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Are You Still Listening?

Alden Eagle

University of New Orleans, aeagle1@uno.edu

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Are You Still Listening?

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
University of New Orleans
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts
in
Film, Theatre and Communication Arts
Creative Writing

by

Alden Eagle

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I Came Back Later, but Only to Steal More

Hi! Welcome to Shoe-Witch! Can I help you try on anything today?

No? Okay, then is there anything else I can help you with? Besides shoes? Some sunglasses, maybe? Shoelaces? Because that's pretty much all we've got. That and those weird toe sock things, but you probably don't want those. No one ever does. They're kind of creepy, you know? Like, whenever I look at them, all I can think about is all the extra lint you probably get between your toes, you know?

Sorry. I'll just let you browse. I talk too much when I'm the only one in the store, and it's slow, because I just kind of get bored here by myself, you know? End up just sitting here, posting too much on Facebook. It's kind of embarrassing. Like if you looked at my Facebook right now,

you'd just see the same thing over and over again. At work, bored. Bored, at work. Boring day at work. My boss is being creepy again. Boring day at work.

Good thing my boss isn't Facebook friends with me. He tried to friend me like a dozen times, but I think he just wants to see my photos. He's super gross. He keeps talking about putting in security cameras, but if he does, I'll just quit.

What? No. No cameras. Kind of a weird question, asking about security cameras. I mean, unless you were trying to rob the place or something. Just kidding!

You wouldn't try to rob the place. This would be a totally weird place to rob.

Oh, wow. Oh my god. Is that a real gun? Oh my god. Are you seriously robbing us? You *are* seriously robbing us. Wow. Okay. Well. This is weird. Kind of ironic though, that I was all like, you wouldn't rob the place, and now you're totally robbing the place.

I'm keeping my hands right here. Right where you can see them. And now I'm just going to open the register. That's all the movement I'm doing.

Hey, um. This might be a rude question, but I don't really know what the proper etiquette or whatever is for being robbed. But is this your first time?

Yeah. I thought maybe so. You look super nervous. It's okay. You should really relax, you know? I've watched enough movies and stuff. I know the best thing is just to give you the money and not try to be a hero or anything. And it isn't even really my money, since it's the store's money or whatever. So let's just act normal, okay? So that if anybody else comes in, they'll just think this is like a normal thing that happens. Like I'm just doing my normal thing where I empty out the register. Like maybe I'm emptying it out because it's got too much money in it?

Huh. We just opened like an hour ago so it's actually not all that much. Sorry about that. Kind of disappointing for your first big robbery, you know? Let me get an envelope or something. I don't even think I've sold anything today. Not cash, anyways. We start the morning with a hundred dollars, so there's that. A bunch of it is in change.

Like, look at this. This whole roll of quarters is only ten bucks. Do you want to even bother with it? Because it's kind of bulky, and honestly, if you left it, you'd be doing me a huge favor because I have so much laundry to do right now, and the machines in my building only take quarters. It's just been so hot and everything, that every night I'm like, okay, tonight's the night. Do the laundry. Do it. And I start bundling it up, and I get my detergent and my fabric softener, and I get to the door, and I'm just like, no. It's too hot. I can't do this. And then I just drink a vodka and Sprite instead. And every morning I'm like digging through all the stuff I never wear because that's all that's clean. Like, look at this shirt? I am *so* not the kind of girl who wears a Hello Kitty T-shirt. You can tell that, right? That this is like an emergency situation if I'm wearing Hello Kitty, right? I don't even really remember where I got this. You ever have that happen? Where you just have clothes, but like, you don't know why, or how? They've just always been there?

And I don't even know what the next step is after Hello Kitty. I can't even imagine what I'll be in tomorrow if I don't wash some clothes tonight. I'm so desperate that I'm wearing a sports bra right now, too. You can probably tell, right? Do guys notice that kind of thing? I mean I know girls do. And god--it's so uncomfortable. I'm totally squished. And the weird thing is that I don't even exercise, really. So why do I even own a sports bra? I mean, I exercise a tiny bit. I walk, I guess. Sometimes. I do yoga. Or did. A few times.

Wow. I'm talking way, way too much. Wow. Nervous, I guess. Never been robbed before! We're a pretty good pair, though, you know? Your first robbery, my first time being robbed. We can kind of learn together.

But yeah. You take this stuff, the bills and everything. I'll just put this all in an envelope for you, right? And I'll take the quarters, and that'll be just between us. Actually, let me get a better envelope. This is one of those ones you have to lick, and I hate that. Don't you hate that weird envelope taste? It's not just the taste but the weird, dried out way your tongue feels. I think we have some of the ones that are already sticky where you just peel off the strip.

It'll just take a second, I swear. Just stay cool, okay? That's the biggest thing for both of us is just for both of us to stay cool.

Now it's like we're partners in crime. That is so funny. I'm a total criminal now, right? Do you have a partner in crime? No? Do you want one? J.K. Just kidding! Wouldn't it be so funny if like, this led to something? Like, imagine a romantic comedy, and you know how the couple always has to have some weird way to meet? Like she's a dog walker, and he's jogging, and the dogs she's walking get all out of control and they all bite him. And then from then on out, that's like a cute story they get to tell their friends. Wouldn't that be funny if, and I'm totally just saying this because I think it's funny, but if like a few months from now, you got me this amazing stolen engagement ring, that we stole together, and I was showing it off to my girlfriends, and they were all like, oh wow, how did you guys meet? And then I'd be like, well, funny story!

That could never happen though. I would be like, the worst at crime, I'm pretty sure. Not because I'm against it. I mean, I guess I'm mostly against it, the way anyone is, or you are, or

whoever is. But that's not why I'd be bad at it. I think I'd just get nervous, you know? I'd be the one in the gang who like screws up and makes everybody else change the plan at the last minute and keeps things from going the way they were supposed to. Or who gets shot and then the other people are like, we gotta stay for Tasha! And I'm like, no, no! You gotta do this one last job! It's too late for me! And then I'd like, pull the pin out of my grenade. I guess that would be more in a war movie. Do you have any grenades?

No? You look more like the lone wolf kind of criminal anyways. Just blowing through town. Unattached. No strings. Just you and your sunglasses. And your gun.

There. I told you I'd find a better envelope. I kind of want to put a big dollar sign on it, you know? Like if you were a cartoon robber, you'd have the money in a big dollar sign sack. Would you mind? I've got a Sharpie.

No? You're right. I guess that is silly.

Hey, um. Don't take this the wrong way, and I'm sure you want to get out of here, but those sunglasses really aren't doing anything for you. They're all big and round, and I guess that big and round is in, but it's kind of like ironically in, and you've got this classic, rugged thing going that I don't think really works with big and round.

Here. Come here. Yeah, I know you're in a hurry or whatever. But this'll just take a minute. Come with me to the sunglasses counter. Let's see. Let's see. Ooh. Try these. Ray-Bans. You cannot go wrong with Ray-Bans. Try. Please? Too snug? Yes? No? Okay, great! Yeah, take them. They look really good. I mean, I'm not just saying that because you have a gun and everything. They seriously look really good.

See? I just doubled your robbery. Not counting the change, there was only like eighty bucks in the register, and that's garbage. Not even worth it. But those are a hundred-twenty dollar sunglasses, and obviously we mark them up from what the store pays for them. But still, they look awesome. And I think they work with the whole robbery thing. Kind of *Blues Brothers*, right? Kind of *Reservoir Dogs*. Kind of classic tough guy.

Okay well. Wouldn't want to keep you. You probably got other stores to rob or whatever.

Look, before you go. I just want to apologize. If you were to come back, maybe on a Saturday, maybe closer to closing, there'd be tons of cash. Tons. This is really a pretty expensive store. And we've got some old guys who shop here, like classy old guys, and they always carry cash. They buy these like four hundred dollar Zen Gunderson loafers, cash. It's weird. Have they not heard of credit cards, or what?

And it's a little gross, because it's always the old guys who like, lick their fingers to count money. And I'm like, seriously? Do you know where that money has been? It's probably like, been thrown at some prostitute or something. Or like had coke snorted through it. Or worse.

But anyway, you could come back Saturday. Sixish? Probably do better. Shit. This guy was looking at a pair of Zen Gundersons earlier, but he didn't do it. Didn't buy them. It's a shame. Bet he would've paid cash, too. I would've tried harder to sell them if I'd known we were going to get robbed.

Oh, actually, before you go, what size are you? About a ten? Right? I'm right, aren't I? Hey. I know shoes. Okay, these are the loafers he was looking at. I didn't feel like putting them back in the stockroom yet, so it's no trouble to try them on before you go. They're tens anyway, or else I wouldn't even ask. Humor me. I just really like the Zens. I've got on a pair of the Zen

clogs, and they're so nice. They're like stupid comfy but not like, *cloggy* clogs, where you feel like you're a Dutch milkmaid or something wearing wooden shoes.

Please? Awesome. Yeah, just sit down there. And honestly, you can put that gun away. I know you've got a gun. We both know you've got a gun. But you've got the money already, you know? It isn't like I'm going to steal it back from you at the last minute. And this way, if anyone comes in, they just see a regular guy with some nice Ray-Bans trying on a nice pair of Zen Gundersons. Just normal, shoe store stuff.

Thank you. See? Isn't that nicer? Isn't that kind of a relief for you to not have to hold it like that? Good. So just slide your foot in. How's it feel?

Yeah, that is a little tight. Wow. Your toe is right at the end. Hold on. I'm going to measure your feet, okay? It only takes a second. Also, I always like using the Brannock Device. Did you know that it was called that? Brannock Device? Most people don't. It's a weird little trivia thing to know. I knew it before I started working here just because I kind of always liked them. Like, the metal is nice and cool, and it gives your foot a little hug. That was always my favorite part about getting new shoes. Getting to use the Brannock Device.

Wow. Did you know that your feet are different sizes? Ten-and-a-half and ten. Don't be embarrassed. It happens. Besides, it's just between you, me, and my friend Mr. Brannock. Nobody else needs to know. I'm just going to go ahead and find you a ten-and-a-half from another pair so that both fit you.

Don't worry about it. I'll just say they shipped us a mismatched pair. That's how I got these clogs. I can't afford Zens. These are like three hundred dollars retail. And I only get a twenty percent discount for working here, which would make them two-forty. And I only make

ten bucks an hour. I mean, my boss is the real thief here! I called up Gundersons and said that they sent the wrong color so they had to send an extra pair. Then I kept the extra pair. Pretty smart, right?

I mean, I'm so bad, right? I would seriously quit here if it weren't so easy to get shoes. I would say, since I've been here a pretty long time, maybe six months? Eight months, and I end up with two or three pairs a week. I've got this huge purse I took when I quit at Macy's, and it fits two pairs easy since my feet are small. So, I dunno, eighty pairs? Is that a lot? Yeah. I guess it adds up.

There you go. Now your feet look awesome. Do you want to wear these out? Yeah, I would too. You're welcome.

Wow. You know what's hilarious? Okay. So you come in here to rob the place. You've taken maybe six hundred bucks worth of stuff on this little robbery. Me? Okay, eighty pairs of shoes, all between maybe eighty bucks and five hundred, say two hundred on average. Oh. That's like sixteen thousand dollars. Holy shit. That's like a small car. Wait, let me check the math. Sorry. There's a calculator up here somewhere.

Oh my god. Yeah. Eighty times two hundred. Wow. I should clean out my closet. Start selling them. I could really use a new car. It's not like I just stole all of them outright, you know? Some of them were samples that just happened to be in my size. Or some were samples that I would ring back through the register like a return, and then use the change to buy some other pair that I actually wanted. Most of them were shipping errors, or defects, or, at least, things that I called shipping errors or defects. Seriously, customer service is so awesome at these shoe places. I could call up right now and be like, oh no! The glue is coming undone on the soles of these two

hundred dollar mules! And they'd probably just send me a free pair of shoes. They usually don't even ask questions. It's amazing. So I never outright steal any shoes from the store, unless it's like something I really, really want.

It's not really stealing, though, right? Since it's not money, just stuff? It's shoplifting, I think, technically, and that isn't as bad I don't think. I mean morally it isn't really better probably, but I think you get off easier in court because you can just be like, oh I have kleptomania and I can't help it.

Wow. I should be selling those shoes. I mean I haven't even worn most of them. That'd be kind of funny, actually. Like if I worked here all day, and then went home, and kept selling shoes there. Like, I would have this whole shoe store, only every pair would all be in the same size. You could only shop at my store if you were a size six. That could be the whole gimmick. Size Six Shoes.

Hey, maybe you should take some extras with you, right? Put them on Craigslist. Take some more Zens. Or the Adolfo Moreys. The Adolfos are ugly as shit, between you and me, but they're stupid expensive. They're total rich old lady shoes. Take like, six pairs of these. You could sell them off pretty fast, I bet. Just ask low for them. Say, three hundred. I bet you could turn them into cash. There've gotta be some old ladies looking for shoes on Craigslist, right? Say that your mom bought too many because she's old or something.

Have you got like, a getaway driver? Somebody to help carry all these?

God, you walked? That's terrible. It's so hot! How do you put up with it? Like, if I were holding up stores, no way I'd do it on foot. God. Okay. Tell you what. And I'm really not like this. I really never give rides because I'm kind of OCD about my car. But let's fill up my car with

shoes and whatever. Then I'll drop you and the shoes off wherever. And I'll just take some extra stuff for me, and I'll come back and call my boss and be like, OMG. We wuz robbed! And I'll fake cry. And be like, oh no. I don't feel safe at work anymore. You need to hire my friend Megan because I don't feel safe working alone anymore. And also I need a raise.

And seriously, if he says no, I'll fucking quit. I don't care. I hate this place. I don't know if you spend a lot of time in shoe stores, but it's so gross.

I mean, I have nice feet. I take care of my feet. See? Right? Look. Look at them. Come on, look for real. See? I take care of my feet. They totally don't even smell bad. I'm serious. I make sure. Smell. Whatever, look. I'll smell them first, just so you know I'm serious. See? They just smell like nothing, right? Like air. Skin. No smell at all, really.

But these weird uggos come in, and make me want to puke. This weird, weird guy comes in Monday mornings sometimes. He's got that like, limp ponytail thing, and I hate that so much on guys. Plus you can tell he's going bald. It's not super obvious, but I've stood behind him and if you're looking at the top of his head it's super obvious. I think he tries on purpose to come only when I'm in here alone, because he's gross like that, and he tries on the Mortadellos which are really expensive Italian oxfords. But I didn't steal you any of them because they're kind of gross and too pointy. Anyway, he always tries them on and never buys them, but his feet are disgusting. Like, so bad. Not just like, oh, you were out, and it was hot, and you were wearing sneakers, and your feet smell bad. Not like when a regular person's feet smell bad. More like, when you've got some weird lifeforms living in your feet. Like total swamp-foot. Like, primordial ooze, like maybe new species are going to crawl out of your shoes, his shoes, because they're so disgusting.

Hey, maybe we should just start a stack by the back door, okay? We'll just stack up all the stuff we're going to drop off at your place, and then we'll pack up the car all at once so we don't have to keep going in and out while we shop. Ha! While we "shop." Quote unquote.

Yeah, so, I complained to my boss about him. I told him we should ban this guy from the store, but my boss is like, no, no. Customer is always right. And I'm like, he's not a customer. He's a creep with a combover and some weird foot fungus who gets off on stinking up pointy Italian oxfords.

So anyway, whenever Stinky Foot--I call him Stinky Foot--when Stinky Foot leaves, I take whatever he had on, and I put them in my boss's office. He can deal with them. I'm not dealing with them. I'm here to sell shoes. Not to spray shoes with Febreze. That can be his job.

He deserves it, though. My boss. He's a total creeper, too. Oh my god. He's always, like, coming at night when I close the shop and bringing in some like, crazy fetish stilettos, and then he's like, oh, hey Natasha. I'm thinking about getting these for the store? Could you try these on?

And I'm like, oh, are you? Were you thinking about starting to carry Hustler-brand, clear, plastic heels with a slot to put stripper tips in? Is that a thing you think our store needs? Do you think our clientele of mostly old ladies with long fake nails want to buy five inch stilettos, maybe for a sexy night out wherever old people eat? Olive Garden or wherever?

I think that's a pretty good stack, don't you? Cool. Let's call that good and start loading up my car, okay? Do me a favor and say something if you see any customers come in the front.

Anyway, then my boss, when I complain about the stripper shoes, he'll be like, yeah, yeah. Maybe we should sell these. I don't know. You know I don't know anything about women's shoes. Try these, though. Just for a minute. Humor me.

And the next thing I know he's like, touching my toes, pretending he's making sure these stripper shoes fit right, and making me stumble around in them because, seriously. These are always fucking intense shoes that nobody normal can wear without falling down or almost falling down. They're insane. It's like, if you are not a stripper or a drag queen, don't even try it.

Wow. I thought we'd be able to fit more shoes in my trunk, but I totally forgot how many I already had in here. Kind of embarrassing. At least it isn't like, gross stuff like fast food garbage and stuff like some people have in their cars. But still. Kind of a mess. How about we just cram some more in the seat? That way we can keep yours separate from all my stuff in the back.

Anyway, last week it got even worse. He brought in these knee-high boots. Like these shitty, knee-high dominatrix boots. Not even leather. PVC or maybe not even that. I don't know. And, okay, this is weird. He asked to take a photo of me stomping on a cupcake. Like, he brings a box of these fancy cupcakes from Cupcake Connection, which is the head shop with the cupcake counter. Next door. These were these fancy pink and lavender ones with these like fancy transparent sprinkles and tons of frosting and little sugar My Little Ponies on the top and he offers me one to eat so of course I do. I bite right into it because I've been at the store all day and these cupcakes are amazing. Seriously amazing. Like, we should maybe stop and get some once the car is loaded as like a reward for ourselves. Like a little post-robbery celebration.

Anyways I bite into it, and he starts taking photos. And I'm like, what the fuck? Only I've got a face full of pink cupcake so it's more like, "Whu uh fuh?"

And he's like, oh, I'm taking this photography class at the community college because it's my new hobby or whatever. And he goes into this complicated description of these photos he wants to take. This whole series of feet and baked goods and desserts and pretty soon I'm getting

my picture taken, stepping on cupcakes. And he's kind of like breathing heavy. And he's down on the floor, like with his face right near the cupcakes that I'm supposed to step on. And he's like, yeah, yeah. Just like that. Really creeper-like. Yeah. Yeah. All breathy like that.

He probably put them on the internet, right? God, that is so gross to think about. Is that even a thing? You're a guy. You ever heard of guys being into that? Squished cupcakes? Is my boss like probably part of some weird, squished cupcake ring?

I seriously can't take that guy anymore. I mean, what's next? Seriously. What's next? I don't even know, you know? This is such specific fetish that I don't even know, like, what the next step is. I mean, if it were something else, something more familiar, I might understand. Like if I had a boyfriend who wanted to do weird kink stuff. You know, one day he wants to get blindfolded. The next week he wants handcuffs. The next week he's got you learning how to tie old-timey sailing knots around his junk, and you're like, this is weird, but at least I'm not lonely. That would at least be predictable, kind of.

But with this thing, this foot thing, I don't know. First stripper heels. Then S&M boots stepping on cupcakes? Then what? I'm seriously pretty scared. Wow.

So anyway. There. I think that's as many shoes as we can really fit into my car. Sorry it isn't bigger. Let me just lock the front door. Ha! Isn't that ironic? Me, locking the front door, so that nothing gets stolen, while we're stealing all this stuff? Oh my god. So funny.

Okay, so. If you just hold these on your lap. These last ones. We can drop all the stuff that's going to your place first, and then I'll take the rest to mine. Unless you, I dunno. Do you want to grab coffee on the way? Go to Starbucks for a minute? Or cupcakes? I'm counting this as my lunch break anyway so it's no big deal. Good, yeah. Let's get cupcakes. I kind of have a

weird thing now with the pink ones, after that thing with my boss, but the chocolate ones I would totally kill somebody for. You have to buy though. All I have are quarters.

I'm Trying to Find a Date For My Dog

Listen: I'm not necessarily sure Bella is *sick* sick. I think it might be more psychological, but I don't know how that works with dogs. Dog psychologists are usually just for behavior, right? They aren't really for dog therapy. More for keeping your dog from biting the mailman. Do you strictly do basic health kind of stuff, or do vets ever check out the more mental, emotional sphere?

Hm. That's too bad, but I kind of assumed you didn't. That form they had me fill out didn't have a spot for me to talk about Bella's *feelings*. Thought I'd ask anyway, just in case. You should think about adding that. I know I'm not the only one who thinks about this stuff, right? I mean, I'm really attuned to Bella's emotions, and that can be a little stressful at times. I always know exactly *what* she's feeling, but not necessarily *why*, since she can't talk to me, in the

conventional sense. I wish you had a little doggy psychiatrist couch. That would be pretty cute, too right? Cute *and* useful! Well. You might not find anything, but would you mind taking a look at Bella anyway? We came all the way out here, so at this point, it would be silly to run home again. *Right, Bella? Good girl. Yes. Good girl.*

Thank you. I appreciate it. Sometimes, when you're depressed like I think Bella is, it can manifest in your body, right? And I know you're really gentle with her anyhow, so we should stay. I bet just getting a little check-up will make her feel better. She won't admit it, but I think she likes you. *Isn't that right, Bella? My lonely little puppy.*

I've been noticing that she's been a little sluggish lately, and that's what made me start to worry. Not a lot of get-up-and-go. Like this weekend, she made me nervous. On Saturday I didn't have any particular plans, as happens sometimes, to everyone, so I said, you know what? I'm just going to kind of make this a "me" night. I got a big thing of pomegranate yogurt from Pinkberry and put in the second season of *Dress Mechanic*.

And at a certain point I realized that I'd been watching for a long time--probably five or six episodes--and Bella had barely even moved. She was just there curled up on the couch next to me. And that made me worry, that stillness. That can't be healthy for a dog, can it? There's no way it's healthy for a dog to be that sedentary, just listless like that.

So I decided right there that we needed to go to the dog park. I'm a responsible dog mommy. I know when something's not right. *You needed some exercise, didn't you, Bella?* So we go the next day. But that made me a little nervous too, because she stayed super close to me. I said, "Okay, Bella. Mommy is going to sit here and read *New Moon* so you go and play with the other doggies." But she kept coming back to me, and she barely even looked at the other dogs.

She ran around a little, which I was glad to see, but she kept bringing me back this gross tennis ball that somebody probably left there ten years ago. So I said, “Bella, you can’t just play fetch with Mommy. That’s not healthy. You need to make some dog friends.”

And that’s when I realized that Bella doesn’t have a lot of dog friends. She’s got a good number of people friends, which is good, sure. I made her her own little Facebook account, but I suppose that’s really more for me than for her, if I’m going to be honest.

See? I’ll pull hers up on my phone.

No, just look for a second! It’ll only take a second. Bella isn’t going anywhere. She’ll wait while you look.

See? “Bella checked in at Dr. Chesywick’s Office.” And then it says, “Why do I have to go to the vet this time, Mommy?” And I made a little frowny face because she doesn’t like to go to the vet, but that’s probably pretty typical, right? I mean, that’s not insulting is it? Me saying that Bella might not like going to the doctor? No one likes going to the doctor, even if they have a really nice doctor, like Bella has.

And then my friend Chad from work posted, “Oh no! Get better, Bella!” And that’s nice of him, and I appreciate it, but Chad is *my* friend. Having people friends on Facebook is not the same thing as Bella having her own dog friends in real life.

And then I got to thinking even more. I got Bella right after I broke up with my fiancée. Don’t worry--it was a mutual situation. Or more him kind of. But no matter. The point is it was a long time ago. I think about three years. And in that time, Bella has never really bonded with any other dogs. Never been on a play date with another dog at all. Now, I don’t have a great track record either lately. Not like I’m going on a bunch of dates while Bella mopes around at home.

But they say one people year is maybe seven dog years, so it's much worse for her, being alone that long. Being lonely.

So there we are, at the dog park, and I say, "You need a boy dog, don't you, Bella?" And she's kind of shy about the whole situation. She clearly needs a little encouragement, a little poke in the right direction. She needs a wingman, and I understand that. Everyone needs a wingman sometimes.

So I say, "Okay, Bella. Let's see." And we're looking around the dog park. Looking for the cutest dogs, to go say hi.

And Bella is really feminine, you know? So I'm trying to find her a real "man's dog" kind of dog. And I see this dog who looks kind of like a pit bull. I don't know dog breeds that well so I'm not sure, but this dog seems kind of squat and solid and muscular, like a pit bull. Very masculine. So I try to get us ready, try to give us a little pep talk, like, "Okay, Bella! You and me! Let's do it!" And I'm kind of shy too, usually, but I steel my nerves and put in all this extra effort for Bella's sake. And the pit bull's dog daddy turns out to be pretty nice looking, too, so that's good.

So we go over there, and I'm doing the usual stuff that people probably do at dog parks when their dogs are making friends. Saying hello, and the dogs are sniffing each other and everything. Doing their little introductions. Which is kind of awkward, right? I'm never sure what I should do during that. So I kind of decided to just give them their privacy, you know? So I try to make conversation with the guy instead.

So I say, "What's this pretty boy's name?"

And the guy says, "Pretty *girl*. This is Tatiana."

And that is really a surprise because I was *sure* that a masculine-looking dog like this one would have to be a boy, and I get kind of sad, too, and embarrassed because I probably should've noticed in the first place. And now it's going to be kind of awkward to get away from this guy and his lady dog and move on. But I have to, for Bella's sake, obviously, because I really think she needs a *date*-date. Not just a play date at the park. And I guess I made a face or something, because the guy's like, "What's the matter?"

And I say something like, "Oh, nothing," because I don't know what to say, really. But I let him know I'm kind of trying to play matchmaker a little bit for Bella. Maybe even set up a date, so that he won't be too offended when we move along.

But he says, "You're trying to set up a date for your *dog*?"

And the way he says it, it's pretty obvious he thinks I'm some kind of crazy person. He obviously doesn't get it at all, so I get a little angry, even. I say, "Look. It's hard to meet people! Or dogs. And Bella is shy. She's sexy, for a dog, in a dog way, but she's shy, and you can't blame me for trying to help her out a little bit. Get the ball rolling a little. Get a little something started."

And I forget what he says next, but it's some weird non-sequitur. He tells me there's this coffee shop at the edge of the park he's thinking about going to. And that they're used to people bringing their dogs in after they run around at the park. So I'm like, "Okay! Have a great time there. Whatever."

And he says, "What do you think, Tatiana? Do you want to invite your new friend over while I get coffee?"

And I'm like, "Um, Bella and I are probably going to stick around here a little longer. Meet some boys."

And then he takes it in a really odd direction, and he asks me if I'm looking for a new puppy. Ha! As though this were just about making puppies. And this just strikes me as so rude, like we're just talking about animals and reproduction here and not about *feelings*. About emotional feelings. And I'm like, "Listen. I'm pretty sure I can speak for Bella when I say she wants to keep things casual. She's not one of those crazy dogs who's going to bring up puppies on the first date. And last time I checked, two girl dogs can't even *have* puppies. Unless they adopt."

And then this guy completely just makes a run for it. He says, "I think I need to get going." Doesn't even bother to think up an excuse. Just, "going." He just put Tatiana back on her leash and left. Rudely fast. Made me think about an old cartoon. If it had been a cartoon, he would've revved up the engine, and his tires would've squealed on his way out. So rude.

But I felt bad too, because that had to be so embarrassing for Bella, for the one dog she met all day to leave without even really saying goodbye. And I tried to get Bella to meet some other dogs after that, but her heart wasn't in it anymore. I could tell. I suppose she felt a little like she'd put herself out there, and it backfired. And it can be very hard to get back on that horse a second time. Plus, the other dogs weren't even that good looking.

So that's when I decided maybe we should check in with you. I'm worried that maybe she needs some doggy Prozac or maybe even something stronger, really.

And honestly, I'm only thinking of this right now, but do you think it's possible she's a lesbian? Maybe she actually was kind of *into* Tatiana. And Tatiana *was* super butch. So, I guess

it's possible that I not only embarrassed myself at the dog park but also maybe messed up a potential thing between the two of them. Wow. I feel really sad now. They were really getting along, it seemed like. And I can't tell if dogs are just being friendly or if they're flirting. I can't be expected to tell!

And I mean, if she is, if that's what team she's on, I just want to make it clear that that's completely her choice, or her *not* choice or however that goes. I'm very open minded, and I have plenty of gay friends. Chad! Chad from her Facebook! Chad is maybe gay, maybe. And I *love* Chad. I do. I really do.

So maybe I should go find Tatiana again? And Tatiana's daddy? Ugh. So complicated!

It's *so* hard to get relationships started these days, don't you think? I mean, probably not for you. You're in here, successful veterinarian. Handsome. And you've got ladies bringing in their little dogs all day long. "Oh, please, please Dr. Chesywick? Can you look at Princess? She has the sniffles!"

But you must know what I'm talking about at least sort of. I just don't want my dog to be lonely. Don't want her to just keep coming home to a cold, empty doggy bed, or be stuck eating out of a one-dog dish for the whole rest of her life. I'd feel terrible if that ended up happening to her, you know? Just terrible. She deserves better. *Don't you, Bella?*

So. Nothing *medically* wrong with her? That's good.

Do you have a lot more pets to see today?

What're you doing after that?

Marvelous Medicine vs. The Guineveres 7" Split Single

I've been talking for too long. What bands are you listening to lately? Anything good?

Wow. Marvelous Medicine? That local band? Really? You really liked that band? You're funny. You are a comedian. Comedienne, I guess. Does anyone say that? Comedienne?

But yeah. Marvelous Medicine. No, I just ask because I don't know--weren't they terrible?

No, I'm being serious! Weren't they scientifically proven to be terrible? By rock and roll scientists? And I'm not being judgmental here. I mean, I am the kind of guy who's going to judge people on what bands they like. As a rule, I am going to do that. But I promise that I'm not doing that now. I only do that judgmental thing to people who aren't hot.

See how I did that? How I slid that in there? Pretty good, right? You barely even noticed I did it. Like when I bought you that drink just by using my cat-like reflexes. You were trying to pay for it, right? And I was like BOOM! Already paid for. Now what, huh? Now, you'll have to talk to me. That's the rule, right? It's like, fifteen minutes, per drink, guaranteed, right?

Five minutes? Oh, wow. Inflation! Only five minutes? That's all I get. I really should shut up then, huh.

But Marvelous Medicine, right? They were one of like ten different fake New Order bands that all came out at the same time in like 2005. You'd hear a new song, and be like, "What is this? Some shitty New Order song they found in a basement in Manchester?" And then it'd turn out to be Editors, or the Measurements, Interpol, or Marvelous Medicine. I'm not being a dick about it, really. I love shitty New Order songs. I'll take a shitty New Order song over almost any other kind of song. Seriously. But that whole thing just seems kind of over, right? Kind of over done. Just my opinion.

I don't know though. I always kind of thought Marvelous Medicine were kind of the worst of that whole trend, you know? I mean, take the vocals. The singer, that guy Milt Evans, can't sing for shit. Or play bass, for that matter. The drummer tuned his bass every show.

Seriously. Every show! Before every *rehearsal* even, too. And the guitar player, she was cool. Kristy Vale. Also had the drummer tune for her, a lot of the time, but basically she's cool. Not great at playing guitar but sexy and cool. And most guitar bands don't have anybody who can play guitar so that's no big deal. But anyway. A singer who can't sing, a guitarist who can only kind of play guitar, and then their drummer. Worst of all. That guy is just an opinionated

jagoff who only really knew how to play jazz, but pretended he knew how to be in a rock and roll band.

That's why he was always so fucking mechanical. Like a typewriter, tick tick tick tick tick. He tried so hard to not be jazzy that he just overcompensated and ended up sounding like an old Casio drum loop.

Yeah, you're right! I am kind of a Marvelous Medicine expert, yes. For obvious reasons!

Wait, are you shitting me? You know that was my band, right? You know I was the drummer in that band, right? The jagoff, opinionated drummer? You knew that was me all along, right?

No, don't leave! No, no, no. Stay here. I mean it!

Seriously, don't be embarrassed. I thought you just said it as a joke and were going along with *my* joke. I thought you were playing this elaborate joke, and that's why you were all like, "Oh, I'm really into Marvelous Medicine," because no one remembers us, nobody at all, so why else would you say you liked us? If not to have a little joke with me?

You are literally the only person I've talked to in probably two years at least who's said anything nice about us at all. We barely recorded, is the main thing, and Milt made us sell everything on fucking cassette tape, because, because I don't know why.

It's not funny! I mean, it is funny. But it's not funny! I cannot fucking remember why the fuck we sold everything on tape! It's worse than vinyl, because vinyl actually does sound pretty nice. That's a real thing, when people say they like the sound of vinyl. That's *real*. It's a real, texture, warmth thing, and I know most people who talk about vinyl don't know what they're talking about, and they just think it's neat to have vinyl because they're hipsters and hipsters just

like things that are inconvenient and old. But if you put vinyl next to digital it sounds *different*.

Tape just sounds like shit, though, and no one has a tape deck. Do you have a tape deck?

Of course not. That's what I mean! Nobody has a tape deck. Right, so you bought our EP, yes, "Wolves Against Wolves," and did you ever listen to it?

Exactly. You bought it and never listened to it.

Don't apologize! That's what happens when you put your shit on shit no one has. You and I should start a band and release all our stuff on, I dunno, laser disc? Audio-only laser disc?

Yeah. Let's do it. Do you play at all?

Oh, that's fine. A little guitar is fine. If you can tune it we'll already be better than Marvelous Medicine.

Quick: what's the name of your band?

I know you're not *in* a band. That's not what I'm saying. I'm saying you have a name picked out *for* your band. I know you do. Everyone does. There is no one worth knowing who doesn't have a band name picked out already for their rock band, just in case, all of a sudden, they're in a rock band and need a sweet band name. So tell me the name that you have picked out just in case you have some band-naming emergency.

The Guineveres? Oh, that's cool. I like it, yeah. The Guineveres. That's very girl power. So you'd have to sing, which is fine. I'll just drum and hang out in the back. It's great. So we'll be The Guineveres, you and me, and release all our music on laser disc, and we'll both grow mustaches.

Yeah. We both have to. That'll be our thing. Okay, yours can be fake. If you insist, on not *actually* growing a mustache, then yes, you can use a fake one. Good?

Good. Do you need a drink? Let me get us another drink. I need five more minutes to hear more about The Guineveres, so I'm going to have to get you another drink, yeah?

Just hold our spot. This is a good spot. SoCo and Coke again? Watch. I'm a bar ninja. I'll be back so fast it will literally blow your mind, maybe.

There. You're welcome. See? I don't have very many skills in life, but I can exchange money for drinks. I'm good at it. Very practiced at it.

Oh, no. Marvelous Medicine will never get back together. No way. No, no way.

Yeah, I do miss playing. I only play jazz now, and I love it, but it isn't the same thing. Not the same as being in a rock band. And I kind of see why people were into Marvelous Medicine, now that I'm older and can reflect back on it a little. Milt couldn't play *at all*, but he was a really intense performer. Really earnest and intense. Scary intense sometimes, especially when we were fighting. Like, every time after we'd get into an argument, I knew he'd just be totally out of control the next time we played in front of an audience. By the end of shows he'd be covered in sweat, covered. And he'd destroy his vocal chords. He'd use himself up. It was wild. Also sometimes he'd jump into the crowd and spin around and get dizzy. That made me worry he was going to hit someone, since he spun the whole mic stand, and those can be pretty heavy.

And Kristy. She's cool. I like her. She's cool. That's part of the thing, part of what drove us apart.

Yeah, you get it. Rock and roll romance. We were a regular Fleetwood Mac, only not really. Only in my mind, I mean. That's why right now, you and I have to make a promise to each other. We will never get involved, sexually. We'll keep Guineveres just about the music and not

about the obvious, you know, sexual chemistry that's between us. So let's pinky swear that we will never give in to our raging animal instincts.

Don't laugh. This is very serious. That's what broke up Marvelous Medicine, and I don't want the same thing to happen to Guineveres, since Guineveres is pretty much the only band that matters right now. So put out your pinky. There you go. Thank you. Glad that's settled.

Yeah, so Milt and Kristy were a thing. They started the band in, I guess it would've been 2004, and they wrote songs together, and Kristy's songs were okay, but Milt's were garbage. They went to RISD together. They were like art school kids or whatever, and dating, and I was living with Kristy in this triple. Me and Kristy and this girl Sandra, but forget her. She's cool, but she's not really part of the story.

Anyway, I was the only drummer either of them knew, so they asked me. So I say yes. For two reasons, even though I'm a serious jazz percussionist and I don't need to be in a rock band. I was a drum instructor at the time, like I am now. A non-tenured, barely-paid, semi-unofficial percussion instructor at Bryant college, a college most people have never heard of. So I'm kind of a big deal, is what I'm saying.

So I don't need to be in a rock and roll band. But *everyone* needs to be in a rock and roll band. You know that. There is no human person who does not *need* to get on stage and plug in and strap on and put in some earplugs and stomp on a stomp box and make some noise.

Don't tell me I'm wrong. Any human person who disagrees is not a fully formed human person. I know you want to be in a rock and roll band, right?

Right. That's why we founded the Guineveres a couple minutes ago. Anybody who doesn't want to be in a rock and roll band--and this cuts across all nations, races, religions--I

don't care. It's primal. You've got it. The bartender's got it. Those religious, door-knocker kids giving you the good news, they've got it. I've got it. So that's a reason.

Also, I really wanted to have sex with Kristy. Is that too crude? I'm just being honest. I think men and women should be honest with each other. How're we ever going to keep things together if we can't be direct? I'm being direct with you. Since we have a very real, primal, primordial, primate-like attraction to each other that we can never act on now that we're in a band together. Don't laugh! I'm just saying what everybody knows. Everybody around us *sees* what's going on here.

And it was like that with me and Kristy, too, only less so. Because it was pretty one-sided, in that it was pretty much all my side. But I joined Marvelous Medicine, and I think I thought it would be like Yo La Tengo, where like two of them are married and there's this other dude who's both of their best friend and they're like a weird, little rock and roll family or something.

Thing was, Milt was like this little Napoleon. And it was nonsense. We'd be rehearsing. He'd be like, "Hey I really need less cymbal on this one. Drop the cymbal way down."

And I'd be like, "Sure, Man. Hey. And while we're stopped, how about you tune your fucking guitar so that we don't sound like amateurs." I used to hassle him about the fact that he couldn't tune his guitar very well. That was always the thing I brought up when he was pissing me off.

So we're having that same fight again, the same basic fight we always used to have. He makes this face, like, "stupid drummer," and says, "It's an alternate tuning." And he starts the song again.

And I barely touch the cymbal this time. I *whisper* at the ride cymbal. I blow a fucking *kiss* at the ride cymbal. And Milt says, “Too much cymbal.”

And I’m fucking furious. But I’m cool. I’m keeping cool. I’m like, he wants to play ball? I can play ball.

So I just kick over my cymbals. Just tip them over. Huge fucking noise. Kind of dangerous. Came close to knocking over an amp, too, and really breaking some shit. I just kick over the cymbals. Crash. Boom.

I’ve got snare, tom, kick only. And I say, “Let’s do it.”

And it’s this challenge. This silent challenge, where we’re each in this contest to see who can be the most cool about the fact that two grown men are throwing tantrums at each other.

And I’m dressed like I am now. Nondescript. Dressed like whatever. But Milt. Milt has these like yellow cowboy boots on. And like, he was all about stupid tight pants before people were about stupid tight pants. So basically he’s working on being intimidating, but he’s the least intimidating person there has ever been ever. He’s manning up, you know. It’s a dick measuring contest, so I’m like, “Let’s do it.”

So we play the song again. The cymbals are on the ground, and what the fuck do you know. Sounds pretty good without cymbal. Whatever. But I’m pissed. I’m not going to admit it sounds good or bring it up. Song ends and Milt has got this smirk, like, this, “I won that round” smirk. And I cannot have that.

So I’m like, “Hey. Why don’t you tune your guitar, and then we’ll play again, in tune?”

Milt says, “I’m tuned. It’s cool. I’m tuned.”

And I'm not having it. We don't have rack tuners that are going all the time, but we've got a plug-in tuner, so I'm like, "No. Just tune up. Won't take a second. Fucking humor me. Or let me do it. Either way."

He thinks he's just won this cymbal thing so there is no way he's going to let me tune his bass. No way. So he plugs in and hits a note, and it's like way, way off. Like Kristy can tell that it's way the fuck off. So we're waiting. And I'm cool. I just dented a six-hundred dollar cymbal. But hey, I'm being the bigger man, here. In a way.

So we're waiting. And he's turning this way and that way, and it's like wrong wrong wrong. Then he quits and moves on to the next string, even. He's like, new string. Gives up on E, like that's going to help. Like maybe there is something wrong with that string that is *making* it be out of tune.

So quietly, I'm like, "Hey, Milt, you want a hand?" And maybe I said it like a dick. I dunno. I don't know if I did, and I didn't *mean* to but probably I did because it's like, I've got him. I've *won* this.

But he is livid. I forget what he said. He's like, "No. I've got this." And just then he just *cranks* one of the pegs, just cranks the shit out of it, and ping! it fucking snaps. And he's *livid*. He's so, so angry. He just drops it on the floor, drops his bass on the floor, and he's like, "Fucking cheap strings" and just leaves.

Which is extra hilarious because we're in his house, in his *garage*. This is after Kristy has moved out of the place we were in and the two of them have this house that they rent together, so he's storming out but not storming out very far.

So he goes to another room or something, and Kristy is like, “So that happened,” and it’s so embarrassing. For both of us. She just had to watch this like, very aggressive, male shit. This over-the-top male shit. And it’s embarrassing for me because, hey, she knows, probably, that that shit was about *her*. On some level, she knew. Like how we know what’s going on with us. *She* knew what was going on with us. Same idea. So she knows. And she says, “So that happened.”

And she gets up and very carefully, very conscientiously takes the broken string off his bass, and, Jesus--bass strings are difficult to break. They are thick and difficult to break. But she gets a new one. Restrings the guitar. Puts it on her shoulder. Tunes it. And she’s not great at it. She takes her time. But she gets it. She does it right.

And that’s like this silent thing between us, too. It’s like, “I can tune my own guitar. I am better than Milt. I can tune my guitar myself.” Which is fine. So we start playing.

And she’s playing Milt’s parts, and she sounds pretty good. I mean, bass is easier, but she sounds pretty good, and she starts singing his singing parts. She’s doing the vocal, and we’re having fun. We’re having *fun*. It’s like, oh yeah. It’s supposed to be fun to be in a fucking rock and roll band. That’s the whole idea. So we play for a while.

No sign of Milt, and I’m like, “Let’s go get a coffee.” We’re putting our stuff away. I’m putting my cymbals back where they belong. We’ve just had this pretty epic musical experience. Really intense musical experience. We’re feeling it, or at least, I’m feeling it. It’s the middle of the afternoon. Feeling good. So I’m like, “Let me buy you a cup of coffee.”

So we go to Ocean’s. She says yes. We go to Ocean’s, drinking espresso. And she looks *really* good. She’s one of these girls, like you, who really know how to dress for winter. She’s got

this little, corduroy jacket on with like a fake wool lining like it's made out of a corduroy sheep, and this goofy hat with this little tassel, and she's kind of small. She's like five-two or something, and her nose is red from the cold. Her cheeks were all red. She's great. Super cute. Not as cute as you but super cute.

And we're drinking, and we warm up, and I'm like, "You know, that was pretty fun, with the two of us. Pretty fun. Sounded good too."

And she's like, "Yeah. It was."

So I go for it. I fucking go for it. I say, "Lately, I just don't know about the vibe in Marvelous Medicine. I been wanting to do this side thing. Drums and bass only. Like Lightning Bolt but not like Lightning Bolt. Side project. What do you think? I want to call it The Gwendolyns."

Yeah. That was the name I wanted to use. The Gwendolyns.

What's so unbelievable about that? Just because you and I got the Guineveres?

Yeah. It's unlikely, sure. It's an unlikely coincidence. But whatever. it's a crazy world. Just shows how in sync you and I are, that we have such similar ideas, you know?

So I start selling her on the Gwendolyns and how badass it's going to be. How fun. I walk her back home. I'm telling her how I miss being her roommate. And it's cold, and she's leaning into me a little. And I'm like, yes. This is going to happen. Definitely going to happen.

A couple blocks farther, she's got her arm around my elbow. Perfect. We go by our old place, where we used to live, on Waterman. Here's Sandra coming the other way. My roommate, Kristy's old roommate. She sees us. We say hey. Sandra is like, "Oh my god! I didn't know you guys were together."

And of course we're like, oh, no, we're not together. She's still with Milt, of course, and we're laughing. But it's perfect. The best thing that can happen, I think, if you're trying to get with someone, is for someone else to be like, "Oh, you guys are a thing?" Because that keeps you from having to do it. Somebody else throws out that idea, and then it's there, in their head, and they're trying it out. So I'm like, in my head, I'm like, "Thank you so much, Sandra." So we get back to her place, back where we started out, and I'm like, "Think about it. Seriously. Think about it. The Guineveres. I mean, the Gwendolyns. You and me. You and me." And I kiss her.

That was probably a mistake. We were probably at about three, and I just jumped it up to six without going to four or five. So that was probably a mistake, but I don't think it was a terrible mistake or a crazy mistake. I'm just being a little eager. So I kiss her. Not a lot, not like a ton, you know? Like, maybe it crossed a line, but it's like barely a kiss. Barely.

Like, I'll show you. Hold still. Relax, okay? Don't laugh! I'm just demonstrating. I'm just helping you understand the story, okay? This was basically a friend kiss. Like a friendly kiss. Like, you kiss your friends bigger than this kiss, okay?

See? That was nothing. Barely even counts. So I'm feeling pretty good about it until a couple days later, when we go to rehearse again, and I show up at the usual time, and Milt has left all my drums and shit on the sidewalk. So I've walked there. I've got no van to put a whole fucking drum kit in. This is not good. So I'm like, "Milt. What the shit?" He meets me at the door. Kristy's not even there. I'm like, "We should talk about this as a group." Like, band meeting or whatever.

Milt is like, "We've talked about it. You're out."

So I'm like, "Look. That kiss didn't mean anything, man. Kristy and I are old friends, man."

But that didn't help because it turns out that wasn't it at all. Milt had found this other RISD kid to take my place. This kid he could push around and tell what to do so that he wouldn't have to have me telling him to tune up or whatever.

So that's pretty awkward, him finding out about me kissing Kristy when we're already having this whole confrontation about this other thing. Milt gets like, red-red, and shoves me. And I'm not set for it. I fall backward.

And I wouldn't have mentioned the thing with Kristy if I knew he didn't know, but now it doesn't matter so I'm just yelling. Don't even know if Kristy is there. "I love you. I love you Kristy. Dump this jackass. I love you."

I mean, I can't help it, you know? I'm a sensitive guy. I got feelings. I got big, strong, emotional feelings. I don't believe in hiding that shit. You gotta let those feelings out and feel them. So I cried. No big. I don't think that takes anything away from me. I cried, a little bit. And I know I'm giving off like a hyper-masculine, testosterone guy kind of thing here, so I hope that isn't a turn-off for you, to know how in touch with my emotions I am and everything.

Anyway the whole thing was pretty fucked up, I think. Sandra helped me. She came over, and we put the drums in her car and brought the set back to my place. Our place, I guess, since Sandra and I were still living together at that point. I told Sandra the whole thing. Every detail. That's when I cried a little, after she helped put my drums inside. I was just really raw, really exposed. So I was like, "I don't think I should be alone right now."

And she was like, “Yeah, I don’t want you to be alone right now.” And I mean, this story isn’t about Sandra so I’m not going to go into the whole Sandra thing. Sandra is great. She’s great, or whatever. We’re still close, kind of. Whatever. Different story.

Whole thing with Milt was pretty stupid. Really immature. It was even more immature to come back and let the air out of his tires.

No, I didn’t really do that. I thought about doing it, a lot.

And then I did do it. Yeah. I did do it. I can’t lie to a bandmate, so I gotta be honest with you. I didn’t do it all the way. I mean I did three of his tires only. Not four. That way, when he first saw the car, he’d see one flat tire on one side and then see two flat tires on the other side. I thought that would be the most aggravating way to do it.

Also, you know how you can just let the air out by unscrewing the little cap and pushing in the valve? We didn’t do that. We cut the tires. Sandra did two. I did the one, and then we ran away.

That was pretty bad, I know. But in a rock and roll band you’ve got to be honest. Really honest with each other because if you’re not, people listening pick up on that. They hear that lack of honesty in the music, and they reject it. They’ll boo at you.

Kind of like how people booed Marvelous Medicine when they went out with that new drummer. Sandra, and some other people, and me--we all booed them. That really hurt to see somebody take my place like that. And then they had that one song that was so big. That really hurt.

I'm okay though. I really appreciate you listening. I've never really talked about this much before. Took me a long time to kind of like sort my own shit out so that I could look back on that part of my life without getting all upset.

No, I'm not upset now. I feel good. It's really nice to be able to share it with someone like you. Listen. They're going to call last call in a minute anyway. Let me go pay my tab and get us one last round, and then we'll get out of here, okay?

Promise me you won't go anywhere. Just wait right, right here, and I'll get us another round, and we'll decide when Guineveres are going to rehearse. Just wait right here for me.

Yes, I Can Tell You About Our \$29,000 Cocktail

Hi, I'm Bert, and I'll be your sommelier this evening. Your server tells me that you had some questions about the drinks menu? Something that might pair nicely with the lobster?

Marvelous. If you'll just turn to the second page I'd be happy to help you select maybe a modest bottle of sparkling wine. We also have a great Pinot Gris by the glass, if you'd prefer to go that route. The Chateau Salée is a personal favorite.

Or, yes, I'd be happy to talk about any of the cocktails, sure.

Hm. That last page is our signature cocktails page, and those are exciting, but you probably want to stick with the first few pages of the drinks menu, I think.

Why? It's just that I've worked here for about forty years, so, longer than either of you have been alive, and I'm pretty good at reading a table. Over by the bar is a man with a much

younger woman. He's trying to impress her with how rich he is, but he's not actually all that rich. He's in the process of selecting an expensive bottle of wine, which he will attempt to send back for something much cheaper. To your left are a pair of businessmen drinking Scotch, but only one of them is enjoying it. In a moment, I'm going to go over there and tell the unhappy one that he really should have Pinot Grigio with the mussels, and he will pretend that he'd rather stick with the Scotch that he hates and then pretend that he's begrudgingly accepting my advice, but on the inside, he will be ecstatic about the opportunity to drink a glass of white wine and blame it on someone else.

That brings me to you. Can I sit down for a moment?

I know it's a rude thing to ask but you've got such a large table all to yourselves, and I've got this thing with my knee such that my knee hurts. It doesn't hurt that much, but it sort of does it all the time, especially toward the end of the evening.

Thank you. You're very kind. And generous, as well. And what else can I tell about you? Just from observing? You're each twenty-five, give or take, and dressed well, but not expensively.

That's a consignment shop dress, yes? Don't be embarrassed. It's a great dress, and it suits you, and you paid probably three hundred dollars less than its original owner.

And that blazer is a Hughes Wheatley from Edinburgh. You don't have to check now. Do it later, and you'll see that I'm correct. It's just a little too small for you, really, which means you snapped it up at a bargain shop. No professional selling Wheatleys would have let you leave the store with the cuff riding that high off your wrist. Don't worry. Most people would not have even noticed. The sommelier is a details man, though, so I noticed.

And I think this is an early date. I'm going to say second. Is this your second date?

Ha! See? I am good, yes. But it's easy, really. You seem a little nervous around each other, and this is a terrible place for a first date. It's too quiet. The atmosphere of wealth and pretense is stifling. No smart person would suggest this for a first date. Instead, you probably went for drinks and tapas somewhere. Maybe at Rodeo. Am I right?

Close enough! Casa Pisco is basically the Spanish version of Rodeo, so I'm more or less right.

And now you're here, and you'd both like to seem sophisticated, but neither of you is interested in seeming rich. Rich people aren't sophisticated, right? Rich people have it easy. They just buy whatever's expensive, and they assume that it's sophisticated because most people can't afford it, but the most expensive things are usually just aimed at suckers who don't know any better, and you *do* know any better. A little better, at least. And you've already taken a gamble on the lobster ravioli. You ordered it, probably without even asking the price. Am I right?

It's thirty-three dollars. No big deal. Expensive, in the sense that thirty-three dollars could feed a lot of people at a different restaurant, but no big deal, in the sense that our cheapest entree is twenty-seven dollars, so you're within a standard deviation, more or less.

No, you took a chance on the lobster, so now you're going to want to be a little more careful choosing drinks. Maybe cocktails, and then a glass of wine with your entrees. And reasonable cocktails, not the ones from the back page. Am I right? The back page items are strictly for show-offs with too much money.

But, yes. If it pleases you, I'm happy to talk about our signature drinks. First, could I trouble you for a sip of that water? I'm a little dry. Thank you so much. I'll get you another one in a moment. You're sure? Because it's no trouble. No trouble to just get you a new glass.

Thank you. Much better. Ahem.

So, about the Stalin Martini.

The vodka is the legendary Potato Imperial, French-made to Russian specifications, from a house called Decadence. Decadence Distillery made vodka until it was burnt down in 1941, but we know our bottle is from no later than 1913, because that's the last year that Decadence made Potato Imperial. This was an ultra-premium vodka made specially for Tsar Nicholas I. Officially the Imperial was available only to the Russian court. Imperial was quadruple-distilled and bottled in a crystal, teardrop-shaped vessel with a narrow base that tends to tip over. The Met has an empty bottle, but I'm not sure if it's on display right now or not. Even empty bottles are almost impossible to come by, in part because they break so easily.

One moment. Blake? I stole this lovely young lady's water glass. Could you bring her an extra? Thanks. And is there any of the duck pâté? Could you? Thanks.

Sorry. Getting hungry. I ate before we started serving dinner, but that was hours ago.

Anyway, the Great War made it too difficult for Decadence to ship to Russia, so all the Potato Imperial they had left on hand ended up in one last boxcar bound for Moscow, and the line was discontinued. Pernod Fils bought out Decadence after the war and planned to reintroduce Potato Imperial in peacetime, but the main distillery was destroyed in 1940. Nazi occupiers declared Decadence "decadent," and torched all of its facilities. The high-proof vodka

burnt in the largest, brightest fire reported anywhere in France throughout the entire war. The fire was so large, in fact, that Allied pilots used the glow to orient themselves during bombing runs.

After the war, there was a major international effort to track missing wine and spirits, mostly because of rampant Champagne theft by the German army. We are proud to have in our cellar six bottles of pre-war Champagne, which are toward the bottom there on page seven of the sparkling wine insert. They are quite expensive, yes, and I wouldn't recommend anyone order one, even if they could afford it. They were almost certainly mishandled by the Nazis and are more of a curiosity than a viable beverage, though they are for sale, nevertheless.

Oh, good. Thank you, Blake. A fresh glass for you, yes. Could you top mine off as well when you get the chance? Thank you. And the duck pâté.

Please, yes. Try some with me. Do you have an appetizer coming as well? Good. Sorry. Let me just hurry though the last part of this, and I'll get out of your way.

Where was I? Ah. Yes. Tracking the stolen wine. One of the leading booze trackers was a young American chemist and distiller expert named Bertram Claret, who would go on to become our first certified master sommelier. He would also go on to marry my grandmother and sire my father, Bertram Claret Jr. But don't let me bore you.

Bertram got special permission from the State Department to visit Soviet vodka archives as part of an exchange with an organization of master distillers from Moscow. While Bertram pored over books in Leningrad, the Muscovite experts toured the great distilleries of Kentucky and Tennessee. Now, I can tell that you already regret asking about the Stalin Martini, so I'll give you the quick version of all this. The Russian experts got along fine with the distillers in Kentucky, but the master distiller at Jack Daniels was convinced that the Russians were on a

mission to duplicate Jack Daniels and put him out of business. Needless to say, things became quite tense. And understand that this was before the Cold War had even started in earnest. Yet still, it was a near disaster.

President Truman personally intervened in order to prevent an international incident. But the Russians were so upset that they got on the next available flight to Moscow and, in protest, the Soviet government expelled Bertram from the Leningrad archives and told him he could not take a single scrap of paper out of the country with him. Bertram agreed without fuss, knowing better than to pick a fight with insulted Russians. But he only obeyed the letter of the law, not the spirit. He complained of indigestion just as his hosts were about to check him for notes, and he slipped into the bathroom with the last document he'd been studying. Bertram had discovered a 1917 almanac of seized Tsarist properties, which included an inventory of liquor and a codex indicating where the booze had been stored after being expropriated. Rather than destroying his notes immediately as the Russians had insisted, Bertram took his time on the toilet and carefully copied the page by hand onto his thighs, writing the cyrillic characters to make sure he got the details exactly right.

Do try some of the pâté. It's marvelous, and I shouldn't eat all of it alone. No? Not even a bite? You aren't worried about the ducks are you? About the treatment of the ducks? What they went through so that we could eat their fatty livers? Well, if that's the case I should be on my way. The Stalin Martini is far crueler than the duck pâté. Ducks died for the pâté, yes. They died cruelly, even. But the Stalin Martini? Merely shaking it up practically makes you an accessory to war crimes. So try the pâté, or else I see no reason to even continue explaining the martini to you.

Yes, see? It's delicious. Probably the greatest thing you'll eat tonight, and you aren't even going to pay for it. This will be a great story for your kids. The strange old sommelier who made you eat duck pâté even though you didn't want any. Sorry. I shouldn't presuppose about kids, especially when you both look so shy.

No, I mean it! Both of you need to relax! You should've seen yourselves when I sat down. You looked desperate for someone to come and interrupt your nervous chitchat, even someone old and boring like myself. That's a little sad, isn't it? That an old grandfather-type like me sits here and pleases a couple of young, attractive people by giving them permission not to speak to each other for a few minutes? Gives them a chance to not worry about saying the wrong thing for a few minutes?

It will be fine, I'm certain. I do think you look charming together, and we'll get some drinks going before too long, and that makes everything better, right? Of course! Of course it will. So I ought to hurry up, I suppose.

Anyway. Bertram had been tracking the Champagne taken from surrendering Nazis, but, quite by accident, had discovered something much more significant. The almanac he found suggested that a few bottles of Potato Imperial may well have survived the bolshevik revolution and perhaps even the war. Potato Imperial was considered by spirits experts to be the Holy Grail of booze--a drink of almost mythical stature that no one expected to ever stumble across. And so once aboard a steamer back to America, Bertram paid a sailor to turn the Russian writing on his thighs into tattoos to make sure the inventory was preserved without alteration. Once stateside, Bertram devoted all his energy and talents to tracking down the remaining bottles. He knew that,

in all likelihood, the tattoos on his legs represented his only hope of discovering any of the legendary vodka.

According to the inventory, about one third of the bottles had been held in Stalingrad. These were almost certainly consumed or destroyed during the siege, and Bertram wrote them off as lost without further research. The rest, though, were moved to Georgia, and Bertram deduced correctly that they had made their way into Stalin's private stash.

Oh, good. Two house salads. Blake, could you get one of those for me, too?

Look at that! He's already brought one. Marvelous. He's very good, Blake is.

Listen. I'm only halfway done with this story, so for now would you just bring a bottle of the Wallaby's Pouch Sauvignon Blanc? Their entrees will be out in a few minutes, and I hate to see anyone eat lobster without a reasonable glass of wine. Thank you so much, Blake. Oh, and cracked pepper? Wonderful.

I'd wait a moment if I were you. Cracked pepper! He won't be long, I promise.

So, through a series of contacts in the international chess federation, Bertram Sr. developed a correspondence with Stalin's personal chef, Guillaume du Peche, after whom our peach dessert is named. We'll get to desserts later. For now, just know that Guillaume was a temperamental Parisian communist with secret Trotskyite sympathies and was willing to help Bertram. Or, as some suspect, he just thought Uncle Joe had an unsophisticated palate and was unworthy of rare French liquor. Hard to believe he'd rather see it drunk by Americans, but again, we'll never have all the answers. That's part of the magic.

Bertram and Guillaume spent several years on a process of booze forgery, as complicated as any single act of espionage ever undertaken by an American. Replicating the taste of a vodka

that only a handful of living people had ever tasted was quite an undertaking. Bertram oversaw the manufacture of counterfeit vodka, with the help of a group of French distillers with knowledge of the old techniques used by Decadence. This vodka was smuggled into Georgia. Guillaume tasted each new attempt and then send coded letters back to Bertram, who adjusted the formula according to Guillaume's notes, and sent back a new bottle. The tasting notes were disguised as moves on a chessboard. They went back and forth over the better part of a decade before Guillaume was confident that Stalin would be unable to recognize that his vodka had been replaced. Our house vodka is actually derived from these early experiments, which is why it's called Espionage. It really is a very nice vodka and quite reasonably priced. But of course, it doesn't have that special gravitas that the Potato Imperial carries with it.

Thank you, Blake. Yes, my young friends will take some pepper too, yes.

Now, once du Peche was satisfied with the counterfeit, the idea was to put the fake vodka into new bottles hand-blown by Decadence's original supplier and then to smuggle those into Georgia and trade them for the real Potato Imperial one bottle at a time. Du Peche insisted that the counterfeit bottles be marked with a layer of red paint under the black enamel on the stopper. The paint on our bottle's stopper has been scraped, slightly, to show that this is one of the originals. La Poisson Paris down the street has two of the counterfeit bottles, which are magnificent in their own right, but, I'm told, have not aged quite as well as the Decadence.

Do you not like the artichoke hearts? That's too bad. They're my favorite part.

No, that would be terrible of me, to just pick artichokes off your plate.

Well, if you don't mind? Thank you. Yes, just slide them over. Lovely.

Anyway, this is where our story gets a little sad. Remember that it took years for Bertram and Guillaume to get the recipe exactly right, and in that time, Stalin drank most of the good stuff. I'm sorry to say that our heroes were only able to smuggle out a single full bottle of the Potato Imperial. Also, Stalin caught Guillaume and had him executed, which is sad too, really. Worse than a few ducks eating more than they ought, I think. But that just makes it all the more important that we respect our vodka.

Our bottle is kept in a locked freezer with its own generator, so a catastrophic power failure will not damage our Potato Imperial unless electricity is not restored within fifteen days. The bottle is held at precisely zero degrees centigrade at all times. Argon gas floods the freezer to insure that the vodka oxygenates as little as possible.

Thank you, Blake. Yes, that's perfect. If you'd just take these salad plates, I'll pour the wine.

Yes. Try that. Marvelous, isn't it? Keep Wallaby's Pouch in mind. Pairs extremely well with light seafood or pasta, and not too expensive. And would you believe that each bottle is aged inside the pouch of an actual wallaby?

I'm joking of course. That would be absurd. Although, who knows. I've heard of stranger things.

You wouldn't mind if Blake joined us for a moment, would you? He loves it when I tell people about the vermouth, you see, so you'd really be doing me a favor by letting him listen in. That way, he won't be disappointed or insist that I tell it again in the kitchen.

Thank you, really. So glad they put you at this nice big table. Pour yourself a glass, Blake. Yes, just use one of those empty water glasses. I know it's not the right shape, exactly, for Sauvignon Blanc, but a lot of that is just style, really.

Could we have a toast, do you think? I know I'm old fashioned, but I just always think it's nice to clink glasses and take our first sips together. My father always insisted, so I like to insist. To new friends! And old drinks! Marvelous.

Hm. That's not half bad, is it? It'll open up a bit, too, if we don't drink it too quickly.

But onto the vermouth. The vermouth, is as far as taste goes, less remarkable. Dauphin has been made with the same recipe for a hundred and thirty-two years. They've never altered their proprietary blend of herbs and botanicals, and they've used the same madeira casks that they first purchased from San Pantalon and Co. in 1875. It's a great vermouth, but, to be fair, you could go to Quality Spirits or any other speciality liquor store and get a bottle for thirty-two ninety-five, and your bottle would exhibit a taste profile that is basically identical to our prized bottle from 1982.

We think our bottle brings a certain historical intrigue, though, which is why we are proud to mix it with Potato Imperial. There are a lot of rumors about our bottle of Dauphin. I don't necessarily want to dispel them, but I do want to make sure we're clear about what's fact and what's speculation.

We do, in fact, possess the famous Helia bottle, which is without question the most famous single bottle of vermouth in the world. You can stop me if you're familiar with any part of this story, but in 1982, Helia won the Oscar for best actress in Carlo Portinelli's film, *The Penalties of*

Sin and Virtue. People don't watch the film as much as they used to, which is a shame. Her performance is amazing. If you haven't seen it, you really should. Helia had been a model, of course, but in that movie, she just oozes a kind of fragile sexuality that just breaks your heart again and again. I get shivers just thinking about it, but then, I was a younger man in 1982, and we always keep a special place in our hearts for the idols of our youth.

After the Oscars, Helia agreed to pose for Bill Taglioni for *Risqué Magazine*. He's mostly a punchline now, but at the time, he was considered a serious photographer, albeit a serious photographer whose main skill was convincing attractive women to take their clothes off. Say what you will, the man was great at it. That photo is maybe the most famous nude since *The Birth of Venus*: Helia, hair askew, wearing only a man's white oxford shirt with a necktie draped around her shoulders. Between her thighs, a bottle of Dauphin, the bottle's neck pressed against her navel, condensation from the cold bottle sweating visibly, the pale green glass both framing and obscuring her bare vulva. You saw the print in the lobby.

My apologies. There simply is no way to explain this drink without getting into some amount of sordid detail. The sordid detail is what makes the thing special.

Oh, excellent--the lobster ravioli. Thanks, Margot. I'm sorry, Margot. I know this isn't your table, but I was just telling my new friends here about the Stalin Martini, and Blake is sort of a Helia conspiracy theorist, and he loves hearing about the vermouth, even if it's the same old story again and again. Let me make it up to you. You don't want to join us for a glass of wine, do you, Margot?

You wouldn't mind, would you, if Margot sat here with us for just a moment? Wonderful. We're almost at the end.

Where was I? Ah, yes. As you have deduced, that very bottle of Dauphin, the very bottle made immortal by the boudoir photographs, is in our cellar. It was grabbed by a young assistant of Taglioni, then sold to a collector of erotic memorabilia, who then lost it to my father, Bert Jr, in an unlicensed hold 'em game in 1992. Yes, my father lacked some of my grandfather's palate, but what he lacked in taste he more than made up for in shrewdness. Bert Jr. was a marvelous businessman and knew a sound investment when he saw one. Also, he was good at cheating at poker.

You're going to love the ravioli. I haven't had it in weeks, but I know it's fantastic.

If you wouldn't mind terribly, could I maybe just get in there? With this extra fork? Thank you. It's a shame to drink a nice glass of wine without some food to go with it. And vice versa. Mm. There are some who say that Canadian lobster is as good as Maine but they are mistaken. Horribly mistaken.

Now then, our Helia bottle is kept in a separate cooling system, at ten degrees centigrade, in a special no-light cellar that our mixologist only enters while wearing military-grade night-vision goggles. That way we prevent even a single photon of extra light altering the vermouth's bouquet. Some people claim it still smells like Helia's perfume, but vermouth has a strong smell already so I'm not sure.

Now, as far as the rumors go, I want you to know that they have neither been proved, nor disproved, and they may never be. The collector claimed, quite publicly, that there was an additional photo in the shoot, in Taglioni's private collection, in which, um. Well. There's just no way to be delicate about this. Dauphin has a famously phallic bottle design, hence the old

tradition of ordering “the dolphin’s bollocks,” where you alternate between swigs of Dauphin and shots of Pollock’s gin.

Our collector, who is now anonymous as part of a 1993 lawsuit, claims that Taglioni’s secret archive contains a negative of Helia and she’s, well, in that photo she’s penetrating herself with our bottle of Dauphin.

Helia, as you know, died in a high-speed collision only six weeks after the photo-shoot. Taglioni subsequently claimed that it was too morbid to release the unpublished portion of the shoot, but he did quietly support our collector’s version of events. Taglioni is now quite mad, though, and reportedly wanders the ground of his mansion, which he calls Bordello Risqué, in a bathrobe and, angered by being overshadowed by his longtime competitor, Hugh Hefner, shoots guns at issues of *Playboy*. Neither can be considered reliable.

His young assistant, now the editor of *Risqué*, says that at one point Taglioni sent him out of the studio to buy speedballs, and so he says that while he never saw the rumored extra photo, he can’t say that it was never taken.

UCLA has offered to DNA test our bottle, but in order to preserve the quality of the vermouth, we have declined to take them up on it, at least until we’ve poured it all.

Last year, one of our patrons, a reputed vermouth expert, declared that his martini had certain earthy, sour notes not usually associated with Dauphin, so he falls into the “yes” camp.

Others dismiss the claim on account of Taglioni’s obviously impaired state. Between the five of us--and I’m really not supposed to say this--I’m pretty certain it’s legit. I don’t know. Something about the way the bottle looks when you put on the night-vision goggles. It’s hard to explain. But yeah. Definitely. She totally fucked it.

The rest of the details are not nearly as interesting. We use Hardwick's Orange Zest Bitters, from a bottle Churchill gave to Roosevelt to celebrate the end of Prohibition. We used to have the end of a bottle of Hendrick's Gin that was part of the gift, but we finished that a couple years ago. Both were given to Bertram for his many years of service by Truman.

We have a contract with some Tibetan monks. They smuggle us out Himalayan glacier ice. We were using Canadian glacier ice, but our mixologist did an ice tour this past spring, and he assures us that Canadian glacier ice is garbage compared to Himalayan. I'll admit that I've tried both, and both have their merits, so I'm not personally willing to say that the Himalayan is really all that much better. But I'm not the ice expert. Oh, also the monks bless the ice, so I guess it's better for reincarnation, too.

We use a single artisanal olive in each Stalin Martini. Our olive maker only distributes to us. This is not an olive that you can buy at any store. He just turned ninety-two years old and is quite blind. One of our sous chefs speaks Italian and is sort of his pen-pal, only he's tricked this poor old, semi-retired, Italian olive farmer into believing that he's his long-lost grandson, so the guy sends us a jar of the best olives in the world every year at Christmas. I am not going to stand here and tell you that I'm a hundred percent comfortable with this way of doing things, but I think if you try one of the olives, you'll agree that it is every bit worth any moral qualms you might have about stealing olives from an old, blind peasant.

I should mention, though, that you cannot order your Stalin Martini dirty. If you ask for it dirty, and I tell the mixologist that you want it dirty, he will literally refuse to make it for you. He will say that if you want a dirty martini, you should go down to Rusty's and get one there made

out of Mim's because you must not be worthy of a Stalin Martini. His words, not mine. Just trust me. Don't try to offer any special instructions. It makes people upset.

We use a diamond-encrusted shaker to mix this all up in, but of course, you can't taste that. That's just for show. Kind of silly, actually. You can step into the bar to watch, if you'd like. We do have extra night-vision goggles.

That took a long time, but it really is the only way to answer your question. That is how we justify having a twenty-nine thousand dollar cocktail on our menu. I think once you consider the history involved, you'll agree that we're being quite reasonable. If that feels a little steep, you might glance at that last page of Champagnes. The Stalin Martini is the most expensive single drink, but there are plenty of full bottles in our cellar that cost even more. For instance, we just used an exploratory submarine to retrieve a lost case of Champagne from the North Sea, submerged since a shipping accident in 1525. We suspect that it would pair extremely well with the ravioli, only it's far too expensive for us to sample, so this is all theoretical.

Will you be trying a Stalin Martini tonight, perhaps as a digestif?

I thought not, but I already told you that.

We should really get someone to bring us a Cognac instead, don't you think? Sound good to you, Margot? I know Blake is interested. He always wants to drink Cognac. See if you can flag someone down, Blake. Seems a shame to get up now.

My Boyfriend Is a Big Hairy Ape

Mom. *Mom*. I don't want to talk about this right now.

Please, Mom, stop. I'm gonna hang up. I'm gonna hang up the phone, and you won't even know it because you just talk over me anyway and you'll probably just keep talking for like a half hour before you even notice I'm not there anymore.

I *know* that's rude, and I'm *sorry*, but I told you I don't have time right now.

Mom. Okay. But can't we do this later? I've got to go do that thing. I have to talk to the guy at the zoo. Like I already told you. I've got to go to the zoo, Mom.

What does it matter? I've got to go to the zoo. People go to zoos. Millions of people go to zoos every day, and it just so happens that I've got to go to a zoo right now. And instead of letting me do my own thing, that I need to do, for my life, you just want to tell me all about how

I shouldn't have broken up with *Dave*. Because now *Dave's* your favorite guy in the world, who you can't stop talking about, even though you *hated* Dave when we were together.

No, Mom. Don't change things around. Don't tell me about Dave, Mom. You *hated* Dave.

You did. I don't know why you can't remember, but you really hated him. For real: *hated him*, hated him. Maybe if you hadn't hated him so much, we'd still be together.

Yeah, I kind of *am* blaming you Mom. I kind of really *am* really blaming you. Yeah.

Okay. I can't believe I have to go over this again with you. But fine. Fine. Remember the thing on Facebook? And how you can't tell the difference between messages and wall posts? Right? *Now* you remember. I said, "Happy birthday to my sweet boytoy David!" I put that on my *wall*. So that all my friends would *see* my wall and know that it was my *Dave's birthday* and wish him happy *birthday*.

And then you wrote, "Oh, I didn't know you were still dating that big hairy ape."

And I didn't get to delete it until I got home from work like ten hours later. And everyone saw it.

Yeah. No, I'm *not* exaggerating. I get all these weird texts that are like, "OMG your mom is so funny." And I don't know what they're about until I get home, and Dave is like, "So. I'm a big hairy ape, huh? So your mom says I'm a big hairy ape, huh?" And he starts making monkey noises. Like, really loud.

Of course he saw it, Mom! Dave is on Facebook all day. He doesn't have a job, so he just sits on Facebook and plays Farmville.

It's a game, Mom. I'm not going to explain stupid Farmville to you right now. It's a stupid game, and it doesn't matter. It has nothing to do with anything.

I don't *know* if you'd like it. Actually, sure, Mom. You'd love it. Why don't you hang up the phone, and go play yourself a few hours of Farmville, and quit ruining my life, okay?

Yeah, I did bring it up, yeah, but only because you should know that Dave just sits and plays a game on Facebook all the time so of course he *saw*, because everyone *saw*, because that's what happens when you post something on someone's *wall*.

It's like an outside *wall* that anyone can see. Not a *message*. That's like a *letter* that can *only* be read by the person who has the envelope.

It's not complicated, Mom! Wall. Message. Wall. Message.

No, Mom. This isn't a *new thing*. No. This isn't part of the new Facebook. This is *old* Facebook. I know you think new Facebook is confusing. Everyone thinks new Facebook is confusing, but this is from old Facebook. It's old.

Okay?

Okay. So after that he *cannot* shut up about it. He brings it up every day. I get home, and I'm like, "Hey, Dave. You start dinner?" And he's like, "No. I'm a big hairy ape." And then I get home one day, and he's bought, like, I don't know, maybe *ten* big bunches of bananas. And he's just sitting on the couch, and he's got like, I don't know, maybe a *dozen* banana peels sitting around. A dozen! He spends a whole weekend only eating bananas.

So, in a way, maybe I should say thank you, because I didn't *know* that Dave was such an infant who was so ready to turn himself into a literal monkey just to prove some dumb point or make me mad or something. He just starts scratching himself. And eating bananas. And shrieking. Just shrieking for no reason! Howling! You remember when Dad called and Dave picked up the other line and thought it was so funny to just make monkey noises while we were

trying to talk? Dave *lost* it, Mom. Oh, and he stopped showering. And wearing a shirt. I was worried he'd just go totally naked all the time.

Yeah. No shirt at all. And maybe you think that's sexy, since you're such a Dave fan all of a sudden, but I think it's ridiculous.

And that's not even why I threw him out, Mom. I was being patient. I figure, maybe if I quit telling him to stop acting like a monkey, he'll stop acting like a monkey on his own. He'll just get sick of the joke and start wearing shirts and start eating other foods besides bananas.

So. A week ago, it looks like he's quit. He cleans up the house. Still no shirt, but he cleans up the house. Throws away the banana peels and everything. And I'm being *nice* to him, Mom. I'm being *so* nice to him. I don't want to go into detail, but I'm being *so* nice to him, because he's basically a big toddler. A giant, thirty year-old toddler. So I'm being *so* nice to him. I think, this is over. I think the whole ape thing is *over*.

But get this. It turns out him being all *regular* was just to mess with me even more. He cleans everything up. And. God. I can't even believe he did this. Okay.

You remember when we were at the museum? The modern art museum? And they had that tiny Picasso--the drawing of the guitar that's made out of oranges? And has boobs? And the curator was all old, and hitting on you, and telling you all that boring art stuff, like how museums sell to each other if they get tired of a painting or whatever?

Okay well it turns out zoos do that too. Like, they might sell a penguin in order to get an extra snake or something. They're only supposed to sell to other zoos or like send stuff to animal reserves or Canada or whatever, but Dave, um.

I guess Dave convinced the zoo that he was from a zoo.

Mom. Dave stole an orangutan. He stole it!

I don't know how! I just know that when I got back home, he was sitting on a couch, drinking Mountain Dew, and playing Xbox with an orangutan.

No, Mom. I don't remember what game. It was probably Tekken.

It's a fighting game. What do you care what game it was? You're missing the whole point, which is that David brought a stolen orangutan into my home, which is why I had to break up with him.

Yeah. Dave introduced him to me as his cousin Steve, who'd be visiting for a while. And I'm like, "You gotta be kidding me. You can't bring a monkey into my house." And Dave is like, "But he's an ape." And that makes me so angry. So angry because I know he's an ape. I know the difference between a monkey and an ape, and maybe that matters in the jungle, but when there is an ape in your house or a monkey in your house and you don't expect it, it's all the same. I don't care. It's all the same when you walk into your house, and there's an ape or a monkey sitting on your couch. And I am so angry, but I'm like, "Fine. You can't bring an *ape* into my house." And Dave is like, "But you already *have* an ape in your house. Since I'm such a big hairy ape." And then he gives Cousin Steve the orangutan a big hug, and they both eat a banana. Like, *Lady and the Tramp* style.

So I just say, "Go." Go. I made him *go*. Dave *left*. Yeah. That day, he leaves. I make sure he leaves. I throw all his stuff out the window. Most of his stuff anyway, and I get the locks changed right away by a twenty-four hour locksmith. I've still got some random stuff, like I've got Dave's old swim trunks because it turns out Dave is kind of shaped like an orangutan, so they fit Steve pretty well.

Yeah, Mom. That's right. Steve is still here.

No, he's fine. I just need to meet with someone at the zoo, which is why I don't have time for this conversation right now.

No, Mom. I'm totally safe. He's actually really sweet. It's funny because I'm really not that into animals really, but he's really not that bad. And, what's wild, what's so amazing, is if you look into his eyes, you just see *him* seeing *you*. And you're seeing a *person*. You're two people looking at each other in the eye, relating to each other as people.

No, it's not weird. He's so smart. He's so, so smart. And handsome. You should come meet him. You'd say the exact same thing. You'd say, "Yeah. This is a person. A human, orangutan person that I'm looking at." I don't see why it's so hard to understand, Mom. Orangutans are smart, and I dunno. I just feel really connected to him, you know?

Like, think about how you feel about Mr. Buttons. You'd say that Mr. Buttons was more than a cat to you, right?

Right. I hear the way you talk to him. And I know you make Dad hold him up to the phone when you're away from home. And I also know that Dad just rubs the phone against his shirt and pretends he's trying to get Mr. Buttons to talk into the phone because he's lazy and also he thinks it's dumb to put a cat on the phone.

He does, Mom. Sorry to break it to you, but he does. You've never actually talked to Mr. Buttons on the phone. I've *seen* Dad do it.

See, you're angry now. You are! Because you feel a *connection* to Mr. Buttons. I feel a *connection* to Steve.

Who cares how long Steve has been here? It doesn't matter. It's not an issue of time, Mom. It's an issue about how *connected* we are. It didn't take you long to love Mr. Buttons, did it? And cats are not smart. I'm sorry, but they are not. They don't have *people* eyes. They have *cat* eyes. So it's much faster with apes. Much, way faster.

And he's so *gentle*, Mom. So, *so* gentle. We just sit, and he plays Tekken and oh, wow. You would *not* believe this, Mom, but he saw me painting my toenails, and now that's like his *favorite* thing. He always wants to do it, and he's got like a thing he does where he rolls onto his back and like wiggles his toes, and that's how I know that he wants toe time. He doesn't even really need to paint them since they don't have enough time to chip or anything. And he just really likes to do it, and I think it's really cute and nice.

No. *My* toes. No. I'm talking about *my* toes, yeah. Yeah. He paints my toes, Mom. Yeah. An ape paints your daughter's toes. Is that really so weird? Is that weirder than like, the pedicure where you put your feet in the fishbowl and the little fish like *exfoliate* you or whatever?

No, I'm not making it up. The fish thing is real, Mom.

No, I don't do it. I've got Steve. I don't need the fish thing.

Is he *good* at it? Mom, that's not the point, whether or not he's *good* at it. Of course he's *terrible* at it. This is an orangutan we're talking about. I mean, he's smart, but not *that* coordinated. And he just started learning, and nobody is that good at it when they first start. We're reading *Elle* together, and I think that's helping a little. But yeah. He gets nail polish everywhere, and then I clean it up with like, one of Dave's shirts or something, which is actually pretty satisfying.

Kind of makes me think of Dave and how things were. When we'd just started dating, and he seemed fun, you know? Like, when his little quirks were still cute and I wasn't annoyed by them all yet.

So, relax, Mom. It's fine. It's *fine*-fine. Just, you know--don't worry. And don't yell at me for dumping Dave, because *you* hated him anyway. Okay? Okay. Now, let me go to the zoo, okay? Okay. I love you.

What? No, no. No, *I'm* going to the zoo. *Steve* doesn't like riding in cars. He's going to stay here and play Xbox while I meet with the primate expert guy. I gotta get Steve on a better diet. All he's been eating is bananas and Mountain Dew, and I really don't think that's very good for him. I mean the bananas, that makes sense. But I don't like the him drinking all that Mountain Dew.

Isn't that right Mr Man? Because that gives you the Mountain Dew burps, doesn't it? Doesn't it?

Oh, sorry. I was talking to Steve. Yeah. He's right here. Do you want me to put him on? No? He likes talking on the phone. Sometimes he likes to pick up the extension in the kitchen. He looks so cute on the phone. Like a fuzzy businessman.

Isn't that right Steve? My fuzzy businessman? My monkey businessman?

He's not really a *monkey*. That's *our* word. *Nobody can call you my monkey businessman except for me, can they? Except for Mommy.*

Yeah so I gotta meet with this guy at the zoo. Maybe I can even get him on like a vegan orangutan diet. He's *very* picky though. *Aren't you Steve?*

Oh my god Mom. You should be on Skype right now. Do you want to get on Skype instead? He's just being *so* cute. Like he's making this *cute* face, but like it's kind of a cute old man face, and it's *really* cute.

I don't know. I can't really explain what's so cute about it. It's just cute. That's why I said we should go on Skype. Do you wanna Skype with him later, Mom? I think you'd really like him if you got to know him.

No, Mom. Steve doesn't want to go back to the zoo. He told me. He made it clear.

Do you want to back to the zoo, baby? No. No, he doesn't. *Do you want to stay here with mommy?*

When orangutans hop around like that, that means yes. So he's going to stay.

Oh, Steve! Are you playing with Mommy's makeup? I should go. He just got into Mommy's makeup again. Yeah. My lipstick.

No. I don't think it's weird to call myself Mommy. I'm kinda like Steve's mommy now. I get him his bananas and his Mountain Dew, and now I'm going to learn how to make better orangutan food. *For his belly. For his orangutan belly.*

Shit. Sorry. I gotta go. I gotta get this lipstick off him before he gets it everywhere, like gets it on my pillows and stuff.

Yeah. I'm talking about the bed. I don't want lipstick on my pillows. Yeah. In the bedroom. I only have the one bed, Mom. It's a small apartment. Where else would he sleep if not the bed? I tried getting him to sleep on the couch, but he likes to cuddle. And he gets kind of scared when cars go by so he likes to spoon.

Mom, I'm going. But, just--now that I think about it, I really should thank you, because if you knew how to use Facebook like a regular person, probably Steve wouldn't even *be* here. And Dave *would* be here. And that would be *so* ridiculous. Okay, Mom. I'll see you on Skype later!

Bye!

Dearly Beloved

We are gathered here today, finally, in celebration of the love between Jodi and Stephen, two wonderful people who told us so often that they were getting married that I think we all assumed they never actually would.

It is appropriate that we mark this occasion here, on the deck of *The Reckless*. This is of course a reproduction of the great wooden ships that Stephen's ancestor, Thornwith Snoot, sailed centuries ago between Africa, the Caribbean, and this very harbor. A marriage is like an old ocean voyage of yore. Just as we are gathered here today, great crowds gathered to watch a tall sailing ship launch for her maiden voyage.

Sailing, like marriage, is an inexact science. When a new ship let out from the shipyard for the first time, there was little guarantee of its sea-worthiness, beyond the past successes of its

shipwrights. And just as many of those old ships often sank without ever crossing the Atlantic, we know that many ceremonies like this one ultimately lead to divorce--and a trip deep beneath the love ocean to Davy Jones' divorce locker.

And perhaps that is why there are so many similarities between the launch of a ship and the start of a new marriage. We gather at both, we cross our fingers at both, we break a bottle of Champagne over the bow. But just as science has improved the skills with which we build ships, it has improved the way we pick mates.

Jodi and Stephen met, as so many young people do today, while waiting to have their teeth whitened by Dr. DaSilva, whom I expect is in attendance today. Yes? Yes, there he is in the back, a rare day off from his cosmetic dentistry practice in Cranston, where he says he'll give everyone who mentions the Snoot wedding half-off their first visit.

But I digress. That is where Jodi and Stephen met and first befriended each other. They friended literally at first sight, each logging into Facebook right there in the waiting room. And, I'm told, each made sure to ask Dr. DaSilva about the other while sitting in his dentist's chair, spitting out mouthfuls of phlegm and abrasive teeth-whitening chemicals into the little self-cleaning sink, saying, tell me about Jodi, Dr. DaSilva. Tell me about Stephen, Doctor.

Conventional ethical notions of doctor-patient confidentiality would seem to forbid Dr. DaSilva from answering such questions. But our favorite teeth-whitener works both for prettier smiles and a higher calling, so share he did. The good doctor was of course privy to their most intimate secrets. Their fillings. Their flossing habits. The sorts of foods each were most likely to have stuck in their teeth. And so it can be no surprise that their love blossomed.

Blossom is an appropriate metaphor, because it is the the nature of blossoms to bloom, to wither in fall, and return in the spring, just as Jodi and Stephen have gone through cycles of their own. I'm sure many of those gathered today had begun to look forward to spring announcements of the couple's engagement, followed by equally predictable cancellation notices a few weeks later.

They say that comedy is tragedy plus time, so I imagine enough time has passed that we can enjoy a laugh about a few of these cancellations. Everyone can enjoy a good chuckle now and again, and I like to chuckle about Jodi and Stephen's first cancellation. Cancelled when the young lovers could not agree on which sous-vide machine to list on their registry. And who could forget when, a mere year later, the happy couple postponed their nuptials indefinitely upon discovering some manner of astrological compatibility conflict. I won't pretend to understand.

And as for last year's ill-fated "spiritual quest" amongst the Buddhist temples of southeast Asia, it's perhaps possible that those wounds are a bit too fresh. I hope someday we may yet find that story funny too.

But as they say, fourth time's the charm. And here we are. Stephen's father took me aside earlier--where are you sitting, Steve Sr.? Don't see him. Ah well. My fault probably. Or perhaps he just stepped away. I understand Stephen's bachelor party was quite raucous, though I was not personally invited. Wouldn't be appropriate for a minister to go to a bachelor party, obviously, although it is nice to get an invitation. Feel like part of the family. That sort of thing.

In any event, Steve Sr. said to me, Hal, if I'd know all it took to get this taken care of was to find a caterer with a non-refundable deposit, I would've made sure of it years ago.

We're all blessed by Steve Sr.'s good humor and charm.

And just as the shipwrights of old improved in their craft ship after ship, I think we can safely say that this fourth-planned Snoot wedding is the grandest affair of all, made all the more lavish by its shrinking number of attendees. Just as flavors concentrate when squeezed into a smaller volume, I think we can rest assured that those of us here today are the absolute best-qualified to mark this occasion.

As the Snoot's family pastor, it has been my pleasure to see Stephen grow up. I remember when he was but a new trust fund established in Steve Sr.'s account books. And now, here he is, a man, grown, prepared to take hold the reins of the Snoot Insurance Group, and the reins of a wife, bound to him in matrimony.

It has been my pleasure as well to see Jodi the handful of times she has joined Stephen at services, and because of the long gaps between visits, I've witnessed their relationship like a nature documentarian, who leaves a stop-motion camera to film a mushroom rising gently from the cow field, a mushroom ready for its ceremonial plucking.

And it is my honor to perform that ceremony today, a ceremony that stretches back in time as far as is worth thinking about. I was asked not to read any scripture, by someone whom I will not name, but whose name is about to rhyme with Odie Snoot. And instead, to read a selection from a long poem, which I have misplaced. So instead I'll just summarize the message of the scriptural passage's metaphor, albeit less artfully than the original, which someone wanted to leave out. Ahem. Marriage is great. It's great so long as a higher authority--whom I won't name, so insert one of your own choosing, but choose wisely--so long as a higher authority watches everything you do in your marriage, so make sure you only do the sorts of things you wouldn't mind the authority knowing about, since He knows about everything. Amen.

Please. Bring forth the rings. Every culture worth knowing about marks this solemn occasion with the exchange of rings. Although I've heard some cultures may exchange a goat or some chickens or some such items as well, there's always a ring, too.

And why is that? It's simple. The ring hugs our finger like a permanent embrace. A permanent, steely grip that can only be broken with a little soap or some manner of lubricant. Or maybe bolt cutters. And in that way it represents the love between Jodi and Stephen, blossoming now for the final time. The symbolism is clear, even to our crude ancestors, who wore rings perhaps made of leather or sticks or whatever materials they may have had available.

Now then, Stephen, if you'll repeat after me: I, Stephen Snoot, take you, Jodi, as my first mate on this, the marriage voyage of the rest of our lives. As my mate, I know you'll see that the ship is always seaworthy and that the decks are always swabbed. And though I am the ship's captain, I will offer you the rudder now and again, when the ocean is clear and the breezes gentle, so that I might rest, and in that way we will comfort each other and not grow seasick. And when seas are rough, you will help me find the right path, or perhaps cook a nice meal below deck so that I might refresh myself as soon as I am able.

And as we are bound by these rings, like an anchor holds a ship by catching on the rocky ocean floor, all that I have is yours, unless you cut anchor, as is stated in our prenuptial agreement, Section 3, Paragraph 2. Note that even though all I have is yours in a grand sense, in more practical terms you will still work within a generous allowance and use a shared credit card account so that we might discuss purchases, as agreed to in Section 3, Paragraph 1.

I will continue, in sickness and health, as long as we both shall live, excepting those specific health concerns listed in 4-1.

Ahem. Bit of an aside may be in order here. For those of you who don't have the relevant documents in front of you, the phrase "health concerns" merely refers to a table of specific, acceptable weight ranges, with a formula that includes reasonable allowances for child birth and so on. They worked it out with a physician, and it's entirely above board. Apologies. Back to the vow.

With these words, I thee wed.

Now, Jodi, if you'll repeat after me: I, Jodi--just say your last name there too. I Jodi do take you as the captain of our marriage ship, and so on. Do we need to go through that whole thing again?

I didn't think so. Good. So I take you on the marriage ship and will love you forever, assuming you remain faithful to me, as defined in Section 1-3. That is, to not exceed second base with another more than once a year and to never again visit Thailand, even for a little bit. I will permit you your privacy, specifically by avoiding your work cell phone and your Aspen condo.

I will limit those tasks associated with my artistic dreams to while you are away from home and not blab on about my women's writing circle except for on lady holidays, like Valentine's Day, or when my mother makes her biannual visits, not to exceed four nights per visit, for which you are only required to be present a minimum of two nights each.

I should come to services more often too.

That's not part of the official vow, I suppose. I'm just throwing it in there. Sort of wedding day constructive criticism. Sorry. Regular vow, now. With these words, I thee wed.

You may kiss the bride.

It is my honor to introduce to you Mr. and Mrs. Snoot.

RE: anything I should know this weekend while I'm housesitting?

Hey Sis-

Thanks again for keeping an eye on things while Geoff and I are away. Everything is pretty much the same as last time you were here except for I got rid of that stupid chair that Geoff liked so much--the recliner with the worn-out upholstery on the arms--so that's the only major difference. That and the bathroom. We redid that. Oh, and I turned Geoff's room, his den or whatever, into an extra bedroom. And I keep my coats in there. So that's where you can go ahead and make yourself at home. Only stay out of my coats! J/k. You can try on a couple if you want. Not the leather ones. Or the lace ones. Or the baby blue marching band one with the tags still on that I just got. Yeah so make yourself at home! Have fun!

The kitchen is pretty much like you'd expect. I put a green sticky on all the food you should go ahead and eat because it'll go bad or whatever anyway. The yellow stickies mean that if you get really hungry or you just want a taste, go ahead and have a little. Please don't eat any of the red stuff. That's mostly for the new Warsaw Diet I'm on. And it's like imported stuff or whatever, like these salted fish thingies that were pretty hard to get so, yeah, don't eat any of those. Unless you're thinking about trying it. It's actually pretty nice. And it would probably be even better for you, to keep your energy up or whatever. So actually, yeah, don't worry about the red stickies. Just make sure there's enough left for right when I get back, okay?

Obviously, the main thing is Tiberius, the main reason for having you stay over. That, and I don't really trust the cleaning service. They say they don't steal anything, but of course they're going to say that.

Anyway, Tiberius is old. You know. He's old. And you can't teach an old dog new tricks, or even old tricks that the dog hasn't tried before. So you pretty much have to just let him do whatever.

Geoff takes him for a walk every morning, but only to the park and back. Tiberius likes to walk around the dog park so he can smell the other dogs, but he doesn't like to go inside it because I guess he likes being near the other dogs, but he's also kind of scared of them. Whatever. It's annoying. Be sure to bring a minimum of three bags with you everywhere. Not just one. Or two. Three. I think it's usually just one, but two happened one time so bring three. I know, right? Gross.

He's starting to shed pretty bad, so I go ahead and keep the small vacuum in the living room all the time. The only good thing about that horrible chair is that it used to kind of confine

Tiberius, and he'd only sit there so that was the only place he'd leave all his hair. Now, I made it clear to Geoff that Tiberius can't get on the new chair, since it's nice and new and doesn't smell like old dog ass yet, but I know he doesn't listen to me. I find hair on the new chair, the leather one, and it makes me just want to scream. That's why there's like three open bottles of wine in the fridge right now. Pretty ridiculous.

Maybe Geoff and I being gone will get Tiberius used to being on the floor, but I dunno. I just want to kick Geoff. Or that dog. Just kidding. About Geoff.

We give Tiberius these pills. I think they're pretty much dog Xanax, but I don't know. I wrap them in a piece of bacon. I went ahead and wrapped like a dozen in bacon and left them in the fridge for you.

The vet said to only give him one a day because he's so thin he can't really take any more than that. He can't process it because of his liver or whatever.

Is that clear? That if Tiberius got into the fridge and ate all those bacon pills, he'd be dead? And gone? And Geoff would be super sad about it for a little while, but then would get over it? But also probably wouldn't want to have a dog at all because a new dog would make him think of Tiberius? And that I'd get to enjoy my own home without a dog for the first time since Geoff and I got married?

On the fridge I put the number for the dog cremators. Geoff doesn't know about this, but underneath the sink there's a box and in the box is a clay pot I bought at the farmer's market and that's for the ashes. You know, just in case. Just in case something happens and you need to take Tiberius to the dog cremators, where I've already paid for a cremation.

Already paid for it. You'd just have to put his dead body in a suitcase or whatever and take him down there, and the urn, and they'd do the rest. That's just so you know what to do if the unthinkable happens, and he gets into the bacon pills. Or gets off the leash and gets hit by a car. Or if he just dies, since that does happen. Old dogs can just die, and it's not like anyone does a dog autopsy so they can put cause of death in a dog obituary or anything. Old dogs die, and you move on. You get sad, but you toughen up, and you throw out all the dog stuff, and eventually the dog food smell leaves your pantry, and you see that you could put a little sideboard or an antique desk or something on that spot where the dog always slept, and then your husband doesn't ever say that he thinks there isn't room in the house for a dog and a baby. And then he has to come up with some other excuse or shut the fuck up. Or divorce you. I don't know. These are just hypotheticals.

Do you remember, last summer, when we were at the lake and you thought there was a mouse and then I saw the mouse and was so scared? And you bought those mousetraps and put peanut butter on them and caught that mouse, only it wasn't quite dead and you used that rock on it? You just picked up a rock and put that poor mouse out of its misery. You just crushed its poor, scared, little head and sent it to wherever mice go. I don't know why I'm thinking of this right now. But you are very brave. And strong. I know I joke, sometimes, about how big you are or whatever. You are a bit bigger, sure. Remember when you borrowed my swimsuit at the beach that summer because you forgot yours and the creepy guy was telling you that he was into BBWs and Geoff had to tell you what it meant because I was laughing too hard?

That was fun. But you're also bigger and stronger. More capable, too, and you just know how to do stuff I don't.

Which is why I'm so comfortable leaving Tiberius with you. I know you'll do exactly the right thing in whatever situation. No matter what happens. You're the perfect one to be with Tiberius, even if somehow he's still here when we get back and not cremated or anything, and maybe I won't feel like moving out still or whatever, and Geoff won't fuck up this vacation like he did the last one and the one before that, and I won't have to sleep in the coatroom anymore when we get home.

Thank you so much, Sis. I know I can count on you. I'll try to get you some of those diet pills you can't get in America I was telling you about. Those ones that would just melt you down like two sizes without working at it at all. Oh, PS. Tiberius is allergic to cheese so watch out for all the artisanal cheeses I left next to the bacon pills. They're all unwrapped and sliced into little bite-sized things on the bottom shelf since I know you love cheese, I think.

Love, Megan

Our Pornography Collection

Honey, I know this probably *seems* like a lot of pornography. Okay, I'll strike "probably." I know this *seems* like a lot of pornography. Let me try to contextualize it a little bit, though, before you get too upset. And I'm not excusing, I'm explaining. When my father wanted to look at naked women he had to get in his car, and drive way out of our neighborhood, and buy dirty magazines from a guy at a corner store. He had to invent some other things he needed, like gum and potato chips, so that he could pretend that the dirty magazine was an afterthought and not the whole point of the trip. So that he could be a man who *happened* to be buying pornography rather than a man *buying* pornography. He had to put all the stuff he didn't really want on the counter, and try to act casual while the clerk was adding it all up, and say, "Oh, and I know I

shouldn't but what the hell. Throw in a copy of, what's it called, *Penthouse*? Right? Did I get the name right? Throw in one of those, would you?"

Look at me. This is the future! In the time that it took him to buy one *Penthouse*, I can download a feature length film. Think about that for a minute. My father and I, equally interested in seeing naked women, let's assume. I don't know how we could really do a scientific comparison, but let's assume roughly equal. Only difference is, this is the digital era, and naked women are being thrown at me at such a rate that this pirated copy of *Vampire Sorority Sluts IV*, for instance, is sort of my *Penthouse*. So don't think of this as a bunch of porn on a computer that you've stumbled upon, here. Think of it as a modest stack of men's magazines.

That should really make you feel better.

Or not. Okay.

Well, maybe I should be mad at *you*, then. Ever think about that? Ever think about how this is sort of my sanctuary? Did you ever think about how I don't have a room that's my sanctuary, now that what used to be my room is all filled with baby shit? For a baby that won't even be born for months and yet has somehow already booted me out of my refuge? Which sort of made my computer my refuge, in a very sad, but very real, way. And you, for no reason that I can tell, decided to invade my refuge.

You have a computer. You have your own computer that's way better than mine. That could fit easily two or three times the pornography mine can hold. And yet you decided that you'd just use my machine instead of yours, because yours was in the bedroom, and that was just too far for your poor, pregnant feet to walk. So if you would have just gotten up, or, hell, you could've even yelled at me and said, "Hey, Ron? Would you go grab me my computer?" And I

would have made a face and rolled my eyes, but I would've done it. I would've done it, and then you would've been comparing reviews of private preschools on your machine instead of mine and instead of having this whole fight we could be continuing to support the bizarre fiction that somehow, neither one of us is capable of becoming aroused by anyone but the other. Make sense?

Well, that's just not really fair, is it? Of course we would be better off if you'd never found it. Because the choice here is not between me having porn on my computer and not having porn on my computer. The choice is between you *knowing* about it or pretending *not* to know about it. I barely have a choice in this! Check the statistics. I'm a man, between fifteen and thirty-five. They practically pre-install porn on computers for us. Don't you remember that kid at the Apple store? The one who would not shut up about the private browsing features? "And you click this to erase everywhere you've been. And I do mean everywhere, right buddy?" He was practically screaming advice at me: "This is how you keep your lovely wife from knowing what a disgusting pig you are." It's understood. Frankly, I think the real problem is that you're just being a little rigid. A little inflexible.

No, I'm not saying you're overreacting. I would never say that. I think that you're not so much overreacting, as you are just sort of reacting when what you could do is not react, because I think that that would be more appropriate. And you don't need to be reacting to things, right? Didn't the doctor say not to react to things?

Well, he said something like that. For you to relax or something. Maybe you should call him up, just to clarify. And, while you've got him on the phone, ask him, if, you know, in his

professional opinion, if he has a bunch of porn on his computer, because I guarantee he does. And he's your doctor, so he has to tell you, right? Doctor-patient confidentiality.

I'm not saying that if *somebody* else does a thing that that makes it okay for me to do that thing. But, if *everybody* else is doing it, then you do have to ask whether or not it's really all that bad. And it isn't like it's ever been a problem between us, has it?

Think about it this way. You know how I want to have sex with you all the time, right? No matter how much porn I download, I still want to have sex with you all the time. The greatest porn ever shot by the greatest porn director filming the greatest porn stars in the greatest place in the world, like, I don't know. The Louvre. The greatest porn movie ever made, this imaginary Louvre porn, is nothing compared to everyday, nothing special, no-frills sex. And you know how very much I enjoy everyday, nothing special, no-frills sex with you.

Even now, when you're all, you know--

No, I wasn't about to say "fat." I was going to say "pregnant." You're *so* pregnant, and I'm still into you. I'm still ready. You know that if you say the word, I'm ready. It's been like a month, and I completely understand why it's been a month. I'm not even saying that it should have been any amount of time less than a month.

But still, you know that if you even look at me, and if there's anything unusual at all about the expression on your face, I start to think about it. Like say your eyebrow is doing a thing that it doesn't usually do. Next there's a little voice in my head saying, "Oh, nice. Maybe that means she wants to do it."

Seriously, even this very second, even though you're really angry at me, and it's been so long--thirty-four days--in my mind, I'm like, "Hey. I've never had sex with anyone this actively

angry. What would that be like?" I don't *know* what it would be like. I would like to know. So. Maybe I can adjust this situation in my favor and take this somewhere, because you look amazing right now. You're so angry that your chest is heaving. Absolutely heaving. And you've got that amazing preggo-rack just taunting me, absolutely sticking it's tongue out at me and saying "Nyah, nyah, nyah" at me. And you've got those angry little fists going, and you're just so tense that it just makes you look solid and muscly. And you've got just a little bit of anger-tear going, and anger tears are the sexiest kind of tears, and I cannot see those without thinking, "Wow. I wonder what anger tears taste like. Maybe if I am very careful. Very, very careful. Brain surgery careful. Maybe I could find out."

But of course, I won't. I don't have that kind of game. I'm not that attractive to you under the best of circumstances, and these are not the best of circumstances. It would take a real sex ninja, a real sex alchemist, to pull that off, and that is not me. I'm like a sex temp-worker. I mean I've got only the most general skills. Mostly I just get called in until someone better can be found to take my place full-time. Frankly, I think it's miraculous that you've let me stick around this long. So there's no way I'm going to be able to turn any of this to my advantage. I mean, I've been trying. I've been trying with everything I've got, and you are, if anything, madder now than you were when I started. And based on past experience, my estimate is that you're going to be pissed at me, in an unsexy way, until this time tomorrow.

So. What am I do do with this new curiosity? This erotic desire to experience your seething, horrible rage? How can I deal with this without bothering you? That's where my old friend pornography comes in! Maybe I'll finally watch *Anger Sex-Travaganza 6!* It got a pretty good review on Adult Move Database, so maybe afterwords, I won't wonder so much. Maybe

afterwords, I'll feel less depressed about the last thirty-four days. And maybe, for the fifteen minutes I'll end up watching the movie before I'm, you know, done with it or whatever, maybe during that time I'll be less terrified about being a shitty dad. I know it isn't really fair to admit this right now, because it just sounds like I'm doing it for sympathy, but, yeah. I am in a state of perpetual terror, with brief interruptions for sleep and sad masturbation.

And you want me to be less terrified, right? I know you do. And also you'd mostly like me to stay out of your way. So, in a way, in a small way, sure, but in a way, this porn is really for both of us. Mostly for me, but for both of us, in a very real way. These movies help you. They make your life better, by making my life better, while you get to do whatever. Sleep, mostly, without me bothering you trying to turn a back-rub into sex like I used to try in college.

Which means, sure, if you want me to delete my porn, that's fine. Because I'd do anything for you, obviously. Even weird stuff. Even weird stuff like in some of the more specialized porn that I mostly don't even like. But if I did delete it all, I'd be deleting your porn too. Because it's for both of us. Mostly for me, but for both of us. So don't ask me to delete all your porn, too, because I just won't do that to you. I won't. I love you too much. And let me be generous. Let me say that every time I watch a movie, let's say that it works out to seventy-five twenty-five. Three quarters of the utility goes to me, and one quarter goes to you. Okay, great. So, if you want me to delete my own three quarters, and three quarters of the backup hard-drives, then sure. The stuff on the computer in the closet, too. The old one. And my laptop. If you want me to get rid of seventy-five percent of it all, well, that's fine. I'll do it. I don't want to do it, but I'll do it. But I cannot delete it all. It would just hurt you too much. More than you can even predict right now. That is where I draw the line.

So. Just. Let me get my blanket. The one I like for sleeping on the couch. And I'll just stay out of your way for a while. I'll just stay out here, and just not bother you even a tiny little bit. Unless you'd rather that I not sleep out here. In which case, just let me know.

Birth 2.0

Oh! Yes, hello Lindsay! I'm so happy to see you. Please. Sit down. Ha! No, not here at this desk. That's too formal and unfriendly. The couch, please, yes. And Dr. Melba will be sitting in with us today if that's okay? He's my intern this year. Yes, fresh out of med school. Got that new doctor smell. Haha. He hates it when I say that, but he loves it. Anyway, he's our first ever, full-time, social media birth specialist. Such an exciting time to be born!

Okay. Just to get some business stuff out of the way. You know the medical stuff we have to do, etc, etc. So yes. Tests back and the pictures are back, and you look great! Your little baby is a little above weight for twenty-four weeks so that is just fine. Little baby has a big ol' noggin, too! Mind if I-?

Thanks. Sorry. I just see a pregger belly, and I just have to commune with it, you know? Other doctors like to go by charts and ultrasounds and that kind of thing, but I've always said that going by *feel* is really what teaches you the most. Yes. Big ol' noggin. Which is great. We'll decide if that noggin is going to be too much for mommy's vajayjay at mommy's next checkup. And really, that's all the boring old doctor stuff there is to even think about right now. Right, Dr. Melba?

He's kind of my "yes man," right Dr. Melba? Haha. Yes. Great. That's why I'm *so* happy to have him in my department. That, and he's just a wiz at all the new internet stuff that's *so* important for a real, twenty-first century approach to birth.

Right. So now we get to talk about the really important stuff. So, you signed up for our full, luxury, Pampered Mommy 2.0 Package, which includes a *lot* of digital extras. First, have you gone ahead and registered your baby for a personalized web domain? Gmail? Facebook? No?

No. Well we should really get on that! Tick-tock, tick-tock! I'll just put that on my little list here. Good. Now, last time you said you were thinking Lorraine or Eugene. Do you want to know if you've got a Lorraine or a Eugene? No?

That's fine. That's fine. A lot of moms still like that whole "surprise" element, which I don't understand, but this is your Lorraine we're talking about. Or Eugene. Your Lorraine, or your Eugene. Not saying which. Lips? Sealed. So what I'm going to do is just let Dr. Melba do all the boring paperwork stuff, get little Lorraine or Eugene set up with her internet identity. We'll do a Twitter, too, to be safe, but we find that children these days, once they get a little older, maybe into the tween years, they really want to pick out their own Twitter name, and that's

just a way for little Lorraine or little Eugene to sort of assert a little independence from Mom and Dad and there's nothing unusual about it in the slightest.

Well, if you'd prefer, you could leave your baby off Facebook, sure. There's no *law* that says everyone has to be on Facebook. Not yet, anyway! I'll mark that as a "maybe."

Oh, and speaking of which, I do recommend that you do go ahead and learn which bits your baby has, just because that makes setting up your baby's Amazon wish-list a lot simpler.

Or not! That's fine too. We'll just go with neutral colors. No problem. It's no problem, girlfriend! Won't bring it up again. Unless you want to maybe consult with Dad, sleep on it, maybe come back to it. But for now, let's just skip ahead.

This brings us to the most important thing of all! Now, some moms are going with the live, streaming webcast. I think this is great. I think it's just wonderful that we live in a world in which your friends, family, or maybe even strangers, can log into our website and watch a live video stream of your baby's entire birth. I think that is just magical. Just really wonderful.

But there is an alternate service that we've just now started, and that's why we scheduled this appointment now, before you were just too pregnant.

Have you ever seen a birthing video? With the new mom all sweaty and miserable? And all the doctors running around and yelling and all the blood and everything? It's terrible, right? I mean, it's the miracle of life, very exciting, yadda yadda yadda. But it's terrible. No one looks their best. I think of that as the sort of indie movie of birthing movies. What we offer now is what I like to think of as the Hollywood Tinseltown birth movie.

Well, before you decide, let me just fill you in on what we're talking about. No sense turning it down before you even know what it is! What we do, if you're interested, and, again,

this is totally up to you, is we take you maybe next week to our studio. Our studio is an actual birthing suite from the hospital, only we don't use it for regular births. No. Instead, we put in a green screen, and it's all soundproof, and we film there. Very professional. Dr. Melba here did a minor in film. Right Dr. Melba?

He's just being modest. Dr. Melba does *amazing* work. What we do is we bring all the people who would be at the real birth, and we do a sort of dry run. You're there. Your husband is there. I'm there. But instead of the regular nurses and doctors and everything, we bring in a bunch of extras. These are people we're screening, people who've sent us head shots. Not to put too fine a point on it, but what I'm saying here is that this is a much more attractive delivery than your final delivery will be. I mean, you're beautiful. Birth is beautiful and magical. But at the same time that it's beautiful, it's also, you know, kind of gross and horrible to look at.

But not in the Hollywood Tinseltown birth movie! Instead of getting up with contractions in the middle of the night, you're going into makeup. Your husband is going into makeup. And we're doing it soon, while you're only showing a little bit. While you've still got your figure. And what we do is we just sort of make it look like you're delivering a baby. We use a fake, green baby that matches the green screen. That way, when little Lorraine actually comes out--or little Eugene, maybe, possibly--we film her, superimpose her on top of the fake green baby, and then wham, bam, thank you ma'am--your birth video is complete.

Dr. Melba, would you mind just doing some quick measurements? Great. You can just stay right there, and Dr. Melba is going to take some quick measurements for costumes. We can just shoot the movie with you in hospital scrubs, but why go conventional? Why not see what it's like giving birth as an Egyptian queen? Or maybe wear something Elizabethan?

Of course, we can wait, if you'd prefer. Put that tape measure away please, Dr. Melba.

I'm sorry. He can be a bit of an overachiever at times. Let me just leave that costume section blank for now and show you the green screen and what it allows us to do digitally. We can transform your birth experience using Hollywood magic and turn it into something you're going to want to watch again and again. Dr. Melba, could you put on that one we did for the Grimley's? The teepee one?

Look at this. Amazing, right? See how the camera just swoops like that? All through the woods and everything? All digital. And then when the flap on the teepee opens, it's so seamless! And there we are--inside of the birthing teepee! Of course, it's just our regular film suite, but look how great the effect is. Turns your baby's birth into something really magical, and spiritual. We're doing all kinds of locations. Teepees. I'm talking Buddhist temples. I'm talking enchanted forests. Even some adventure births. We had this one couple. Mountaineers. They wanted their little boy born at the top of Everest. Amazing, right? So we put all the actors in ski parkas, and Mom and Dad are wearing ski parkas, and we couldn't find any sherpas, obviously, so the sherpas are all played by Mexicans. But it turned out great. Really, really good. So great that I asked the couple. I said, hey. Let's share this with some people. Let's put it into a film contest or two, you know? Short film contest. Sort of hybrid of drama and documentary. Unfortunately, they weren't that interested. But I think some day, that's where we're going to take this. Full on Hollywood.

You'll want to go with the video, right? Rather than the live webcast? It's possible to do both of course. We often do both. The webcast for the sort of day-of excitement. And then the video when you want to relive the experience at home.

I see. Well, that is an option, of course. Less fun, but that is an option. The old fashioned way, we call it.

Tell you what. I've got to meet with this other couple because we're shooting their video in just a few minutes. They're doing this amazing thing where we're doing their birth video in the grand ballroom of the *Titanic*. Isn't that amazing? Isn't that the most amazing thing? So let me just get to that, and I hate to run, but why don't you just take this form, the video form, and then Dr. Melba can just show you a few of the sample videos we've done. Why don't you just look at a few of the samples before you completely make up your mind, okay? Okay bye! And bye little Lorraine! Or little Eugene!

Why I Believe I Am Qualified to Be Your Babysitter

Well, right now I'm only working about twenty hours a week, besides school, and it's all unpaid. Volunteer stuff. I volunteer Tuesdays and Thursdays at the St. Thomas community center, where I manage an organic garden, which is pretty fun. The gardeners are all tough, inner-city kids. At first, they were pretty reluctant about growing heirloom tomatoes and getting their sneakers dirty, but we ended up bonding over old-school hip-hop, and now the kids use the produce at a three-star, vegan restaurant that they started all by themselves. You might have heard of it. Called "Baby Got Bok Choi?" No? That's okay. It hasn't been open long. But you should really check it out. Those kids are really inspiring. I might have taught them about gardening without pesticides, but I feel like they've taught me a lot about life.

I also work most weekends at a non-profit called Shoes for Cats. Our goal is to provide little cat shoes for low-income cat-owners, as a gentle alternative to having cats declawed. We go into housing projects, that sort of thing, and knock on doors and distribute cat shoes to any cat owners we meet. It's funny. You'd think that it would be the low-income cat-owners who learned from me, but really, I think I learn more from them. Very uplifting.

So, I'm also in my third year of med school, so I am CPR certified, of course, and hope to get into neo-natal neurosurgery when I graduate. That's a super competitive field, though, and even being at the top of my class at Tulane is not necessarily enough to get the residency I want most, although I am working hard for it! My fall-back plan is quantum pediatrics, which is a new field that is all about treating not just a child's symptoms, and not just a child's atoms, but individual parts of a child's atoms to insure that kids are healthy as can be. Very cutting edge, and it's a philosophy I really support. That's how I think the future generation should be cared for in general, you know? At the sub-atomic level.

Before starting school here, I did my undergrad at Harvard. It's funny, because I always figured I'd end up in international relations or drama, not medicine, but you never can tell how things will turn out! You probably saw my note about special skills, I think on the fourth page of my resume? Where it says I speak Hebrew and Arabic? Yeah, I picked that up when I directed a trilingual production of *West Side Story*. We got special permission to build a stage on top of the wall around Gaza, right between Sderot and Beit Hanoun. We used Palestinian and Israeli actors for both Sharks and Jets. Really mixed them up! It was a super enriching experience. None of the actors had ever been in a play before, so they were all really thankful for the chance to act, but at

the end, I was like, “No. Thank you guys. Thank you,” because I think I got as much or more out of it as they did.

It was kind of amazing that I even got into Harvard in the first place, though, after I spent my high school years raising my five younger siblings after my parents got so irradiated during their work with Chernobyl orphans and had to live in a special, glass house separate from the rest of the family so that they wouldn’t give us cancer or anything. I think those years were probably what gave me such a real passion for babysitting, you know?

I guess that’s pretty much it. I did include those reference you asked for, on the last page. Just, please make sure you take the time difference into account when you call Nelson Mandela. He’s seven hours ahead of us, and he goes to bed super early. You know how it is with people his age.

Oh, and I should mention that I’m totally fine working for a while, like even a month or so, on like an unpaid trial-basis kind of thing while you make your decision, just because I respect how important this choice is for you, and because I know the kind of trust that’s involved in letting someone else look after your child for a few hours a week.

I hate to run, but I am due at this self-defense yoga class I started taking. It’s that thing where you use gentle yoga techniques to protect yourself from violence. They say you can put a rapist or kidnapper or whatever into a deep trance once you’ve mastered your technique. Just thought it might help, in case I ever got into some kind of hazardous babysitting situation or anything.

Thanks so much for having me in so we could talk through my skill set and everything. I really appreciate it. Do you want me to send in the next girl? I can let myself out.

Daily Recommended Allowance of Misery

Look, I know you're going to be disappointed with this report card. It's your job, as my dad, to see that these grades aren't as good as my last grades and to ask questions. Have I stopped taking school seriously? Is it drugs? Too many texts? Do I have a boyfriend you don't know about, who convinces me to sneak out in the middle of the night so that I'm not rested enough for class? Am I distracted during by homework because I play Unicorn Battle too much?

Or is it all of these things? Do I have all the horrible, teen problems that they warn you about on the news? Did you see that new one? On the news last night? Where they said that high school kids figured out a way of making wine out of Jello? Scary, right? What if I'm doing that?

Let's just skip the part where you ask me all about my life and I avoid all your questions like an eel navigating a coral reef, and you make your own, arbitrary assumption about exactly

why I just lost so many tenths of points off my GPA, and then devise some related punishment? And then, when I get upset, you can decide that the fact that I'm upset is proof that you were totally right.

I don't think I'm being disrespectful. I just don't really want to sit through a rerun lecture. I've got a lot of texts to send and drugs to do and a new boyfriend to sneak off with.

Kidding! Take a joke, Dad. Jeez.

But I was serious about how you didn't need to do all that regular, dad-talking-to-teenage-daughter routine. How about this, as a shortcut: Let's say that my normal level of happiness, on average, is a six. Out of ten. Above average but still with the occasional, unexplainable dip that hits all us crazy teenagers. Right? So how about I promise to do whatever it takes to drop down to a five for, I don't know, two weeks? I'll promise to just be a little less happy for a while, okay?

You do want me to be less happy, though, right? That is precisely what you want, because you can only assume that I got a C in Algebra II because I was too happy. Your assumption is that high school is a sort of elaborate hazing ritual that adults make teenagers do so that they don't have too much fun.

I know you wouldn't put it that way, no. You'd sound like a monster if you said it out loud, if you said, "Jen, the most important thing to me is that you have as little fun as possible, because the more miserable you are, the better a person you'll be afterward."

It's very puritanical. Yes, I did still get an A- in history. I'm well-versed in the Puritans, Dad. This is the American school system. All they ever want to talk about in history is the Puritans. The optimal American history class, I think, starts with the first Thanksgiving and ends

with the signing of the Declaration of Independence, and then the teacher says, “And then we all lived happily ever after.”

But, enough of my editorializing. I’m saying that Americans think, whether they’ll admit it or not, that there’s still something great about being miserable. That the simple act of being miserable can serve as a sort of karmic balancer.

Look at Mom, for instance. Definitely what she thinks. She thinks that she’s already had a lifetime of misery, so she should be excused from ever having to do anything unpleasant ever again. Like raising her daughter.

You know what I’m talking about. Mom is great, but she is *terrible* at doing mom stuff. She *never* does mom stuff. And I’m not talking about how she doesn’t really cook or do any housework or whatever. That’s fine. It’s the twenty-first century, and if she doesn’t want to do that stuff, I’m not going to tell her she ought to. That’s fine. I’m talking more about *guidance*.

Take our photo wall, for instance. You add to it, every year. Mom never touches it. And look at me! There’s a photo of me for pretty much every year, sometimes a couple. Notice anything odd? Notice how I look like a real social services case until about thirteen? It’s awful. My hair is all weird, and those clothes don’t match. Look at this one--fourth grade. I literally think that that sweater clashes with itself. Like, I literally think that there is no garment that you could pair with that sweater that would not look just truly horrifying. And yet, Mom let it survive in my wardrobe. A mom who’s on the ball is not going to let that sort of sweater stay in her daughter’s arsenal. That sweater should have been quietly buried in the backyard.

And whenever I ask her anything, she says, “Ask your father.” And it’s not because she values your opinion, because she doesn’t. She just refuses to strain herself.

And yet, every chance she gets, Mom will talk about my birth. The hours of labor! I was early! But then it took so long that I was also technically late! I was underweight! But also my head was extra big! I was nothing but head! The doctors don't know how she survived! And so on. You don't need me to tell you that whole story again. The point is that Mom thinks, and she'd never say this, but she thinks that giving birth to me was such a terrible ordeal, that somehow, she didn't ever have to do any parenting after that. That's why you and I are having yet another report card discussion. It's not that Mom doesn't care. She cares. She loves me or whatever. But in her mind, she's suffered enough. She suffered so much in a single, nine-month gestation period, that that suffering somehow "counts" as two decades of actual parenting. In her mind, her work is done. And now it's your turn.

And now, you're worried that I'm not suffering enough. That I'm not getting my daily, recommended allowance of misery. So very important for my fragile, developing psyche to get enough misery!

So let's say we do things your way, shall we? Imagine this: I get all As throughout the rest of high school. That's five more quarters, so five more report cards. Every single grade an A, except for History, and that one is an A-plus because I am actually great at History, so why not? A-plus! I'm home, studying, all the time, in order to get these amazing grades. Never drinking or smoking or doing anything much fun at all. I've got no time for it! I've got to study! Or, when I get burnt out on studying, I just make sure that I do something equally unpleasant, like maybe for study breaks I just rub myself with sandpaper or something. I don't know--something terrible, to keep my misery levels high enough. I become a real school monster. I win all the school prizes

when I graduate. I get valedictorian. Honor society. They make up a new, special award because the principal thinks that I'm so great that the old awards just aren't remarkable enough.

And I apply to colleges. And I'm so smart, with such great recommendations and such a great transcript that we're talking Ivy League only here. I'm saying, Cornell is my safety school. Like, my fallback plan is an Ivy League school that everyone forgets is in the Ivy League.

So I'm set. I do it. You drop fifty thousand dollars for my first year, because I don't even bother applying anywhere that might offer anything as lowbrow as an academic scholarship. No, these places are financial aid only, and because you suffered so much when you were my age, you're too rich. I barely qualify for any aid at all. But that's fine! You're proud. You're so proud that that you say, "Of, course, Jen! Of course I want to spend the price of a modest home on your education!"

You're happy to do it, because you love me. Sure, that's part of it. And also because it seems like the right thing to do. That's a bigger part of it. Let's be honest. But also because you think, just maybe, with one final, huge check, you can be done, too, like Mom. You can wipe your hands and say, "I'm done. The money is spent. I gave you every opportunity, and now, I have placed you on the conveyor belt of success. I made sure you were sufficiently miserable in high school that your future fortunes became a matter of mathematical inevitability. There's a reason education costs as much as a house. Harvard grads accumulate value like houses do, and, if necessary, I can sell my Harvard grad to fund my retirement, because it's her job to take care of me, now. My parenting is complete."

So yes, Dad, that's one possible outcome, I suppose. That's your fantasy version of what will happen after this discussion, if you succeed in passing this parenting test. If you manage to

inspire me into better grades again next quarter and all the quarters after that. This is how you imagine the future will be, if you are able to insure that I'm not having too much fun.

But, you do know that there's another way this could go down, don't you?

I'm not saying that I couldn't get better grades. I could. High school classes are pretty easy, if you look at them in a strictly academic way. All you really need to do to get good grades is to always show up, and always write in complete sentences, and never hand in assignments that look too rumpy. You do that, and you're guaranteed at least a B. You speak up in class every once in a while, and make teachers think you don't hate them, and then you're guaranteed at least an A-minus. So, for the sake of argument, let's say your plan works, because it could. I get into Harvard and all that. Or, wait. Let's say I'm salutatorian instead, and I go to Brown, and you're secretly a little disappointed, but you know that you'd sound like a jerk if you let anyone know that you were disappointed that I only got into Brown and not Harvard so you shut up about it and remain proud and reasonably certain that I can still become an investment banker or fancy lawyer or whatever it is that you think that Ivy League kids end up doing if they want to make a lot of money.

But the thing is, not everyone who works that hard for grades during high school keeps it up after. And yeah, you're the boss in this house. If you really insist I hang out here and study all the time, then yeah, I'll do it. But the moment I move into that dorm room, I promise you, things will be very, very different.

After years spent putting up with your misery regimen, I will rebel against it at the first opportunity. I'll be one of those sad freshmen who do all the dumb things that everyone else did

in high school, only I'll do them more and harder, because I'll be making up for how miserable I was growing up.

I'll get a fake ID my first week.

I will be famous in my dorm. Everyone will know which room is mine, and they'll know that it's a good door to knock on if you want to have a drink with someone, or even just find someone who maybe knows someone who would maybe buy you a liter and a half of the worst, cheapest, strongest booze available.

I will drink the punch at frat parties, even though I know it's mostly grain alcohol and Kool-Aid.

I will learn, using the scientific method, exactly which detergent is best for getting vomit stains out of clothing.

I will learn how to turn whatever I happen to have on hand into a bong.

I'll get a tattoo on my thigh of what may or may not be the Chinese character for something that sounds deep to me at first but is, in fact shallow. Maybe "Life," or "Breathe," or "Energy." I will prove the existence of this tattoo at some awkward moment, perhaps even in front of Grandma.

I'll come home for Thanksgiving with a new boyfriend. I will go for whatever sort of guy I expect would bother you most. Maybe a brash, international student who smokes cigarettes and speaks while inhaling as well as exhaling, who touches me too much at the dinner table. I'll explain at the very last moment that we're both vegans and won't touch any food that has a soul, or that even touched the soul of another food that has a soul.

I'll switch my degree to theater.

By Christmas, I'll have dumped Pietro, and I'll come home with all my hair cut off and a pierced nose. I'll insist that, before we open any presents, I need to make an announcement. At this point I will explain that I have joined a sect of Buddhism that you are reasonably sure does not actually exist, but you'll be too scared to find out, for fear that it does.

Then, I'll describe several weeks of therapy in excruciating detail. Maybe I'll even bring a tape along. Isn't that a terrifying idea? I'll bring a tape, yes, that my therapist made of our conversation, and you'll hear me blame you for repressing my childhood, and you'll hear me express my worry that you won't accept my newfound bisexuality, and then at the end of the tape you'll hear me ask my therapist if maybe it would be a good idea for me to play this tape for you, since I'd be too nervous to confront you with these issues directly.

And that's only my first semester of college. That's the craziest part! That's just maybe four months or so of me carefully picking things to do just to make you miserable.

I don't even know if I'll enjoy any of them. Some, probably. I think it would be neat to have a gaudy, Mediterranean boyfriend. And I do kind of like the idea of being a drama major, except for the fact that it would mean spending a lot of time with other drama majors. And, I kind of think I'd look cute with a nose ring. I know they look kind of awful on most people, but somehow, I think maybe I could pull it off.

I do promise, though, that even the things that I don't want to do, I will do. It wouldn't be right for me to just spin an elaborate tale about doing all these things without actually doing them. That is a promise: I will disappoint you on purpose. I will do outlandish things for revenge. I will make myself miserable, at times, purely so that I can say, "I told you so." But I will never, ever lie to you. The truth will be my revenge.

There is another way, though.

We could, both of us, acknowledge that high school grades aren't the biggest determinant of one's future, and that, really, my grades aren't that bad anyway, and that I still might make the honor roll since my class is mostly idiots And you could remember that you went to a school with the word "state" in its name, and you're doing just fine.

And I will promise to get the best grades I possibly can while maintaining an average happiness of six. And if you relax a little, I probably won't end up doing any of that stuff in college I said I would. And if I do, it'll be because I want to. Not to punish you.

I'm going to wait in my room while you decide how miserable I ought to be.

Allow Me to Explain This Haircut

I don't think your mother has had sex with me in two months. Don't look at me like that. Don't pretend to be some naive child who needs his bourbon in a sippy cup instead of a big boy glass. Just accept it. Your mother and I are sexual beings. I am, anyway. You mom I'm less sure about.

Your showing up is what made me think of this. It's not your fault, Stewart. You were just a trigger. And I'm not going to put this on you. I'm not going to guilt you by saying we had years of great sex, and then you were born, and then we had twenty years of occasional, unremarkable, polite sex. No--actually, the only time it was ever good was when we were trying to conceive you. We got into a pretty good routine there, for, I don't know. A month maybe? So, no--I have you to thank for the most consistent stretch of my whole, miserable sex life.

Gross, right? Isn't that the grossest? Thinking about your parents having sex, with each other, so that you could be born? Think about it from my perspective, though. Think about how bad it must be for me. Take Grandpa and Nanny. Right? When I accidentally think about my parents having sex, it's them I'm thinking about. And they're old. So much older.

See what I did there? I made you do it. I know. That was cruel. I made you think about your grandparents having sex, with each other, which is perhaps the most horrible thing anyone could ever think about. Have some more bourbon. And go get us some more ice. You're young. You're fit. You can handle the walk to the kitchen, young Squire.

Right. So I only realized we hadn't had sex in two months because you and Cora got in and your mom made up the guest room. Flattened out the futon she insisted we needed even though everyone says it's uncomfortable. And I saw her, putting the sheets on, looking kind of grim, frowning the way she does when she isn't forcing herself to smile. And I couldn't help it. I hadn't even met Cora, but I thought about it: Stewart is going to have sex on this futon--this futon that I've never had sex on. Hey, when was the last time I had sex somewhere? Hm. It's a couple days before Thanksgiving now. So. Last sex was after that dinner party at the Slafmores'. Let me just check my calendar. Ah. Dinner. Slafmores. Seven P.M. September twenty-eight.

September twenty-eighth, young Squire! Top this off, would you, college boy? It's fun to have you here to drink with. Did I ever tell you that? We never did this when you were in high school. I apologize for that. I do.

Two months, though, Squire! Two months. And I know I'm not a good looking man. You are. You're young and fit. I don't think that women ever really want to have sex with men, but I

can imagine being a woman, being Cora, or whoever, and seeing you, and saying, “I would tolerate having sex with that guy.”

Is that worse than me making you think about your grandparents fucking? Me openly speculating, contemplating you in a semi-sexual way, as filtered through the brain of some woman I’m inventing?

I’m sorry. I don’t know why I’m like this. The holidays are such a powder keg, you know? I know it’s awkward for you, being back, worrying we won’t like Cora. Worrying that I’ll fight with your mom. When I was your age that kind of thing made me nervous, too, of course. I didn’t give my parents enough credit. I always imagined their lives as being static. Stuck. But now, I’m older, and I know. I know that yes, they were happy to see me during the holidays, but they were nervous, too. They wanted to seem fun, and happy, and with it. They wanted to make it clear that they loved me, but they also wanted to seem relaxed about it.

So don’t think of Thanksgiving as a thing for your parents, that you do for me and Mom. We’re miserable too! I’ve been losing my mind all week, Squire. This bottle? Started it yesterday. Not last night. Yesterday. During daylight. I keep buying more expensive stuff, because I think I’ll savor it if I pay more for it. Nope!

Maybe it doesn’t work because I have too much money. The difference, to my expenses, between twenty-five dollar bourbon and fifty dollar bourbon is trivial. Not like it is for you, right? College kids all drink vodka, right? Terrible vodka with a fake Russian name. Muscovite! Glasnost! Sputnik! Sputnik and Sunny D, please! Let’s go to a bar and order that. The young squire and I will have two Sputniks and Sunny D’s, please.

Wow. Yes. I'm not even tasting this anymore. It's like when you touch very cold water, and you can't tell if it's very cold or very hot. The more ice I throw in, the warmer I feel while I'm drinking.

You mom says I drink too much. I say, she screws too little. Isn't that how it's supposed to work? Men are simple machines. Our coding is simple. Oh, you don't like a choice we've made? Well, maybe try having sex with us, and then we'll re-evaluate it! Simple.

It's hard to be a man, I think. It's hard to be a woman, too, probably. According to women. But it's hard to be a man. Our bodies just betray us all the time. Middle school? Constant boners. Boner, boner, boner. I spent most of seventh grade holding text books against my crotch. The joke is that we think with it, right? But really, it just acts, on its own, and we have to adjust accordingly.

I remember being sad when I first became aware of your masturbation.

Relax. You were basically discrete. Basically. But the bathroom stays occupied for that long and even us old people do the math. It made me sad because it made me think of my own life. Whenever this was. Let's say you were thirteen. Thirteen year-olds should be masturbating.

Wow. I'm drunk, but even drunk I know that was an inappropriate sentence. It's true, though! Thirteen year-olds should be. Why? Because they shouldn't be having sex with other people. So what else is there?

Me, though? I'm an adult. I should be having sex with other adults. Or just one, even, like the one I married, perhaps, and provide for. What about my rights? Don't I deserve certain things in life?

I think everyone deserves to have sex, say, every other week at least. Doesn't seem like an outlandish amount to me. Now, I don't think that the government should assign you a sex partner if you can't figure it out on your own. I'm just talking about what a person deserves. I'm not calling for a mandate. Not for everyone.

Me, though--I do think my wife, to whom I am married, should have sex with me at least every other week. And if sometimes it doesn't work out, that's fine. I understand. I'm not made of stone. I can be flexible. I can bend. But right now, nobody is bending in this house. Nobody!

I know she works hard and everything, sure. But she's done raising you. You're raised. We can't make you any better now. Or worse. We're done, Squire. You're raised. So she's semi-retired. And I'm still toiling away. Working. Crunching numbers. Investing. Getting money. It's not exactly the salt mine, but it's a job, and I have to go to it even when I don't want to.

So, it seems to me, that she could take some of the time once allotted to raising you, and use some of it for having sex with me. She sees things otherwise. She moved all of her "you" time into yoga. She has classes nearly every day. And at weird times. And these long yoga retreats sometimes. When she comes back she seems happier than when she left, but sad, too, like she wishes she'd just stayed.

It kills me, Stew. She practices here sometimes, and she is flexible. She could do stuff now, at forty-eight, that she could not do at twenty-eight. Stuff that wasn't even invented then.

That's a joke. All sex stuff has been around forever. Or maybe the Greeks invented it. Right, College Boy?

Right. Sorry, again. Sorry for making you think of your mom's flexibility. But not like you've helped. Not at all. Yesterday, when Cora went with your mom to her yoga class, and they

came back all sweaty and limber? Forget it. Your mom, I don't even notice, really. She's like a wristwatch. You stop noticing it's there. You just know it's there subconsciously, and even when you forget to put it on, you look at your wrist to find out what time it is. Or like a background smell that you eventually just turn off.

But Cora! I shouldn't say this, but fuck it. I shouldn't have said any of this. She stretched out on the couch and watched some show. I think the one about the people who trick dumber people into selling their stuff at yard sales. Doesn't matter. She stretched out on that couch. And. Let me put it this way. I forgot what the couch looks like. If you ask me what my couch looks like, I will have to go into the living room to look at it, because I have forgotten. I sit on that couch every day after work, and I no longer know what color it is. We purchased it fifteen years ago, when you reached the age at which we figured you were unlikely to do irreparable harm to couches, and I have left a more or less permanent indentation on the cushion directly across from the TV. I have no idea what color that cushion is, though. My memories of that couch have been permanently fused with my memory of my son's twenty year-old girlfriend stretched out, like a lazy cat, in a tank-top and yoga pants that say USC on the ass.

Is it any wonder I drink, Squire? Who could keep from drinking, with USC-ass yoga pants in his house? I'm not made of stone, Squire.

That's probably my worst admission of all, yes? That your girlfriend is attractive? But she is! You don't want me to sit here and pretend that she isn't, do you? Because she is! And not just in the way that everyone is passable when they're twenty. No, she is legitimately attractive. I'm sorry for leering. She didn't come here to be leered at, I expect. If it's any consolation, as soon as I realized I was leering, I ran away in shame.

I ran away and said to myself, I cannot go on like this. I cannot be held prisoner by beauty. Not in my own home! I am the master here, Squire. And the master must be proactive! The master takes steps! The master makes choices! Hasty, ill-conceived choices that he later regrets.

This brings me to the haircut. I assume you'd like an explanation. The haircut is short and unflattering, I know. That is because it is a double haircut. The girl over at Sid Scissor's did this second cut, and she did not have a lot to work with. She asked what happened. I said, just fix it! Fix it! Shave it if you must. Fix it! And that's why it's so short. It's like how your grandpa wore his when he was my age. God, I'm old.

But the first haircut, the disaster one, I got at this place that doesn't have a name. There's a guy I work with who's a big talker. One of these water cooler guys. And he told me about this happy ending, illegal haircutter. You go to her house. You get a haircut. And she, you know. Happy-endings you. And I'm revolted. And intrigued. I'm not made of stone. I'm intrigued. It's intriguing. I've never paid for sex, except for in the most mundane ways. The let-me-buy-the-good-Champagne-because-you-deserve-it sort of ways.

So, I go. Well, let me backtrack. I see the couch, with Cora on it. Or, really, I see Cora, and not the couch, and, I have a tough day. A tough, terrible day. I don't want to get into that, but it's awful. And I think back to the water cooler. And the happy ending haircut. Everyone wants a happy ending, Squire! Don't they? Doesn't everyone?

So, yes. I'm admitting to you, right now, that I openly contemplated paying for sexual favors. Me, a married man of many years, contemplated. Contemplated! And before you judge me, think of this. There was a time, and maybe more than one time, when you were with Cora,

and you saw someone else. Some other girl. And I don't know how you feel about Cora, not really. I don't know what stage you're at, but I know that there has been a time when you saw someone else out the corner of your eye, probably with Cora right there, probably while you were even talking to her, and you thought, "What if?"

That's all I did, Squire! I said, "What if?" What if I found someone willing to provide the happy ending that your mother is not willing to provide? And I'd rather it be her. I'd rather have sex with your mother than with anyone else. Not because she's the most beautiful or the best at it. More just because of convenience. She's right there, in my house. Anyone else, and we start getting into logistics. I do not have the patience for logistics, Squire. So believe you me, having a happy ending with anyone besides your mother is my last choice. Absolute last choice.

What's that? Oh. Yes. I'll stop saying "happy ending." I can see why that would bother you, hearing about your dad having a happy ending. Yes. Yes, I agree. Completely out of line. So I'll try to finish the story without having to say "happy ending" again.

So, I call this guy, the water cooler guy, and ask him. What an awkward call. Calling up this guy, this work guy I barely know, the Tuesday before Thanksgiving. "So, uh, hey, buddy. Oh, just saying hi. Just calling to say hi, an hour after we saw each other at work. Oh, and while I've got you on the phone, could you give me some advice? I'm trying to get a blow job haircut." Such an awkward call.

So where does one find a happy ending haircut? I did have to say it once more, yes, but I think I'm done. Craigslist, he says. Craigslist. Of course! Craigslist! That's why there was a haircut involved, he says, because you can no longer post little ads saying that you're willing to have sex with people who pay you. You have to be sneaky about it and offer massages, or

haircuts, or cooking lessons, something more innocent. But the real sex connoisseur can see these ads for haircuts or massages or whatever and know what they're really about. That's what the guy told me. You just scan the ads, and you'll know. You'll know who really wants to cut your hair, and who really wants to, you know. You'll know.

So I scan the ads. I find one. I'm sure of it. And you know where this is headed, right? I barely need to tell you the way this story ends, but I will, because I'm drunk and sort of enjoying burdening you with all this terrible, terrible information. And somehow, having you know it makes it easier for me to know it, so you really are doing me a great favor.

So I go. I make an appointment for the next day, today, and I go. I drive half an hour across town. We closed the office at noon, and I went. And let me just give you some background information so that you don't ask me too many questions. Oh, and get a new bottle. I don't know what else there is back there. Chivas, maybe.

So. Background. I don't know why I didn't go to a strip club. Or get an "Asian massage." I guess this seemed safer, knowing that this jagoff had done it, had gone and done it and not woken up missing a kidney or anything.

So I go. And I'm nervous. And I'm sweaty. And I get there, to this little basement apartment that doesn't look like a business at all. And the girl says her name is Angel, and she's beautiful. Late twenties, maybe. Thirties maybe. It's harder to tell, the older you get. She's one of these fake retro girls. Retro pin-up looking girls. Tight dress with cherries all over it. Dyed black hair with severe bangs, like she cuts the bangs as often as I shave, probably. And she's got this barber chair, and I'm sitting in it, and she's giving me a massage. Neck. Shoulders. Scalp. And ears, Squire! Ears!

And I don't mind telling you, because I am swizzled, that I had a raging hard-on at that point. Raging! I hadn't had a rager in years. Had to settle for irate. Lots of irate hard-ons. Like my poor prick is this irritable old man who'd just rather be left alone.

But not this time. Raging! And she starts snipping and telling me all about her boyfriend's rockabilly band and his hot rod, and she shows me the hot rod tattoo on her shoulder, and it's all very friendly. Very polite and friendly and she's snipping and snipping, and she's so nice, and I'm practically inviting myself to her boyfriend's next rockabilly show. They had a dumb name. Arkansas Juggernaut, I think. Yes, because their little CD logo is a cowboy riding a jug into space. Yes. That's right.

And pretty soon she's putting Dapper Dan in my hair. And I'm so nervous and happy. This woman, this delightful, beautiful woman with dumb optimism and earnest, embarrassing dreams and a meathead boyfriend in a dumb band, is putting Dapper Dan in my hair, and it's anachronistic and marvelous. And she says, there. Done.

And I say, done? "Um, done?" Thinking, finished, except for the prostitution part, right?

And she says, "Yup! Done." And flashes me this little hand mirror, like the size of a ping pong paddle. And I'm not thinking about my hair at all so I don't look in the mirror. Don't notice the reflection.

I say, "Done all the way? All the way done?"

And she says, "Um." All stretched out, like, what the hell else is there to do, old man?

I know I said earlier that of course we don't think with our pricks per se, but they do speak to us, on occasion. I mean, mine speaks to me. And right then, it says, "You lied, old man!"

You gave me false hope!” And I try to explain that, no, I’m not the liar. This other guy, this water cooler jagoff. He’s the liar. Craigslist is the liar. I’m a victim in in this too! Both of us victims!

So I get up, and I’m thirteen all over again. Crouching down, not putting on my coat. Just holding it like an apron to protect me from my shame. My shameful, embarrassing shame. And I look at her as I’m getting money out, and I’m thinking, “Of course. This is an angel. A curious, anachronistic angel, but an angel nevertheless, and I would not, could not debase her in that way even if she were in the debasement business. I am getting what I deserve.”

I have no idea how much I paid her, but I think I probably tipped her about two hundred percent. I’m such an asshole about money sometimes, you know? I just throw it around when I’m not sure what else to do. I spend my whole life like, I don’t know, like a rude tourist waving dollars at the locals. “Rich American tourist here! Man who knows the price of everything and the value of nothing here! Take some of my American dollars! They are green! Take them!”

So I get out of there. I leap into the car. And I think, you know, I’m more self-conscious, more nervous, than I would be if I had actually just paid someone to have sex with my poor, shameful self.

It is at this point that I look in the mirror to back up the car, and find out that I have, by far, the worst haircut ever. It’s not that it’s weird or punk or something. It’s just awful. The front slopes to one side. The are chunks missing. It’s got like a Marines thing going and a mullet thing and it is fucking terrible. It’s like seeing a plate of food picked at by a picky child. Everything’s still there, and it’s recognizable as food, but it’s all rearranged and sad looking.

So I have to go to Sid Scissors. And they’re busy. They tell me they can’t do it. And I know I can’t go home like this. I can’t. I would sooner go home and face your mother with actual

lipstick on my actual collar than go home with this hair. This terrible, terrible hair. I gave the girl at Sid Scissors a hundred bucks. I'm so embarrassing to myself. "Are you sure, *sure* you don't have any space?" And I slid it to her like I was bribing somebody. Was I? Maybe. Or was it just an advance tip? I don't know. So embarrassing.

Got back, just before dinner. And dinner was good and everything. But it was awful, too. You and Cora, talking to each other with your eyeballs. Moving your lips just a little bit to remind each other of some shared joke. And your mom and I, the opposite. Pretending not to understand each other. Acting like the other is being obtuse. Making each other spell everything out. While you two are just going off looks.

Well. Depressing, I know. I'm sorry. Which is worse--thinking about your parents having sex, or about them never having sex? Don't answer that. We all want our kids to have it better than we did. And get it better, too. So, consolation prize! Thank you for drinking with me.

Do you need anything? I obviously don't have any wisdom for you. So don't ask for that.

Nothing? Kind of putting you on the spot, I suppose. Take this, then.

No, take them. Take some of my American dollars. They are green. You can buy us some more whiskey in the morning, if anyplace is open. Someplace will be open. Lots of people probably need whiskey on Thanksgiving. Or go take Cora out for drinks somewhere. I don't care. Do whatever makes you happy.

Happy Thanksgiving, Squire.

Vita

Alden Eagle grew up on a sheep ranch in Applegate, Oregon. He made his way to New Orleans in 2007, where, in addition to studying writing at the University of New Orleans, he performed on stage with the Cripple Creek Theatre Company and the Washington Square Park Circus Collective. He currently resides in Seattle but would like to assure everyone that this is strictly temporary.