was at the grocery. ‘Did you buy any pharmacy items?’ I asked. She loves a pharmacy item, especially anything beauty-related—an unfortunate trait that I have inherited. I had told her that I am placing a moratorium on the purchase of beauty products for both of us, aside from essentials like toothpaste and deodorant. My god, the amount of money she has poured into hair products full of empty promises and moisture-sucking sulfates. And her hair still looks like a more elegant Kate Gosselin wig: Bangs with a bouffant. She spends hours getting ready, and when she is seemingly finished, she continually re-checks herself in the mirror. It makes me sad.”

“Not too much,” I tell Shayne. “Just ate out a lot, walked around...” Now I’m boring myself. Maybe I prefer him talking at me. I look around the room for conversation starters. Grapefruit—I already asked if he likes grapefruit. The words scribbled on my dry erase board: “Imposter/performance.” He doesn’t know that those words are written in reference to him—to us. We speak in length about the Notre Dame football player

Manta Te'o, and the scandal about the girlfriend whom he never met and who turned out to be a gay man, with or without Te'o's knowledge. Shayne recounts a story of being harassed at a gas station in Alabama. The gas station clerk asked if he and his male friend were "kissing cousins." "I almost punched the dude!" Shayne says, causing my dick to go hard.

We're sprawled out on opposite ends of the dilapidated couch under an electric blanket holding each other's feet. I'm fucked up and marveling at his beauty—his bone structure and how the blanket cuts his face off at a divine angle. Overwhelmed, I blurt out how handsome he is. He does not return the compliment, and yes, I want it returned even if in vain. "I'm not a big talker, usually," he says instead. I'm relieved at his level of self-awareness, and I wonder if it is a veiled compliment, that apparently he feels comfortable with me. I'm even more assured that I might make a great therapist, because I can sit here and appear interested while under the influence of wine, pot cupcakes, and Viagra.

I took Viagra for the first time today. I got a few from a friend—most queens I know keep some on hand regardless of their age or penile functionality. I've still been enduring erection issues with Shayne. I wonder if the purported side effects of Propecia have caught up with me after four years. Propecia is a drug men take for prostate issues, but in smaller doses has been shown to promote hair growth, and thus prevent hair loss, which is one of my main personal objectives in life. But I suspect the boner problem is psychological, due to the inherent lack of connection caused by having a closeted sexual partner. Or to the aforementioned insecurity I have because I can't imagine why he is interested in me. I had thought that on Viagra, all the blood in my body would whoosh to

my dick and remain there for twelve hours, leaving me with an indestructible erection and teetering on the precipice of unconsciousness, but sadly, no.

In addition to the Viagra, I purchased a German lubricant intended for anal sex: *Pjur Backdoor Glide*. It's supposed to desensitize the area without the use of Lidocaine or Benzocaine, which can be dangerous because the numbing effects might prevent the user from noticing if his ass is tearing.

“Want to use a Kimono?” Shayne asks with a grin.

“Do you want to fuck me?” I ask back.

“Yeah. Do you want me to?”

“If you want to. Do you want to?”

“Yes.”

Even with the Pjur, when he pounds me from behind, his dick goes so deep it feels as though it might be bruising my heart, so I have to stop and retrieve my sample-size of Lidocaine-rich Boy Butter Extreme H2o Desensitizing Lubricant, which is packaged in a precious container à la Country Crock, with a similar logo and font. Just as Shayne is about to come, and I mean JUST ABOUT TO COME, I say, “DON'T COME!” and snatch his hand off of his dick. We are both shocked. “What? Why'd you do that?” he asks. “I don't know,” I reply. “I have no idea. I think I wanted us to come at the same time.” He grabs our dicks and presses them together, jerking them until we come. I come on him. I come a lot. He says “whoa” while I come—a mixture of surprise and horror. I keep coming. He comes. His semen is bright white and gluey. There's less of it. Mine is translucent, and there's more of it. I pop up off the bed and toss a designated towel at him.

I don't sleep well. I am thoroughly fucked up from the medicated birthday cupcake, tripping out in bed, hyper, wishing I was at once walking around, talking, singing, entertaining the masses, but stuck in bed, in the dark with him clinging to me—always an arm or leg strewn over me. I love his touch, but am prone to overheating, so I gently remove parts of him from me. Suddenly I become ravenous. All I ate today was Adderall and Viagra, so I slip out of bed, tiptoe into the kitchen, and pour a bag of sunflower seeds—sticking to my lips and face—down my throat. Followed by some too-watery, undercooked oatmeal.

On his way out the next morning, we kiss goodbye for the first time, and he asks if I want him to come back later—as in later that same day. I could use a night to myself, but I say sure, reveling in the knowledge that I am sought after.



I'm at a neighbor's house when Shayne arrives at the cottage. I had told him to let himself in. Walking the path back to my house, guided only by moon and starlight, my pace increases as I get closer. I see him through the window, and picture our reunion, which plays out exactly as I imagined. My dog gallops past me onto the porch waiting at the door panting, tail wagging, pleased to see Shayne's now-familiar face approaching. Shayne and I squeeze each other. We kiss and I steal occasional glances at his face.

Shayne brought some sticky-icky nose-tingling weed, which he will roll into a blunt. I zone out as he talks blunt wraps and weed strains, and without asking, fetch all the supplies he'll need: a piece of card stock, a magazine, a grinder, and a lighter. He likes that I know this—I am bucking his ideas of the “gay lifestyle,” penetrating that hypermasculine marijuana territory. I watch his tongue glide over the blunt wrap, an

image I have always found titillating. I spent years devoted to marijuana, watching nail-bitten dude fingers expertly roll joints and blunts, a skill I could never master, what with constantly trembling hands due to the assorted SSRIs in my system. Since then, I've carried a long-held blunt fantasy that I might someday date one of these talented men.

We're lying on the narrow couch, our slender bodies pushed together, his hands grazing various parts of me, petting me, giving me a boner that I cannot achieve when he's fucking me or sucking my dick. One hand settles over my heart—quaint, I know. His other hand holds my hand in that sensual way—all fingers intertwined. Shayne passes me the blunt, sometimes craning his neck to shotgun big nasty hits of weed smoke into my mouth. He hacks deep-seeded coughs 'cause real stoners take that shit to the head—always got something to prove, can't take a leisurely lady puff. I hold the blunt between my index and middle finger like a damn dame. The darkest gray of the smoke seeps out of my mouth, vacuumed up through my nose like the French do. My heart is beating so fast that I tell him, "I'm good," which is stoner for "no more weed just now, but thank you." I nonchalantly guide his hand from the left side to the right side of my chest—I don't want him to feel the rapid pulsing of my heart. I imagine my body's internal controls going bonkers like the meter on a house about to explode. I take discreet, calming intranasal breaths, and commend myself for handling the marijuana—for my ability to be who Shayne wants me to be. "I was dating this girl in Alaska," Shayne says, causing my boner to go dry, "and she took one hit off a blunt and bugged the fuck out, man. I had to take her outside and calm her down." He squeezes me tighter.



I'm going to make dinner for my man. *My man*. Tonight I play the role of elegant house frau.

First, I shower, making sure to lather every nook and cranny* because you never know where your man might go. Attention to detail is key. Shayne was massaging my feet last night, and today I noticed that one of my toenails was freakishly overgrown. I moisturize my face to avoid any unsightly dry patches. I check my widow's peak. Lately, it's been flaking excessively—big flakes that I like to rub off and examine while I watch television. I run Aquaphor over my lips. I dab on my signature fragrance—*Century* by Odin New York: *Complex in structure but simple in character*—just a dot on my wrists and neck. I don an electric blue shirt that serves to further enhance my admittedly remarkable irises.

We will fuck before dinner, on an empty stomach, with more energy. The sheets are always cold so I preheat the bed with the electric blanket on level 8. I light a scented candle—essences of honeysuckle, wisteria, and jasmine—and promptly blow it out. Subtle.

Daddy's home! After a quick mirror-check, I remove the wine bottle that has been chilling in the fridge, and pour him a glass. When he walks in, I smile, and hand it to him. "For you." He takes a sip, sets it down, and kisses me hard, squeezing me until my back cracks. I place my hands on his chest, pushing him away, as if to say, "But, Honey, the kids are in the other room." I tell him to get on the bed. "It's pre-heated, baby. I did that for you." He giggles.

* like a Thomas' English muffin.

While he's taking a pre-coital piss, I remove my pants, leaving me in a button-down shirt and briefs. I have always wanted to wear this costume, reminiscent of some cinematic moment where the ingénue wakes in the middle of the night to find her lover is gone. She pops out of bed grabbing the first article of clothing on the floor, which happens to be the oxford shirt her man wore to work yesterday, the same one which she slowly unbuttoned last night before performing mind-blowing oral sex on him. It fits her like a short dress (he's 6'2), and with the top 5 buttons undone, she parts wind-whipped curtains and walks out onto the balcony to find him clad only in pajama bottoms, hunched over, hands on railing, wrestling with assorted inner demons. She wraps her arms around him from behind, pressing her cheek against his powerful man back. Taking his hand, she leads him back inside to the bedroom where they have sex even though he is distracted. Shayne is 5'7 and only wears t-shirts, but tonight, I am that woman.

With my man glowing and his appetite boosted, it's dinnertime. "You handle the fire and I'll fix the food," I tell Shayne. I'm quietly giddy as I farm out salad fixins, feeling the refrigerator light shining against my face. He's in the living room focused on the fire, this test of virility. I'm chopping things at the kitchen counter repeating a little ditty: "I'm making a salad for *my man*. *My man*." The greens are local and organic—triple-washed: red and green Swiss chard; kale; tatsoi; arugula; spinach. I consider texture, adding snippets of sugar snap peas and sesame sticks. I consider color: yellow bell pepper, purple cabbage, orange carrots. I consider flavor: nutty, lip-puckering, tingling. I want this salad to be everything.

We're on our couch; I'm leaning against him while he devours the salad. He loves it, and he tells me so. "God, this is the best salad I've had in a long time." And when he

finishes it: “Wow, I didn’t think I’d be able to eat all of that, but it was so good.” He kisses me. I have done right by my man. *My man*. I keep him full. And he keeps me warm.

Between sips of a fine dessert wine, I ask Shayne what he would deem his all-time scariest life experience. He says it was when he came into close proximity with a grizzly bear and her cubs while in the wilds of Alaska. When he returns the question, I have to take a moment... I think of Guido in Berlin, I think of a night in Atlanta when I had to flee a police raid on a popular cruising locale—stories I ~~can~~ won’t share with him. I settle on the time I was en route to London, when, out of nowhere, the aircraft dropped, causing me and my fellow passengers to scream as our heads hit the ceiling, followed seconds later by another colossal plummet. “What about the other day with the dogs?” Shayne asks. My 35-pound dog had run up to an untended 90-pound Bull Mastiff, and got right in its face. I reflexively grabbed Shayne’s forearm as I did to the stranger sitting next to me on that London flight. “Oy vey,” I said, otherwise unable to move. “That was so cute!” Shayne says, laughing. It was kind of cute in retrospect—and driven only by an intrinsic reaction: so authentic.

I finger the rubber band around Shayne’s wrist. He rubs the back of my neck. “Hey, do you think I can wear yellow with my skin tone?” he asks, tugging at his t-shirt. “You know about fashion,” he says. I do, but how does he know? He’s only seen me in t-shirts and jeans, and naked. I sit up and take a gander. “Yeah, sure,” I say and smile. He kisses me and begins breaking up weed on the coffee table to roll into a joint. I fetch rolling papers for him.

“So,” he says, “I have to make a confession.”

Shit, shit, shit. No confessions. Not now. I don't want to hear about your secret girlfriend. I don't want to hear about your secret boyfriend. I don't want to hear about the other trick you met on Craigslist and have been fucking this whole time. I don't want to hear that those bumps beneath the head of your dick are, in fact, genital warts. I don't want to know that you've lied to me in any way. There can only be one liar in this relationship.

"Okay," I say, inhaling a deep breath through my nose.

He looks up at me.

"I googled you—"

I release the breath and feel my face go red.

"I saw your videos...I read your articles."

He looks back down at his weed project. If we weren't in my house, I'd pack my things and skedaddle.

"Oh yeah?" I ask nonchalantly, as if my head isn't about to explode. As if I'm not prepping for a fist in my face, or at least a stern talking-to for my lies by omission. As if I'm not preparing my speech: *I'm sorry, Shayne. I shouldn't have pretended to be something I'm not. I just, I thought maybe you'd get to know me—I don't know what I thought. I was desperate to be loved.* "What'd you think?"

He smiles. "They're hilarious!"

I sit back down beside him. He puts his arm around me, and continues: "They're bold and raw. I love them!"

"Did they...um..." How to ask this? I take a distanced, academic approach: "Did they *align* with how you had previously viewed me?"

“Yeah,” he says. “You’re a proud gay man.”

Am I?

“Well,” I say, “Did you L-O-L?”

“Yes!” He kisses me.

“I have an admission for you, too,” I say. “I love Belinda Carlisle.”

“Who’s that?” he asks.