Nebraska Nights

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Nebraska Nights

By Karen Baddeley
12/5/2011

First Reader: Mark Jay Mirsky
Second Reader: Michelle Valladares

Submitted in partial fulfillment for the degree of Master of Fine Arts of the City College of the City University of New York.
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A Narrative

I don’t exactly know where this story truly starts. But I will start at the end and end at the beginning. It was New Year’s Eve 2003 (but this goes into 2004 I guess because, you know, the actual THING happened after midnight). I was in New York with one of my friends named Rachel (actually, I really never liked her, but whatever) and we were going to go out and whatnot. I was visiting from Connecticut where I lived at the time. We were going to meet another friend of mine named Carissa who I grew up with and go see her boyfriend’s band.

They were playing at the Continental. Rachel and I got there kind of early so we could start drinking. We were doing shots of Jaegermeister. I think before the band actually started playing I had maybe three or four shots. I used to drink a lot at that time. The band played and we were hanging out with my friend Carissa and drinking some more I suppose. I kind of lost track as to how many drinks I had or what they were. I think the band (they were called “Monolith”) finished early. So now, Carissa, Rachel, the band, and me all went to this other bar called the “Three of Cups” (I think that’s what it was called, it was close to that). I guess at this point I realized that I was into the lead singer or he was into me, both I guess.

His name was Peter. Normally, I am into drummers, never into lead singers because, obviously, lead singers are totally conceited. But of course they’re always good looking. And he was okay looking. He wasn’t really my type. But he was a personal trainer so he had a really nice body. He wasn’t bad looking really, just not my type, that’s it. So I’m getting incredibly drunk by now. It was quite late. We were at the bar and I
was sitting on his lap and I guess we were making out and stuff. I remember doing a shot of Tequila. I cannot even smell Tequila without getting physically ill. But I thought since I was already so drunk that maybe I wouldn’t taste it? Well it was disgusting. I came so very close to actually throwing up but managed not to.

Rachel and I left and went to her place. I kind of assumed Peter wouldn’t actually come over. I didn’t really care either way. I was quite tired and kind of getting sober. But both Peter and Tom did come over around 4:00 am. It was easy enough, Tom went to Rachel’s room. And it was Peter and me on the pull-out couch. I was totally up for having sex with him. Regular sex, oral sex, that was all okay. What happened is this: he sodomized me. It’s such an odd term for it. Sometimes, when I wish to make people really uncomfortable I’m just straight up. “He kneeled on my chest and made me suck his dick. Then he flipped me over and put his dick in my ass twice. Did you know for each time you are penetrated it’s an additional count of sodomy?” But that’s what really happened. It was horrible and excruciatingly painful. But I thought if I just let him that he would leave. I told him to stop several times.

He said “I thought girls from Nebraska were supposed to be tough.” He seriously said that. I don’t even know what that means. I grew up in the suburbs, not a farm. He did leave, he came all over my chest and left. I didn’t feel anything emotionally. Physically I was in horrible pain. There was blood all over the sheets. The sheets were white so that made it worse. I think that guy Tom spent the night. I really have no idea. I tried to tell Rachel about all this she was totally disinterested and instead wanted to talk about herself. Seriously, she was a complete bitch. Later after ALL this happened (more about
this in a sec) she told this professor we both had (Rachel and I went to undergrad together) that this was something that I was making up or blowing out of proportion. She had a crush on him. He told me all about this when we were in his bed after we’d just had sex. So I guess I win as far as Rachel goes. So that was it. I just never told anyone about it.

Now it’s November 2005, around Thanksgiving. All over the Post and the Daily News and even the Times was this story about a stripper who had been murdered. Her throat had been slashed. Her name was Catherine Elizabeth Woods. My name is Maryann Elizabeth Brady. She came from Ohio to New York to be a dancer. Later when there was a show about all this on TV, I found that we had the same teddy bear that we’d kept since we were kids. The same exact bear. It made me cry. Then the papers said that there were two suspects because she had two boyfriends. One was a guy from Ohio who lived with her, and the other was her yoga instructor. The yoga instructor was Peter. I read this while I was at work. I felt quite ill and upset and did not know what I was supposed to do. I told all of this to my boss because her boyfriend was a detective for the NYPD. He said I should go in because any little thing can help an investigation. He gave me the number of the police station (it was the one by Hunter College). I called them and talked to one of the detectives working on the case. His name was Marinaro (I never got first names). He was very excited for me to come in and talk to them. So I went to the police station. On the way there in the taxi, I made the mistake of calling my mom and telling her everything. When I told her what Peter did to me, her first response, truly honestly was “Did he pay you?” I hung up on her and she called me back. I can’t
comprehend why anyone, but especially my own mother, would say such a thing. To this day she doesn’t understand why I got so upset. I’ve told this to several therapists and they all agree that it was totally fucked up. But this isn’t about her…

I got to the police station. It really did look like the police stations on TV. There was this young cop at the front desk. I told him I was supposed to see some detective with an Italian last name that started with “M.” He made some joke about how that could be anyone. He was cute, and under other circumstances I might have found that amusing, but I looked like shit and had obviously been crying. I told him that I was there about the Catherine Woods case and he suddenly got all professional. The homicide detectives were called Marinaro and Mahoney. Marinaro was small and jumpy. Mahoney was large and very calm. I wished that Mahoney was my dad. My own dad wouldn’t really care about this. I told them what happened. As soon as I got

The next day the arrested Peter for two or three counts of sodomy. They didn’t really care about what happened to me, they needed Peter’s fingerprints and they couldn’t get a court order for them. His fingerprint ended up matching a bloody fingerprint that was at the scene. I had to go to the DA’s office and talk to her about what happened to me.

I had to go to the DA’s office on the first day of the transit strike. I stood on the corner of 116th and 2nd and eventually got picked up by this guy in a red car. It was vibrating from the music. It was twenty dollars. The DA seemed annoyed that I’d gotten there earlier than her. While I was waiting for her, there was a guy who was also waiting who was totally fucked up looking. Some kids stole his iPod and he stupidly chased after
them to get it back. They beat the shit out of him. Stitches, staples, the whole works.
The DA was named Melissa Stark. She rode her bike over the Brooklyn Bridge. She was young and very pretty and blonde. She went to Northwestern for law school. The first thing she said when I walked into her office was “I LOVE your hair!” She asked me these questions from a survey that was on her computer. I sounded pretty bad. Yes, I had been arrested twice before, was in an institution, and was on psychiatric medication. I sounded kind of crazy when it was all out there like that. I also remember this question:

“Was there blood when you went to the bathroom?”

“Yes.”

“When you peed or when you pooped?”

“Both.”

Because it was both. It felt like kind of a gross thing to discuss though. Then when it was over she mentioned that the story was in the Post and the Daily News (I guess it was too lowbrow for the Times) and that they probably had my name and address. Great. I should also mention that I’d just started dating this guy when all this was happening. He was a fireman from Yonkers and Irish and Catholic. So while he tried to be protective, I could tell that I was now tarnished in some way. He ended up marrying an Irish Catholic kindergarten teacher also from Yonkers. I think they have a baby now.

The Post and the Daily News started coming to my apartment all the time (oh, I was living in New York by now) and ringing my bell and trying to get me to give them an interview. I cannot understand why anyone would talk to them.

The charges of sodomy were dismissed because there was no interest in it. I
didn’t even know they were dropped until I read it in the paper. Nobody ever called or anything. I also wasn’t a part of the murder trial. He was convicted. I think he got 20-life or something. Now his mom runs a website proclaiming his innocence. He was so not the guy she describes.

Later on, a guy wrote a book about it. I did give him an interview because he changed my name in the book. I’m “Monica.” The book is called *Death of a Dream* and the tagline is “She was a born dancer with a dream of stardom, he was a jealous lover with a murderous obsession…” It’s totally one of those slapped together true crime paperbacks. This is how I am described: “Monica was not a hardened New Yorker; she has something of a little girl’s voice and comes across as meek. She wasn’t wise to the ways of the city…” This is what his mom said about me: “It was obvious she came on to him. She invited him to her apartment, and somewhere along the line, what? It’s a rape? They continued to see each other at the band’s shows.” That’s sort of true. I didn’t see him exactly, I just went with my friend Carissa. I didn’t really know anyone else in New York then.

And that was it. I don’t really know if I am the way they described me. I am quiet, but I’m not timid. Also, I love that they say I was coming on to him. As if he was resisting and I lured him to my apartment. Please, I’ve never had to do that…
On Aunts

My great aunt Gladys was like a movie star would be like, I thought. Like Norma Desmond if Norma Desmond lived in Denver and was an artist. She never liked me very much but I didn't take it personally. It was really that she just didn't like children which was why she never had any.

She secretly married her husband, Larry, before he was sent off to Europe during WWII. I don't know why her mother didn't approve of him or why she married him secretly. He came back fine and they lived in Denver together. He worked at a bank there. One night he worked late and she decided to bring him dinner. Of course she found him making love to his secretary and they got divorced. Louis married his secretary and my aunt started teaching private art lessons. She and Louis stayed friends and she kept the house.

She started getting small dogs after the divorce. They were Pomeranians at first, then poodles, and when I was seven or so she had a basset hound named Wheeler that she pushed around in a baby carriage. I liked wheeler and the way he would howl. She fed all her dogs breakfast in bed. She did not feed them regular dog food but bacon, Total cereal, and cinnamon toast (for breakfast); and beef or chicken with rice for dinner.

Often, a guest would make the mistake of eating the dogs' food. I did once (cereal) and
Aunt Gladys started crying. My mom had to calm her down.

Her basement was like a time capsule from 1958. That was where we stayed when we came to visit. She had a full bar and "set-up" with martini shakers, highball glasses, etc. My dad tried to make himself a drink once and became very sick because the liquor was so old and stale. He also took Aunt Gladys to see Frank Sinatra and she cried because she was so moved.

The basement was also where she kept all her dresses from the 1940s and 50s and I would dress up in them. She also had those fur stoles that still had the fox or mink head and arms still on them. Those frightened me.

I don't know if she ever painted anything more than pots of flowers but once she came to visit me and we painted a watercolor scene of a bullfight in Spain.

In her bathroom were bottles of *Chanel 22, Shalimar, Chanel 5*, etc. And *Chanel* talcum dusting powder, *Jean Nate, Ponds* cold cream. Every night she would cold cream her face and wipe it off with a tissue. I watched her. And then she put all of her makeup back on and went to bed. She let me use her bath oil beads that were "black orchid" scented. I liked how slippery and soft they made my skin. The water would bead off me as though I were a duck. They always gave me a urinary tract infection though.

I don’t remember her voice, but she was always very frantic. Her house was full of breakables and I was always breaking them. I broke her rotary phone when I tripped over the cord and I broke the handle off her icebox when I pulled it too hard. It was only because I was so nervous that I became clumsy. She cared only about having nice things and I liked that about her. It felt like she had an uncomplicated life.
The Dreidel

No one liked Alex Weissman but it wasn’t because he was the only Jewish one in school. It was because he was so annoying. I loved him, but only in secret. He had black eyes and black hair. We passed out the milk together. It was an important job. The janitor brought the milk in crates and everyone lined up. I handed our classmates cartons of 1% milk. Alex was supposed to give them straws from an empty coffee canister. Alex took a straw out of the canister and pretended to conduct an orchestra.

Mrs. Mapes sighed. “Focus Alex, focus.”

If he didn’t focus Mrs. Mapes would send him to the back of the room to sit in the playhouse. He drank his milk in there. Mrs. Mapes would bring it to him.

At home I wrote on a piece of lined paper:

Alex Alex Alex

Alex Weissman

Maryann + Alex

Maryann Alex

Alex Maryann

Maryann Weissman
Maryann Weissman

I loved him and I wanted to kiss him. I wanted to kiss his face and his leg and his black eyes. I pretended my pillow was Alex and I kissed it all over and squeezed it between my legs.

Alex had to sing the Dreidel Song by himself at the Christmas Show because he was the only Jewish one.

“Our culture celebrates Christmas,” Mrs. Mapes explained to the class. “Their culture celebrates Chaun-a-kah.” And a dreidel was like a top that spun around and around.

Alex forgot the words when he got on the stage and sung the chorus over and over again. “Dreidel, dreidel, dreidel! I made it out of clay!” And he tap danced around the stage. So Mrs. Mapes started clapping and so did everyone else. Alex bowed and Mrs. Mapes led him off the stage. He watched us sing “Oh Holy Night” and “Angels we Have Heard on High” but sang “Frosty the Snowman” and “Jingle Bells” with the rest of us. He stood in front of me and wore a red and gray striped sweater. He looked back at me. I looked away.
Cupcakes

I was probably eight years old and my family and I had just moved to Nebraska from Iowa. My mom was always really worried that I wouldn't make friends because I was so quiet and shy. So she decided that in order to make friends, I had to start going to Sunday School at a Methodist Church. We never went to church before and I wasn't baptized, but I guess they'll take anyone. Anyway, my mom was a primary school teacher at that time, so she had all these weird recipes for children. She decided that not only did I have to go to Sunday School, but that I also had to make treats for the other kids.

I guess you were supposed to leave the slips of paper sticking out a bit. But I'd worried that they'd burn.
Mom

I always wondered why my mom got sad every time she got divorced. Even the first time, when my dad divorced her, I only cried for a few minutes and then never again. That was how long my dad gave me to cry. He said “You can go to your room and cry for five minutes.” And he actually timed me. I knew I was supposed to feel sad. And the therapists she sent me to all said it was normal to want your parents to get back together. So I pretended I wanted that to make the therapist happy. I didn’t really want them to get back together though. It was too tense.

When my dad divorced my mom, he kept the house and she and I moved into her friend’s attic. They were supposed to have joint custody where I’d switch off every other week but
mostly I just stayed at my mom’s in the attic. My dad had a lot of dates and my mom described him as a “catch.” He did have that giant house on Woodsdale Blvd. It was far too big for one man, but he really wanted it. He met ladies at this singles group at his church. They would spend the night when I was over and it made me uncomfortable. I just felt safer at my mom’s and less like a guest.

She started crying a lot out of nowhere. She would just throw up her hands and say “I don’t know what I’m doing!” and collapse. She didn’t know how to write a check, or cook, or do laundry so I did all of that even though I was only eight. She would say that she wasn’t smart, that I was the smart one. But she was working on her Doctorate so I knew that wasn’t exactly true. “I’m just a hard-worker,” she said. And she would tell me how strong I was and what a good daughter I was. I wasn’t trying to help her though. Things just needed to get done.

It irritated me to see her cry. Like when we would go to K-Mart and I would get all wrapped up in hiding in the racks of nightgowns and robes. I liked the way the satin and rayon felt so cool and slippery. But my mom would panic when she couldn’t find me. Once I was gone for half an hour before a clerk did find me. My mom grabbed my arm and yanked me out of the store. She slapped me in the car; so hard that my face hit the passenger’s window. And she started to sob. “I’m your mother and I was so worried about you!” We yelled at each other all the way home. She embarrassed me. I just wanted to be left alone.

We moved into an apartment complex called the Lake Park Towers. They were not really towers. She was a union organizer so she had to drive all over Nebraska and wouldn’t get home until three or four in the morning. Then she would get up at 7:30 and do it again. I was afraid to be alone so late at night. I was afraid of being murdered by Ted Bundy even though he was dead
and never came to Nebraska in the first place. I know because I would read the *Stranger Beside Me* over and over again and stare at the picture of where he took one girl from her apartment. It was just a picture of a mattress with a big blood stain where her head would have been. And I would read about the last girl he killed. She was twelve and she was suffocated by mud while he sodomized her. He liked girls with brown hair parted down the middle.

My mom started buying designer purses and we ran out of food money. She liked anything by *Coach* or *Ferragamo* or *Dooney and Bourke*. I found a stash of money in her lingerie drawer once and bought generic pop-ices and olive loaf. I did not know what the olive loaf was and it was disgusting. I got free lunches at school though so I didn’t starve.

We both started stealing. She did it first. There was a stamp set at K-Mart that I wanted. It was $15 and that was out of the question. She looked down at and sighed. “Just give it here…” and she put it up the sleeve of her coat. I got caught stealing from the mall. It was a black, patent leather mini skirt from the *Merry-Go-Round* store. I made it out the door and to the food court before I got caught. A security guard called me to the back of the store. I almost got away with it. I was wearing overalls and when he shined his flashlight down my pants he couldn’t see the skirt. He was very determined though and eventually I cracked and told him everything. So he called my mom and she came down to collect me. This resulted in another slap to the face and probation for a year. My probation officer’s name was “Officer Butts.” Truly.

She started dating Mike, a union lawyer that she worked with. He was rich and things got better. He belonged to the Country Club and would take us there for dinner. He had a teenage daughter named Katherine who was some kind of violin genius and went to a boarding school in Michigan. I met her when my mom and Mike got married and that was it. My mom wanted me
to write letters to her like she was my real sister. She wanted us to be a big family. Mike did buy us a dog named Gizmo and that was nice. She was a black and white shih-tzu puppy.

Mike was a nice guy. He was very tall and red-faced. He had a bourbon every evening when he came home and listened to Bob Dylan. He told me about Vietnam. My dad would never tell me any stories. But Mike told me about what he had seen and done as a Marine. He said he would go on missions to collect information from the Vietnamese. “But if one of them started acting funny, we just had to shoot them. It didn’t matter if they were four years old. If they were setting us up, they would have tortured us.” My dad was also a Marine. But all he would ever say was “It was a very bad time. We thought we were doing the right thing.”

My uncle, my mom’s brother, got brain cancer. He was her only relative besides the Ohio cousins that we hardly ever saw. So my mom and I would drive from Nebraska to Wyoming (where my uncle Marc lived) to visit him. And while we were gone, Mike would see his girlfriend Marie (his secretary). I don’t remember how my mom found out about it or why she couldn’t just deal with it. He didn’t want to divorce her but my mom said she could never look at him again. That was a problem since they still had to work together. He ended up marrying Marie and my mom and I moved back to Lake Park Towers.

My mom alleged that Mike started drinking all the time. “He looks terrible,” she would say with a smile. But she still went out with him occasionally. It didn’t matter to me either way. My uncle Marc died when I turned fourteen. I felt guilty because I always hated going to visit him. My mom quit eating or taking care of the house again. I enjoyed doing laundry though. I could go to the Laundromat and start washing clothes and go visit my boyfriend for a couple of hours. Sometimes my mom would be out so late I could practically have him spend the night.
Eventually she just sort of let him move in. I had a lot of friends because there were no rules at my house. My mom didn’t believe in grounding or curfews.

The only time I did get grounded was when I was arrested for smoking pot in an alley by a cop on a bicycle. After she came to collect me at the precinct I was crying really hard. She didn’t slap me this time. “Do you want a cup of water?” she asked. I nodded. She brought me the water in a *D.A.R.E. to Say No to Drugs* cup. I thought she was being funny so I started to giggle a little. She just threw her hands up and said “You’re not taking any of this seriously!” I got another year of probation with Officer Butts. He made me write an essay on how probation affected my life negatively.

And I had to start therapy with this squatty woman named Linda. My mom found her in the Yellow Pages. I told Linda about my life and where I hung out and who my friends were. “Oh, those are bad people! I know all about them!” I could tell she wanted to be hip and relate to young people. She wore big, chunky jewelry and had kind of kooky, frizzy hair. It felt very contrived to me. She had me fill out surveys that revealed that I was very troubled. She told my mom that she was alarmed by the results. My mom wanted a diagnosis. “Well, depression, definitely, maybe Bi-Polar, Borderline, maybe even a touch of Asperger’s.”

So my mom bought books on all of them. Borderline Personality Disorder was her favorite diagnosis. If we would get in a fight she would just shake her head and say “That’s the disorder talking…” And this made me more upset and we went round and round like that until one of us gave up.

My mom had breast-reduction surgery and I was supposed to take care of her. I drove her home from the hospital and thought she would just sleep while she healed. But the anesthesia
made her sick and it took her much longer. I didn’t mind taking care of the house but I really resented that she wanted me to take care of her. She was so weak she couldn’t feed herself and I had to feed her spoonfuls of orange jell-o. I felt sort of disgusted by her. But when I saw she was too weak to even cry I felt bad. I lay down in the bed next to her until she fell asleep.

Tenements and Tiffany

I booked the deluxe tour of the Tenement Museum where we would view the apartments of two families who lived on the Lower East Side long, long ago. My dad liked historical things and he liked walking and standing up. So I knew he would like this tour. It was raining so hard that I began to feel guilty. I knew that I was not responsible for the rain, but I kept apologizing for all the bad weather we were having since his visit. I kept saying “I’m so sorry, it’s never like this!” And he didn’t say “It’s all right,” but “You must get ten times the rain we get in Nebraska.” But the Tenement Museum tour was mostly indoors, so we would be okay.

Our tour guide was a young Jewish girl named Erica. And she was going to show us
the homes of the Gumpertz family of 1863 and the Baldizzi family of 1935. The Gumpertzes were Jewish and from Germany. And Erica said they were probably the only Jewish people on the block. She showed us their home which was just a couple of rooms. Mrs. Gumpertz took in laundry. “And *this* was the iron she had to use on the clothes! Heavy!” And she passed it around for everyone to feel its weight. I passed it to my dad who didn’t hold it for long. “My mom used to have one like that,” he said.

Grandma Nora was frightening. She had bright red hair and light blue eyes and never smiled. She liked to embroider things and bake bread that made her little apartment smell nice. Her apartment overlooked some railroad tracks and I thought that was cool. When I would take naps at her place I would pretend I was a hobo on a train. She kept a velvet painting of Jesus above her bed. His hands were held up to God and he looked worried.

Every family in the Midwest has some air-brushed piece of art that they got from a fair in their home. Grandma Nora had an air-brushed picture of me looking like a forlorn urchin with the caption “God Don’t Make No Junk.” The only relative she really loved was Betsy, my cousin’s daughter. Betsy was born when my cousin was fifteen and no one knows who her real father is. Grandma Nora would always give Betsy limited-edition Barbie dolls for Christmas, and charms for her charm bracelet.

She came from Scotland and her accent irritated me. Nothing she said sounded right. I corrected her once when I was seven. “Don’t say ‘woof,’ say ‘wolf!’” She grabbed the back of my hair and pulled it really hard. She said I had no respect and had a slick mouth. But she was a good cook and put cheese sauce on all her vegetables, so that was nice.

In the Gumpertz family, Mr. Gumpertz ran off one day and no one knows what happened
to him. Erica said that he could have been murdered or he could have just taken off. And I looked at my dad quickly to see if he had any reaction. Of course he did not have any.

My dad did not run off on my mom and me. When they split up I stayed at his house every other weekend at first. He got to keep the big house. He started dating other women right away and they would often spend the night when I was over. He dated a Seventh Day Adventist once who was a vegetarian. I’d never met one of those before. Around fifth grade he told me I couldn’t sleep next to him at night anymore or cuddle with him when we watched TV together. And he stopped saying nice things about me. I don’t think he ever told me I was pretty or anything like that, but I think he used to like me. At eleven, I wasn’t so sure anymore. He would give messages to my mother who would tell me “Your dad thinks I should teach you how to shave your legs.” So she taught me how to do all of that stuff. In school we had to watch one of those videos about our changing bodies. The one where the boys get to go play in the gym. The school nurse told us how to bury our maxi pads in the garbage can so that our dads couldn’t see them. “Your dad doesn’t want to see something like that,” she said. I used tampons though and I wondered if that was a lesson he also requested my mom to teach me. My mom told me to stand with one foot on the ground and the other propped up on the lid of the toilet. “Just look into space and relax… I promise we’ll never discuss it again. Now you try.” And she had me insert it in front of her so she knew I knew what I was doing.

The Baldizzi family at the Museum had a little nicer apartment with hot water and electricity. I thought it was a cute little place and I liked all of the vintage things. I was afraid my dad would say something bad about the Baldizzis being Catholic. He didn’t like Catholics, he said, because of all of the priests molesting children. But he pointed to a light fixture and said “I
like those old lamps. They lasted forever.” And I asked him if they had one like that when he 
was growing up. “No. We didn’t have electricity,” he said. I was shocked at this because I never 
knew it before. A lady from the Upper East Side who was also on the tour shouted “Oh my God! 
Where did you grow up! Oh my God that’s crazy!” (I know she was from the Upper East Side 
because she had mentioned it several times already.)

I knew that my dad’s family was poor and that he was the golden boy. That’s what my 
Mom told me. My dad told me nice stories of growing up on a farm. Things that would make me 
laugh like how he and his brothers would ride calves around and shoot BB guns at each other. 
And he would tell me that his parents were just nice farm people. But from others, I learned the 
truth about things. His mother didn’t marry his father until she had two kids. The first one wasn’t 
really his. The second one probably was. My dad said the only time his father ever hit him was 
when my dad hit a pig with a stick. His father loved all the animals even though they would 
eventually be slaughtered. He said he couldn’t go so far as to name them though, that would have 
made things too hard. His father drank a lot and had hepatitis.

After the tour of the Tenement Museum he wanted to see Chinatown and Little Italy. I 
thought we could share deep emotions over lunch and I would gain a greater understanding of 
why he was the way he was.

“Did you have running water at least?” I asked him.

“Nope. We had a well and an outhouse.” And that was all he would say.

Part of his visit was supposed to be spent buying a graduation present for my stepsister 
who was graduating from college soon. He did not come to my graduation because my 
stepbrother had a Little League game the same day, and I don’t recall him ever sending me a gift.
But I decided to be helpful anyway.

“Does she like jewelry? Does she have an iPod?”

No, she did not like or want any of those things.

“What about something meaningful and nice from Tiffany? Like a pen or a frame or something?”

At least he would like to see Tiffany, I thought. That was something tourists liked to see. But I was really torturing myself because I was the one who always wanted a ballpoint pen from Tiffany. My stepsister, who was very Nebraskan, would have no appreciation for it.

We went to the floor at Tiffany that housed all the gifts for people that were not jewelry. Things people registered for when they were getting married. He just stood there and I started to boil inside. I asked an employee to show us the pens. They were very nice and you could get them in any color or design. They were $150 or something around there and that was what he said he wanted to spend. I thought it was perfect and that my plan was brilliant.

“She wouldn’t like any of this crap,” he said. “I’d be better off getting her some clothes from Target.”

“You can’t get someone a fucking t-shirt for graduation,” I said. And I said it rather loudly so that everyone on the floor could hear. And I was shocked that I’d said the F-Word in Tiffany but I didn’t really care. I knew that he had put no thought into the nothing that he gave me when I graduated. And I remembered what he told me when I got into graduate school. “Well, I guess they’ll take anyone as long as you can pay.” Granted, I was going to City College and not Yale or anything, but still.

I always found ways to defend my dad and excuse what he said to me. My mom would
start in about how he wouldn’t even pay forty dollars to buy me glasses when I was fifteen and I would defend him. “Well, I don’t really live with him anymore, so I don’t think he should have to pay…” And then I would fight with my mom about it.

My dad got remarried when I was fourteen. Before they got married I actually liked my future stepmother. She was very nice to me and I felt I could open up to her about things. She had two kids of her own and I liked to take care of them. And I thought that maybe it would be like having normal brothers and sisters. But it was like a switch flipped in her after they got married and she wanted me out and her kids in. And my dad went along with it. Normally I spent every other weekend at his house and I had my own room and everything. But one day I came home to find everything of mine packed in a large rolling suitcase. And my stepsister was moved into what was once my room.

“You can’t stay here anymore,” he told me. “It’s not working out.” I could sense that this was coming long before it actually happened. My stepmom, Theresa, said that I was a bad influence and that she didn’t want me around her kids. It’s true that I was pretty terrible but it’s not like I blew crack smoke into her kids’ faces. Theresa started writing letters to my therapist telling her I was on drugs (true) and “goth” (not true, I was going for more of a beatnik look and wore a lot of black) and a danger to everyone around me.

I took it though. I left without complaining or crying or anything. My mom called my dad and yelled at him but he didn’t want me back. I felt it was too tense to stay with him and I didn’t like having to clean my room anyway. My mom didn’t require anything of me.

He had a secret daughter he ditched too. I didn’t even know she existed until I was 13 or so. He’d gotten this girl pregnant when he was in high school and the baby was put up for
adoption. Eventually, the adopted girl, Christy, found her birthparents and wanted to meet them. So he had to tell me about her. We traveled to visit her in Florida where she lived with her daughter and husband. She looked just like my dad. They had the same hands and same red hair and freckles. I always wanted to have red hair and blue eyes and she had all of those things.

He never saw her after that one visit. She would send cards at Christmas and write him letters, but he would never write back. I guess I could have written to her, but I didn’t either.

And I thought of all of this as yelled and cursed in Tiffany. But I felt embarrassed by what I did. He showed no emotion. He never did but it was particularly irritating at that moment.

I took him to H&M so he could get cheap clothing for my stepsister’s college graduation present. He picked out a tunic and some leggings for her.

“Is this the right size?” he held something up and asked me.

“I don’t know,” I said. “It’s small. Is she small?”

“She’s your size,” he said. “Small.”

“I’m not small, I’m medium now.”

My dad liked skinny women and healthy things in general. He became concerned about me as I turned eleven and started to have the slightest bit of fat. I heard him discussing it with my mother on the phone. I wanted to tell him that the reason I was now a medium was that he had denied me any kind of delicious food as a child and I acted out in college by eating nothing but fast and processed food. But I only said it to myself in my head.

I looked at dresses. I found a red one that I liked. It would be tight and low-cut bright red cotton with a patent leather belt. I would look pretty good in it but kind of slutty.

“That dress would look nice on you,” he said. “I’ll get it for you.”
And that cheered me up although I found it odd he would be such a slutty dress for me. He hadn’t complimented me in years about my appearance. Not since I was a very little girl.

I had some friends over for dinner so they could meet my dad and talk to him. I wore my slutty red dress and my breasts poured out of it. It was one of those dresses that make men stare down first and then up at your face. And that’s what my dad did when he saw me in it. I wondered what he thought about it.

I knew he would like my friend Tania because she was so tall and skinny. She was really too skinny for most people. But she would be just right for him. My friend Maria also came over. She was just normal like me. He ignored Maria and me while he talked to Tania about her boyfriends. She told him how she was close to her father but she could never find a boyfriend. She thought her standards were too high.

“It’s because you were so close to your dad,” he said. “Because he was so good you want someone who is just like him.”

I thought about taking a bottle of wine and throwing it at my television. Or screaming about my own problems with men (not that he ever expressed any interest). I just sat there and listened to their conversation and watched him look her up and down until I felt so uncomfortable I wanted to leave. It was my own apartment though, so there was nowhere for me to go.
Teachers

The first might have been the director of a play I was in. I don’t know if he counts because he wasn’t my school teacher. I was fifteen and in ninth grade. I wasn’t a virgin or anything, but I was still kind of innocent (or stupid, if you will). I auditioned for *Alice in Wonderland* and I got the part of Alice. The play was held in the backroom of a bar called the “Silk Café.” And the bar was in the cellar of another bar. It was a cool place actually. There were lots of worn velvet sofas and white Christmas lights. I don’t know what kind if liquor they served because this was before I had a fake ID. And even if I had one, I actually looked fifteen.

I was short and frail-looking with very short cropped hair. I wore a ton of makeup
because I had bad skin and I thought the makeup would distract people. Usually, I wore lots of Max Factor pan-cake makeup with powder on top of that. And I wore a lot of black eyeliner and Cherries in the Snow lipstick by Revlon. And I dyed my hair platinum blonde. My mom actually approved of that. She always wanted a blonde. I dressed really slutty. For instance, I once left the house in a mini-skirt up to my crotch (black with sparkles and shoplifted from *Merry-Go-Round* in Gateway Mall), a lycra-hot-pink-leopard-print halter top (also shoplifted from the mall – from Deb’s), fishnets (I don’t know where they came from) and clear plastic stripper shoes. The shoes I purchased from a shop called *Boog’s* that sold stripper and rock ‘n roll clothing. That shop was the coolest. I was trying to look older, but it really made me look like a child prostitute.

So I got the part of Alice and other people were the other characters. The others were all over the age of twenty-one and that was nice. It all made me feel very grown-up. The director was short for a man and had a pot-belly. He had thick and curly hair and a beard. He was thirty nine (I know because he told me later on). He smoked Galoises cigarettes. *Galoises Bleu*. That’s the kind Roman Polanski smoked. And I kind of hoped he would be like Roman Polanski and he would seduce me and I could be his muse or something. The director, his name was David, wasn’t particularly attractive or unattractive. But he did look like a “director.” Like if you went to central casting and said “Find me a man who looks like a theatre director,” they would come back with this guy. And I just thought it would be interesting to sleep with him. My feeling has always been that you should sleep with most people you have the opportunity to. It could always be an interesting story. There’s a word for girls that feel that way…

He said I should stay after rehearsal to discuss my role in the play and I actually believed him. The Silk Café had these deep wooden booths and we huddled into one. He lit a cigarette
and ordered two shots of *Drambouie*. It was disgusting. He told me I should sip it slowly next time and ordered another one. I sipped the next one slowly and it was still disgusting. He had the script in his hand and he began to ask me about my life. I told him I would rather be a dancer than an actress. He inhaled deeply and said “You move… beautifully. I can see that you are a dancer.” And I was very flattered.

I was getting drunk. He didn’t need to get me drunk. I would have slept with him while I was sober. We walked back to his place because he rode a bike and didn’t have a car. He lived near my mom’s office. I was always very glad to have a mom who didn’t believe in curfews or grounding or anything. If she’d known about this though, she’d probably have called the cops. Once a man followed me home from school flicking his tongue and telling me what he’d like to do to me. She called the cops that time. It was totally embarrassing.

His apartment building also housed families transitioning from homeless shelters to homes. Lincoln, Nebraska didn’t have public housing, this was the closest option. There were men in the hallway shouting at each other. They fell silent when David walked in with me. I looked back as I walked up the stairs and they looked back at me. On this particular night I wore a black and white polka dot mini-dress and stacked platform heels. His apartment was cute. The walls were yellow and slick and he had French doors that separated each room. One minute he was showing me a picture of his four-year-old daughter Zooey, and the next he was telling me how he liked to see my little hand on his big cock. Even at fifteen it was hard not to laugh.

The next one was a student teacher at my high school. I suppose he wasn’t much older than us. He assisted in my social studies class and we teased him a lot because he was so good-looking. His name was Joseph Patrick Ryan but he told us to call him JP. We girls would tease
him and say he was our boyfriend and his face would turn bright red. He looked very Nebraskan: stocky and kind of roly-poly. He had dark hair and blue eyes. That was a nice combination.

My friends and I weren’t the cutest girls in school but we were okay. We had the best style. Sometimes we would see him at one a.m. in the Highway Diner (which is open twenty-four hours a day) while he was writing or studying. And he would let us linger for a long time at his table.

He lived in the dorms at the University of Nebraska. I was eighteen by this time so I had my driver’s license. He didn’t have a car but I did. I started driving him home after our Highway Diner moments and things progressed from there. We kissed and he worried about getting in trouble. It’s funny because my mom worked for the teacher’s union and was always representing teachers who were interfering with their students. She and I talked about it often. But I wasn’t going to snitch on him. I wasn’t in love with him and it was fun. He seemed more innocent than I did. He came from some small town in Western Nebraska. He thought Lincoln was a big city. And he was very earnest about social studies and current events.

I told my favorite teacher, Mr. Thompson, all about JP and me. He taught political science and drank vodka out of a coffee cup all day. He was gay but deeply in the closet. I told him and he laughed and said “Don’t go getting him in trouble kiddo!” A year after I graduated high school, Mr. Thompson committed suicide. I think the medical examiner said it was an accident, but we all knew it was on purpose.
Beginnings

It might have been better if my dad was around. He might have been the kind of dad who was protective of me and made me bring my dates to the front door to meet him. Or I might not have been allowed to have dates until I was sixteen or something. Maybe I wouldn’t have been allowed to pierce my ears or wear makeup. He would sit at the kitchen table with me at night and make sure I did my homework. And he would give me a curfew of 9:00 on weeknights and 11:00 on weekends and ground me if I broke it. Sometimes he would drive me and my friends to the movies downtown and we would actually go to the movies.

But he’s not around because he doesn’t want to be and because he has a better family
now. I am allowed to visit his house on Sunday nights for dinner. I am not allowed to spend the night or play with his new children because I am a bad influence. I try not to say anything when I’m there because it’s never right. Nobody there asks me how school is going. They know it is not going well. I don’t think they’d care if it was going well but it’s never gone well so I don’t know. But there’s always been something wrong with me that disappoints him.

I try and smile when someone says something pleasant, but my step-mom shoots me a look. That is also not right. But then she says to me, “Maryann, do you like your food?” And I say “Oh yes, of course!” And she says “I didn’t know, because you never said anything.” So not saying anything, that’s not right either. They have these friends, this couple, from Sri Lanka. I always hoped that they would see how sad I was because they are Buddhist and understand about souls. But they’ve never told me if they’ve noticed anything.

When I leave, after dinner, my dad says “Take care now.” I like to walk home by myself back to my mom’s house. Even when it’s below zero and your nostrils feel like they will freeze together. At my dad’s, they eat nutritious things that my step-mom has spent hours making. Things like pot roasts and soups and potatoes and vegetables. They have dinner rolls in baskets covered with cloths. At my mom’s she leaves me $20 on the counter to order pizza. Sometimes, if she’s not working late, she’ll drive me to the Dairy Queen and we’ll buy 10 ice-cream sandwiches. You can get 10 for $10. But I like when she works late because I can watch TV as late as I want and I can have guys over.

I get scared when no one is around and I want to go to bed. I worry that someone could come through the window and rape me and kill me. I jump whenever there’s a sound and I wonder if it would be okay to call the police just to make sure no one is hiding and waiting for
me to go to sleep so they can kill me. Ted Bundy did that. He waited until this girl who was also 13 to go to sleep and then he came through her bedroom window and raped her and beat her to death. I told my mom about this once and she said “Jesus Christ Maryann! What? Do you need a babysitter or something?”

But she works really late and last month they found the body of this girl who used to go to school at the University of Nebraska who had been missing for a long time. Her name was Candi and everybody was looking for her and praying for her. These guys got arrested last month for robbery. Only they thought they were being arrested because they murdered Candi. So they started telling the cops all about what they did to her and where her body was. I know what happened to her because my mom’s friend Angela knows someone who works for the police department. The guys had pretended they were cops and pulled Candi over. They pulled her into their car and wrapped her head up with duct tape so she couldn’t see what was going on. Then they raped her, separately, and at the same time. One of them cut off one of her nipples. They tried to strangle her, but she wouldn’t die. So they buried her up to her neck in snow and shot her. And nobody found her because there was a blizzard and she was all covered up in snow. Candi looked soft and pretty in her missing posters. She was wearing a pink cable-knit sweater with a little gold cross around her neck. She had curly blonde hair and blue eyes. I bet she used shampoo that smelled like apples and wore Love’s Baby Soft perfume.

I look the opposite of that, practically. So why worry that somebody’s going to rape me?
Beautiful

I know I’m not beautiful and that’s okay I guess. My mom tells me “You would be so pretty if you had better skin and lost, I don’t know, ten pounds or so?” Everyone in Nebraska is fat though. It’s because of my breasts that I look fat. They’re too big for my body. I had to start wearing a bra when I was in third grade. Not a training bra, but a regular bra that women wear. My mom took me to Penny’s to get fitted for one by this really old lady. She put a measuring tape around my chest and around my breasts and said “34C. It’s good you came in right away,” to my mom. I used to have friends before I got it. But I was doing cartwheels in gym class and my shirt came up and all my friends saw it. My friend Natasha called me over and asked
me “Maryann, do you know you’re wearing a bra?” She seemed really upset about it. Of course I knew I was. “That makes you a slut you know,” she told me. I didn’t know. The only other girl who had to wear a bra was Carla whose parents were from Mexico and everyone knew she was a slut too.

Carla and I both got our periods on the first day of fifth grade (well, mine was the day before, but whatever). We read all those books like *Are you there God? It’s Me Margaret* about girls who really wanted to get theirs and didn’t understand them. And we had to sit through those videos about our changing bodies as if ours hadn’t already changed. But everyone knew they did. The teacher would look in our direction and say “Now, some of you may have already started your periods, but you still have a lot to learn.” The boys got to go to go play soccer outside when we watched all this stuff.

In sixth grade we started going with these two boys named Clint and Sean. I had Sean because Clint was really cute and so was Carla. Sean and I were just okay-looking. Carla told me that we had to lose our virginity before seventh grade. Just get it over with so we could have boyfriends in high school. She spent the night at my house a lot because there were no rules. We would go meet Clint and Sean in the park by house late at night to make out. In June, the summer before seventh grade, she told me “It’s going to be tonight. I’m going to do it with Clint.” We met them in the park and split up as usual. I made out with Sean and it was boring. It always was. I acted like I liked it and he thought I did. That made me happy and made me feel like I must be pretty. I must be *kind* of pretty for someone to want to kiss you. We never really talked though. He had a real girlfriend named Lindsay, he only made out with me. But that was okay.

When Carla and I were walking home that night I asked her if she did it. “No. He just
fingered me,” and she shrugged. She stole *Newports* from her dad. She lit one up and we sat on the stoop of the sidewalk for a while. “That sucks,” I told her. She didn’t look at me and she told me “You should wear more makeup. And you should learn how to smoke or something. You look better that way.” “Yeah, I guess,” I said.

She met these guys who were in high school when she was downtown one time. “I’m going to go out with Justin. You can go with Tom. I told them we were sixteen, so act mature okay?” Tom had greasy blonde hair that was down to his shoulders. Justin was like, really grown up and had his own place because he was emancipated from his parents. He had just dropped out of high school and worked at the meat packing plant now. It paid $9.50 an hour he told her so he always had a lot of money and would take her to the movies and bought her a promise ring with a gold heart and a diamond chip in the middle. He was really built (that’s how Carla said it) because he used to play football for Southeast High School.

We went to his house late at night to hang out. Carla thought that this time, for sure, she would get to do it and I probably would too. They were watching *Cinemax* in the dark when we walked in. There was a couch, a TV, and a chair and that was it. They didn’t get up so we just stood there for a while. “You guys can sit wherever,” I think it was Justin who said it. But it was dark and neither of them moved so I couldn’t really tell. Carla sat down and I stood. I tried to shift my weight from one leg to the other leg so they wouldn’t hurt. The boys were on the couch with their legs stretched long in front of them. Their skinny ankles made their sneakers look gigantic on the ends of their legs. Justin stretched his whole body out and said to Carla “You wanna go back?” and she got up and walked to the back of his apartment with him. I guess they went to his room. I was excited for her because she so wanted to lose her virginity.
Tom said “You can sit over here.” And I moved to sit next to him. The couch was second-hand looking and mostly avocado-green with swirls on it and it was scratchy. It reminded me of the couches my grandma had. He put the remote on my thigh “You can change it if you want.” On Cinemax there were two women giving each other a bath. One was Asian and the other was blonde and they were rubbing soapy sponges over each other’s breasts. “It’s okay,” I said and I shrugged. He would move closer to me and I wouldn’t move, and he would move closer still and I wouldn’t move. In the dark with the TV flickering we must have looked like a black and white silent movie.

He put his hand at the back of my head and ran his fingers through my hair. I thought maybe he would just want a blow job. It was okay if he wanted more, I guess. I should just get it over with. All of a sudden I wanted him to stop kissing me and just put it in me and be done so I wouldn’t be a virgin anymore and it would be official and all. But he was undoing his belt and his zipper and pushing my head down in that direction and then it was in my mouth and I was doing it and that was fine because I’d done it before and there wasn’t much to it. He pulled my head up and said “Wait there while I get something.” Something is condom, everyone knows that. I sat there on the couch and waited for him. I was wearing jean shorts that were cut shorter than they were supposed to be and I noticed how my thighs squished and spread out in them on the couch because of the fat.

When he came back I he was wearing boxer shorts and nothing else. I could see it coming through his boxer shorts. I wondered if he could tell that my heart was beating hard. It was surely beating through my shirt. He sat on the couch next to me and moved toward me. I moved back. “I’ve never done this before,” I told him. He leaned back and sighed “Are you serious?
You know if we don’t do it I could get blue balls. A guy can die from blue balls! Did you know that?” I did not know that. I did not know what he was talking about. I didn’t really know that much about balls. “I mean, it’s really fucking painful, that’s all I mean, but whatever.” He was really annoyed. “We can still do it, I was just telling you,” I said it very quietly because I felt very quiet and embarrassed. I didn’t want him to feel upset or die from the agony of blue balls. Of course I would do it. And it would be done. “Yeah, yeah I want to. I want to do it.”

I took off my shorts and wriggled out of my underwear in a way that I saw women do on TV. In a sexy way I hoped. He rolled the condom down his dick. I lie down on the couch and spread my legs around him. When he tried to put it in me it felt like it was wrapped in a dry balloon. It felt like the inside of me was wrapped in a dry balloon. I could not do it. It wouldn’t go in and I started to squeeze my legs together. It felt like ripping and horrible. I pulled my legs all the way together and pushed myself away from him. I told him I was sorry and tears started to pool in my eyes. “Just forget it,” he said. He got up and went into the bathroom. I put my underwear and shorts back on and looked at the clock on the cable box. It had only been a few minutes but it felt like a long time had passed. I heard the toilet flush and I heard him knock on Justin’s door and say “Hey I’m taking off man!” and I heard him walk back to the living room where I was sitting on the couch. He didn’t look at me but he sort of waved his hand at me and said “Take care!” and put his Cornhuskers cap on and walked out. He didn’t seem like he was in great pain from the blue balls. I thought that at least I wasn’t technically a virgin anymore. He put it inside of me after all.

I sat and waited for Carla and watched the Cinemax show. It was about the blonde woman and the Asian woman and how they both worked at this brothel and were competing
with each other for clients. And the blonde kept losing clients to the Asian woman so the Asian woman was going to show the blonde why she was so good at having sex by having sex with her. Something like that. I don’t know how it resolved itself. I heard Justin’s door open and I heard him talking to Carla and could imagine them at the doorway and he would put his arms around her and kiss her neck and maybe tell her that he loved her even if he didn’t mean it. She walked out and said “Let’s go!” and we started to walk back to my house.

“Did you do it?” she asked me. “No,” I told her. But that was okay because she wanted to talk about how she did it. She said it was magical and beautiful and that she realized how much she loved Justin and how she’d had lots of orgasms. And I knew she was a liar because it wasn’t like that at all. I wanted to yell at her that she probably didn’t even know what an orgasm was because I knew she really didn’t. I did because I had my first one in my room when I was ten after I started rubbing against a pillow and it was so amazing it made my ears ring. So I just knew that she was a fucking liar and didn’t know what the hell she was talking about. I just knew it. But I was only saying this on the inside and not saying anything to her really. I was just nodding my head because she was so lucky to have such an amazing boyfriend like Justin. I knew I would never be friends with her again and that I didn’t want to hang out with her anymore.
Alyson

I talked my way into Stevens College for Women in Columbia, MO. I graduated from high school with a 1.68 GPA but told the blonde woman in the admissions office that I was very dedicated to my school work. I told her about how I’d been date raped by the school basketball star and that’s why my grades went downhill. I didn’t mention that it happened after I had officially graduated and that I’d always had terrible grades. In a soft, Southern accent she said “Maryann, I can see that you are an intelligent, sensitive girl.” They started me off on academic probation and I had every intention of doing well and going to class and doing all the things I’d neglected to do in high school. Those good intentions lasted about a week.
I met Alyson after the bars closed and we were both trying to get back to the campus. She was riding her bike in front of me and crashed it into a little tree. So I helped her up and walked her back to her dorm room. It smelled like patchouli and like her. She had a peculiar smell. Later, when I got to know her better, I found that she ate strange things from the Korean supermarket. And her boyfriend told me that she also had a strange taste. But it wasn’t a bad taste. Just sort of herbal.

Alyson looked like an elf or a fairy and it wasn’t just because she was small. I was small too, but she had teeth that came to little points. They didn’t look frightening like fangs, but made her look like a woodland creature. And it was her light red hair and light green eyes, and the sprinkling of freckles on her nose. And she acted like a fairy, or like a snowflake, or like a leaf that floated around on the wind until it fell to the ground.

I lived on the top floor of Pillsbury Hall because I said I was a smoker. I wasn’t really, but I thought it would be better to live with the kind of girls who smoked cigarettes than it would be to live with sorority girls. Alyson lived next to several sorority girls who watched us as we walked into her dorm room. They probably thought we were going to have a lesbian tryst, as many girls at Stephens did have, but we were not.

“That girl,” she said as she pointed to Carli, the Jewish sorority girl from Cleveland who was talking to a blonde sorority girl from Oklahoma. “She said I was listening to satanic music. I wasn’t though. It was just… Experimental. For a piece I’m working on.”

We were both dance majors, but she was a year ahead of me so we didn’t have any classes together.

So we sat up and talked for the rest of the night. We talked about ghosts and tarot cards
and music. I told her about my dream to write a ballet set to the music of Elvis Presley. And she told me about her boyfriend who was named Jason and called Trotsky because of a small socialist newspaper he put out. I wasn’t a lesbian, but I longed to kiss her because I wanted her to know how much I loved her and wanted to be just like her.

Her parents were also divorced. Her mother was a wealthy real-estate agent in Dallas. She was sent to a posh convent school in California where she went to school with the children of celebrities. She was asked to leave after she threatened to push the daughter of a pop singer down a cliff. After that she went to live with her father who was an artist who lived in the Ozarks. She liked that better. She went to Stephens because her mom did and because they would accept her without a hassle.

“*Alpha Kappa Gamma* tried to rush me,” she said. “Because my mom pledged that sorority and they had to take me too. Obviously that didn’t work out.”

And we laughed. And she walked me to her door. She kissed me full on the mouth.

“I’ll come wake you up tomorrow,” she said. “And we’ll have breakfast together.”
Carrie

We were performing *Jewels* and I was in “Rubies” because I was in modern ballet and not classical ballet. And “Rubies” was very modern with very angular and sharp movements. It was the only time we got to interact with men since men were part of the choreography. But I found the men irritating and distracting. They were all gay, the three of them, and were too loud and flamboyant when I liked quiet. They only liked the Southern debutantes anyway since those women were just caricatures of real women and practically like drag queens with their accents and teased hair.

It was our first performance and I was still excited about school at that point. Carrie
designed the costumes and sewed them. She was in the theatre department but the dance
department was borrowing her. She had black hair and green eyes and very pointy features.
She wore a lot of makeup even though she didn’t need to. I think it was a dramatic look she
was going for. She measured me and called out my measurements and I cringed each time she
announced them.

“Bust 36!” she yelled. And she asked me “What’s your cup size?”

“D,” I told her very quietly.

“D!” she yelled.

Usually it is a good thing for a woman to be a size 36D but it was a terrible thing if
you were in ballet. Balanchine said “I want to see ribs!” and he wanted dancers to look like
adolescent boys. That is what I heard at least.

I explained to Carrie that I would tape my breasts down with an ace bandage and duct
tape for performances so perhaps I should do that so she could get my measurements that way.
And she looked at me like I was crazy.

So that was how we met. And I liked her because she wore black all the time and was
always taking cigarette breaks. Really she was taking breaks to get away from the debutantes,
she told me this later, because they wore so much perfume and were always chattering. Most
of them wore Ralph Lauren perfume and she said this just proved that they had no respect for
themselves. A woman should take her perfume choice seriously.

“What kind do you wear?” she asked me.

But I didn’t take my perfume choice seriously either. So she looked me up and down and
said “You might like Coco, by Chanel, or Fracas. Fracas is probably right for you.”
“My mom wears *Youth Dew,*” I told her. “I like that one.”

“That’s a good one too,” she said. “Joan Crawford wore it… And Gloria Swanson, I think.”

But Carrie preferred Elizabeth Taylor to all other actresses even though her prom dress was an exact replica of the one Marilyn Monroe wore in *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes.* She said that everyone loved Marilyn but that Elizabeth was a better actress and more serious.

Carrie came from some small town outside of Las Vegas where everyone was Mormon. She showed me pictures of her parents from the 1960s. They looked young and happy and healthy.

“My dad was crazy then,” she said. “But everyone pretends he only got crazy after Vietnam. Vietnam only made things worse. Have you ever been to *Disney World*?”

“Yes,” I said. “It was the worst vacation ever. I puked on the teacups. I hate amusement parks.”

“The first time we went to *Disney World,*” she told me. “We stopped off at *McDonald’s.* I went to go play in one of those ball pits by myself.”

“I loved those ball pits,” I said.

“Yeah,” she said. “They were fun. So I went to go play in them and this weird guy comes over to me, he had a weird accent, a foreign accent, and he grabs me and the next thing I know he’s putting his hands up my skirt and stuck his finger in my, you know.”

“Didn’t anyone see it happen?!”

“Yeah, some lady came over and started yelling at him and he ran off.”

“That’s crazy!” I said.
“Yeah, it was crazy,” she said. “And the second time we went to Disney World my dad threatened to kill himself. He pulled over on the highway, and he always had guns with him, and threatened to shoot himself in the head.”

“Oh my God!”

“He was always threatening to kill himself,” she said. “So I finally said to him ‘Just do it Dad, just shoot yourself,’ because I was so sick of it.”

“What did he do?”

“He put the gun away and never threatened to do it again,” she said. “But I always felt guilty about it.”

“Don’t they call Disney World ‘The Happiest Place on Earth’?” I asked.

And we both laughed about that.

The First Date

Alyson introduced us, and I vaguely remember walking around with Eric that night and talking about where we came from. I finally told him I needed to sit down and that was when we kissed. I think he kissed me first. I was nineteen and he was thirty five but I planned to tell my mother he was really twenty five. He could pass for twenty five. So we kissed on a bench on the street and went home. Only we couldn’t go to his home because he didn’t have a home. Sometimes he lived with his brother in Jefferson City and now he was living with Alyson’s boyfriend on his couch. And sometimes he worked and sometimes he didn’t. He was an artist and a writer so he only worked when he had to. And he was very talented but other people didn’t
understand his work. I would understand.

There must be more to the date that I am forgetting. He must have asked me about my life and where I came from. But if he did, I don’t remember it. I used to wonder how so many cute girls could just go following Charles Manson around from the moment they met him. And when I met Eric, I was actually reading *Helter Skelter*, so I thought about this a lot. We did talk about *Helter Skelter* because he read it too. And he corrected my pronunciation of the District Attorney’s name. Eric was good-looking, very good-looking, and I’d never gone out with anyone who was truly attractive before except for the guy who raped me at the end of high school. That guy was good-looking *and* popular and I should have learned my lesson.

After we kissed, we walked around some more and went back to Alyson’s boyfriend’s house. He lived in a cheap townhouse in a semi-bad neighborhood. We had to break into his house with a credit card because Eric didn’t have a key.

And then I remember the sex. We went straight into it and we didn’t even talk or make-out beforehand. I remember lying under him on the couch and thinking this was terrible because I wasn’t even ready. I was dry so there must have been no foreplay. Though I had slept with lots of boys in high school, I didn’t really know what I was doing and I thought sex was mostly for boys anyway. I thought the women on *Sex and the City* were lying when they said they enjoyed it and that it was some gigantic joke that wasn’t even funny.

He was annoyed that I wasn’t enjoying it more.

“What’s wrong with you?” he asked.

And I started to cry. But I was only crying a little, not sobbing or anything.

“What’s wrong?” he asked me again. He wasn’t asking because he was concerned or
because he wanted things to be better for me. It was more like an accusation.

“Jesus Christ,” he said. “There’s blood. I can smell it.”

And I looked down between my legs and there was, indeed, a tiny bit of blood. The sex was kind of rough, and of course, I was dry when it began. He walked upstairs and took a quick shower. I sat in the dark and didn’t know what to do while I waited for him. I looked around and could see stacks of books along the wall and a television and a kitchen table and chairs. There was nothing on the walls.

He came downstairs and put his arm around me.

“Next time it will be better,” he said. “You just have to do it a lot and it won’t hurt anymore.”

I didn’t really know what he was talking about and wondered if he thought I was a virgin or something. I didn’t bleed the first time I had sex but it did hurt a lot.

He walked me back to my dorm room and I don’t know what we talked about. It was very early in the morning by now and the sun was just coming out. My eyes felt dry and I felt unclean. He couldn’t come up to my room because boys weren’t allowed as overnight guests at Stephens. So he kissed me goodbye at the door to Pillsbury Hall.

I walked inside and turned down the hall. I actually skipped and twirled around because I was so happy to have a boyfriend. We moved in together a week later.
Crazy

Eric’s favorite thing was to call me crazy. The week before we moved in together he would beg me to call him more often. So I would call him and he would tell people “This girl is crazy, she calls me constantly.” And the more you try to explain what happened, and how you weren’t really crazy, the crazier you sounded. So I started to believe that he was right and I probably really was crazy.

But then a week after we met I moved into Jason’s apartment with him. I moved in and we started to live like recluses. We stayed in our room most of the time so it started to look like a hoarder’s room. We threw our clothes and trash on the ground and never washed the sheets.
Sometimes we would go out to get food or go to the bathroom, and sometimes Eric would go out and to the bar, but I would never go. Or if I did go, I would leave early. I began to feel afraid to leave our room. Of course I quit going to classes and the Dean called me all the time to try and find out where I was and what was going on.

I went in to talk to the Dean and explain things. I wanted to tell her that I would probably get married to Eric so there was no need to worry about me not going to classes.

“Your writing professor says you’re very talented,” she said. Because besides ballet I was also taking creative writing classes. “You should focus on that and ditch the boyfriend.”

That sounded like a great idea when she said it. But I knew I would never do that.

I started getting cystic acne which I had not had since I was in high school. The first cyst was on my cheek. A hard, red lump formed there and I soaked it in a hot wash cloth sprinkled with salt. Eventually a head formed and I could drain it. I pressed down on it and warm, yellowish liquid poured out and down my face. But then another one would start to form, on my other cheek, my chin, my forehead, and I would have to do it all over again.

Months went by, I think, but I sort of lost track of time.

Eric and I were having sex on our dirty sheets when I got my period. He jumped off of me and flicked on the light.

“I can smell the blood,” he said. And he sounded frantic. “I don’t think this is working out.”

And that was how he broke up with me the first time. I still had my dorm room so I could just go back there. Alyson and Carrie would bring me food and try to make me feel better. But when I tried to eat it would just come back up. Nothing would stay in my stomach and they
wanted me to see a doctor. Alyson started to bring me cartons of whole milk and cakes and mashed potatoes from the cafeteria.

“Maybe a little of the fat will stick to you,” she said. Because I only weighed 85 lbs.

The Glorious Beginning of it All

I worked it out so that Alyson could drop me off at Club Vogue and pick me up a few hours later. She liked that because she didn’t have a car and could use mine to go and run errands and things. Lots of the other girls in the dance department were also strippers although stripping really doesn’t involve any technique. The men didn’t like it if you got too involved or moved around too quickly. They wanted you to just stand there and sway and remove whatever you were wearing. And they didn’t like it if you wore elaborate outfits. Well, they didn’t care if you did anyway. Some girls just wore their regular cotton underwear. But they were all pretty girls.
Club Vogue was the “nicest” club in Columbia, MO. Regina’s Cabaret was the bad one. And when I started as a stripper, I could work at the nice one.

After the first night, Alyson picked me up and we both started crying and holding each other for reasons I did not understand.

I didn’t think stripping was immoral or that strippers themselves were sluts or anything like that. I didn’t walk away feeling dirty. But it was unpleasant. It was very cold that night and the club was cold. They kept it cold so that our nipples would always look hard. I saw a movie once where strippers rubbed ice cubes on their nipples to keep them hard. I never saw anyone actually do that, but hard nipples are sort of a requirement so maybe that scene was taken from real life. So the club was cold and I had nothing but a bathing suit and a garter and high heels on and I felt like I looked cheap. The bathing suit was old and worn out from too many washings. And the high heels weren’t even real platform stripper shoes, but the shoes I wore to my junior and senior proms. They were also worn out. The newest thing on me was the garter which was provided by the club and probably not actually new at all. The other girls were tanned and wore new bathing suits or panties. They had long hair and highlights and my hair was short and dyed black.

In the fantasy I had, one of the girls would take me under her wing and teach me how to dress and how to dance but really, no one talked to anyone else. The owner of the club was an old man who barked orders at everyone.

“Your makeup looks like shit,” he said. “I want to see big eyes, big hair. I’ll let you work tonight, but change it when you come back.”

But I couldn’t grow my hair long over night and I didn’t have enough money for a wig.
I thought he didn’t understand very much about makeup because I thought my makeup looked cool. He wanted to turn me into the girl next door except I could never look like that even if I tried. I had spent most of my life trying. There was always something off about me.

The way it worked was that a girl danced to three songs throughout the night. She would be the only girl on the stage so she would get all the tips that were flung onto the stage. When she wasn’t dancing on the stage, she would dance on the bar or walk around and ask men if they wanted a private dance. I would dance on the bar to avoid having to interact with anyone. They chose the music for the songs you would dance to. Usually it was R&B or pop music but sometimes they played rock.

I felt very overwhelmed and like going to sleep. Whenever I feel nervous I laugh or go to sleep. Sleep seemed safest at that moment. I felt like staring at all the men. Later I learned that it was good to give men a lot of eye contact because it made them feel special. But I wasn’t interested in staring at them like I was interested in them. I was just curious. Maybe animals in a zoo are just as interested in the people who come to look at them. The owner, whose name I do not remember, had me sit on a bench and watch some of the other girls before I actually got on the stage.

“See?” he said. “Dance in a slow and seductive manner.”

He kind of had a southern accent and I wanted to laugh. But I just sat on the bench and he brought me a coke in a frosted glass that I didn’t want or ask for. That’s when I realized that I was cold. I was getting goosebumps on my thighs. I looked down at them and they looked fat and white. I felt that every imperfection in my body was being highlighted even though all the lights were dimmed. It was not a bad place, the club, and it was very clean. The carpets were
blood red and so were all the little tables and chairs. It was only a Tuesday night so not many men were there.

When I went up to dance it felt very unnatural. I thought it would be easy for me since I loved to dance and was trying to be a ballerina, but I didn’t really know what to do. I was used to the costume or at least some clothing and I realized that was an integral part to the whole dance. I didn’t know what to do with my hands. But I swayed in a slow and seductive manner as I had been instructed. Some men threw dollar bills at me and I didn’t know what to do. Was I supposed to pick them up right away or leave them there? And if I picked them up, was it supposed to be in a sexy way or just a normal way? I had seen some men hold up a dollar bill and let the girl squeeze her breasts together to collect it. I tried to do that but the dollar bill wouldn’t stay between my breasts and I had to just use my hands.

Dancing on the bar was tricky. There wasn’t any room to move your feet so you just had to stand in one spot and sway your hips from side to side. I was worried that I would make a wrong move with my foot and fall off. So I stood there like my feet were being held in place by very strong magnets. I liked being on the bar though because you didn’t have to interact with anyone. You didn’t even have to look at anyone if you didn’t want to. So I didn’t.

Alyson went to the wrong entrance to pick me up so I stood in the back waiting for her for quite a while. It was chilly and I could see my breath in the air. But she arrived eventually and I burst into tears. And she did too but I didn’t know why. Maybe crying, like sneezing, is contagious.
Cigarette Burn

He burned me with a cigarette once and laughed about it. He did it in front of everyone. He put it up to the top of my wrist and pressed it in. And I yelped like a puppy does. He only held it there for a second. It was so hot that it felt cold. We were walking, Eric, me, his friend Jason, and Alyson. She was my only friend after I started dating Eric. It was because she was so cheerful always and loving that she stayed my friend.

Before I met him, Alyson and I decided to learn to skateboard. Maybe we could start a gang of skateboarding girls with matching jackets. But every time we got up on the board we would slip off and laugh and laugh at ourselves. We would laugh so hard that our faces would
hurt. We would laugh so hard that we rolled on the ground. So we would carry our skateboards and buy Slurpees from 7-11. We would fill them half up with juice (I liked red flavor) and then half up with vodka and wander around downtown Columbia and drink them all day. Eventually we would flop outside on the lawn of the Baptist church that our school was affiliated with and we would laugh some more. Then at night we would use our fake ID’s to go dancing in nightclubs. Shattered played the best music. Alyson danced like a top. Like someone would pull the string and she’d go up and down and someone would pull the string again and she would go up and down again. She liked the way I danced though. She said it was cute. We would dance and dance and sweat would drip off of us. And then we would walk back to our dorm rooms and discuss it. Sometimes she would sleep on my floor and sometimes I would sleep on hers.

I knew that eventually Eric would start hitting me because he used to tease me so hard. It wasn’t teasing even, because teasing is something sweet. He would make fun of me in front of other people. And everyone felt so uncomfortable that they would just kind of look at their shoes. So I knew deep down that he wanted to hit me. He started slapping me. Just in private though. If he ever hit me in front of other people I thought I would break up with him. Or marry him. Either way I knew it was serious.

Back to the cigarette. We were all walking to Shattered. That was the nightclub Amanda and I used to go to. Me, Eric, Alyson, Jason. Eric started teasing me and I held up my hand to sort of brush him off. And I never did things like that usually. Nothing that sassy. And he took my hand and burned my wrist with his cigarette. And I yelped. It hurt so much. And I was so embarrassed that I’d yelped and it hurt so bad that I started to cry. Just instantly. I held my hands up to my face and cried and cried. We were all behind a building and I pressed my face up to the
wall and crouched down and just cried and cried in a little ball. I remember what I was wearing too. A “Ramones” t-shirt and denim Capri pants and black Converse high tops. And my hair was my natural color and it was bobbed. Alyson ran over to me and bent down and put her hand on my back and rubbed her hand on my back. “Did he burn you? Are you okay?” Because I don’t think she could really see what happened. She was wearing a “Smiths” t-shirt, denim Capri pants and black Converse low-tops. She was so cute. I can’t stress it enough. Like a munchkin or a pixie or a fairy. She had light red hair and blue eyes. Just so fair and lovely. It made me cry harder because she was being so nice.

She ran back to him and I looked back at her. She yelled at Eric “You stay away from her! You get out of here and leave her alone! Just get out of here and stay away!” It was just so cute to see this little fairy girl yell at him. I almost wanted to smile at how teeny tiny she was. But it made me cry harder and turn back into my ball. Jason took Eric away and the whole way Eric yelled back at Alyson that she was a fucking bitch and whatever. And that he’d barely touched it to me (which wasn’t true).

Alyson took me to her dorm room. “We’ll be safe here,” she said. All night she paced and huffed and puffed. Jason would call her and she would yell at him on the phone about how Eric was an asshole. She took care of me.

Eric and I made up the next day. But she still stayed my friend.
Might’ve Been

He’d break up with me every time I had my period. He’d break up with me, sleep with other women for a week, then get back together with me. And finally I snapped and said I was really going to kill myself. I actually called him and told him and he laughed at me. I called him and told him I was tired of everything. And I told him I was going to take all the sleeping pills I had in my dorm room. And he laughed. He said “Sorry, I was just thinking of something else.” And I hung up. Jason, called back and apologized and said I shouldn’t do anything crazy.

I called my mom and said I was serious this time, that I was really going to kill myself. And my mom said that it wasn’t worth it. Killing yourself to spite someone is always a bad
idea. Because in the end, you’re just dead. So I called Alyson who told me to stay put. And she walked to my dorm room and drove me to the hospital in my own car. I felt like an asshole at the hospital. “I want to kill myself because my boyfriend dumped me.” That sounds like something that stupid people do. Stupid girls. But the nurse checked me in and said they had to hold me for observation. On my way up in the elevator, up to the psychiatric unit, there was another patient standing next to me who slit her wrists. “No one was paying attention to me!” she shouted over and over again.

One day at the hospital turned into another. Every day I would tell my psychiatrist, whose name I can’t remember, that I just wanted to go home. Finally he told me “You have no place to go. Your parents won’t take you. Your college won’t have you back. Where are you going to go?” And he made me feel very irresponsible for not having a plan. Therapists are big on plans. “Do you have a plan to kill yourself?” “What is your discharge plan?” I’m not big on plans myself.

My roommate at the hospital was an anorexic named Amy. I liked her and admired her. I never had the willpower to be an anorexic. Bulimia suited me better. It implied that one was out of control and that was how I liked things. Every night before she fell asleep Amy, who was about my age, would say “No one can get better in a place like this.” She said it to no one in particular. It was true that the hospital was chaotic. But I liked that it felt a little like a college dorm. Amy and I were the youngest there though. Most were longtime crazies. One lady would pull her gown up and scream about how her vagina had fallen out. She was very fat, this woman, so I looked to see what a fat woman’s vagina looked like. I had never seen one before. It was covered by her low hanging stomach. So I never learned.
The nurses at the hospital called me “Snow White” because I was very pale and I had black hair. In fact I demanded black hair dye and red lipstick. So they started calling me Snow White.

I had no choice but to go back to him, to Eric, after they discharged me. I think my suicide attempt made me seem interesting to him. I hadn’t really attempted suicide, but I may have given him that impression. He was fascinated and afraid. I liked that. I was used to being afraid of him. But I lost control over him quickly and we went back and forth again whenever I would get my period. I moved in with him into a small house with peeling paint. It was very cheap for a house, only $400 a month. I had to keep seeing the psychiatrist. My mom kept me on her insurance so I could pay for it. I should say, so Eric could pay for it, because I didn’t have a job. I watched TV all day, daytime television, and sometimes I did laundry. Laundry was the only chore I could tolerate. Everything else hurt my back and instantly made me exhausted. Eric would come home and yell and I would ignore him. He was sleeping with this fat girl, Jennifer, who wore a pink cowboy hat all the time. Sometimes I thought about confronting her and challenging her to a fight, but ultimately, I didn’t do anything.

It’s funny because Eric is always upset that I am fat. “If you could lose ten pounds, I’d probably find you dazzling,” he tells me. The good thing is that the more weight I lose, the less often I have my period. So he has no excuse to sleep with other women. He probably still does. He finds other things to complain about. He says that we are living like crack addicts. He means that the house is messy. It is. I am a messy person. But a lot of the mess comes from his fast food wrappers. Why doesn’t he throw them away? I throw everything out once a month and let it build back up again.
A Brief Intermission

After I got out of the psychiatric ward for the second time, I lived with a new guy. His name was Graham and he was the opposite of Eric. He was tall and frail and looked like a corpse. Carrie was his roommate but they were just friends. I knew he had a crush on me so I just moved in there after I got out of the psych ward. I still had my plastic hospital bracelet on.

But I should explain why I was in the hospital again in the first place. I was really just tired. And I’d built up such a tolerance to the sleeping pills I’d been taking that I just kept taking more and more each night. This time I was up to fourteen. I think you were only supposed to take one or two. All of a sudden all fourteen hit me at the same time. Everything got all swirly
and strange. My shower curtain looked like it was coming to life. I started hearing things. I thought someone was calling my name only no one was calling my name. I made myself throw up and saw a couple of undigested blue capsules floating in my vomit. So I called 911 from my dorm room and told them I took too many sleeping pills.

The fire department showed up. They always come to suicide attempts because they can knock down the door if they have to. I very politely let them in even though I was falling asleep. One of them gently slapped my cheeks and said “Stay with me now sweetheart!” He had a Midwestern accent. And they pulled me into my bathroom to the toilet bowl. Then there was a big black tube in and out of my throat plunging the remaining pills out of my stomach. If I hadn’t woken up in the hospital I would’ve thought the whole thing was a dream. But they had to keep me overnight.

I guess the psychiatrist I saw believed me when I told him I just had terrible insomnia because he sent me home with a prescription for Valium. It never helped me to sleep but it did make me feel warm and relaxed and that was nice.

I didn’t want to be alone so I moved into Carrie and Graham’s house.

It was a shabby place that needed a good scrubbing and sweeping. I forced myself on Graham and told him I would be sleeping in his bed and he could sleep there too if he wanted to. He was so slight that I wasn’t afraid of him and instead bossed him around in the way that Eric often bossed me around. Graham had a plaid comforter that I imagined his mother bought for him.

He felt like a pile of bones when he was on top of me. His hip bones stuck out and dug into mine. He was so thin that it was like he was made of air. I tried to go down on him and he
pushed me away.

“What’s wrong with you,” I asked. I’d never met a guy who would turn down a blow job.

He sighed. “I guess I should just tell you,” he said.

I wondered if he had herpes.

He got up from the bed and cupped his hands over his groin. He turned on the lights and took his hands away.

“I’m not circumcised,” he said.

I’d never seen one that wasn’t circumcised before. It looked odd and like a raw turkey’s neck hanging in a butcher’s shop. I felt a little ill. I didn’t know what I could do with it.

“Oh,” I said. “Some people aren’t.” I didn’t know what else I could say.

“We don’t have to do it,” he said. “If you don’t want to.”

“It’s all right,” I said. “I mean, it’s fine.”

We got back into things. I thought I could feel his foreskin with each thrust and it was very distracting. I couldn’t look at him after it was over. And anyway, I could never be with someone who was skinnier than I was.

I stayed on for a week after that but I moved to the couch. Graham started bringing home a fat girl with bad teeth that I’d seen around town. They would have sex in his room and she would cry out in a wild and dramatic fashion that I’d only heard in porno films. I wondered if she knew his terrible secret.

Word of my hospital stay got back to Eric and he came to see me since he only lived down the street from Carrie and Graham. He wanted me to move back in with him because he now realized how much he really loved me.
“And I guess I’ll have to marry you,” he said.

I was so excited that I squealed.

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**Escape**

He chipped my left front tooth so that it looks like a fang. I guess I swallowed the chip that broke because I could. The break went up into the nerve of the tooth so that every time I breathe it’s this cold sharp pain. And I know I’ll have a black eye tomorrow but now it’s just swollen and it’s red and bloody where it’s supposed to be white on the inside. Usually Eric just slaps me but he was mad because we don’t have enough money coming in from my stripping. He doesn’t even do anything except take my money and buy meth that he doesn’t even share with me half the time. He wanted me to become a prostitute. Not even a high class one, but one that would walk the streets and bend down to lean into men’s cars and say things like “Hey baby, you
lookin’ for a date?” And I didn’t want to because who would want to say something so lame? So I told him this and he punched me in the face twice really fast. It was in the kitchen and I was backed up against the refrigerator and I wasn’t expecting all that anyway. My cat Cleopatra jumped off the counter when he started punching, knocking down bottles of Smirnoff vodka that broke on the floor. He said “I’m gonna kill that fucking cat!” because he never liked her, so I scooped her up and threw her in my car and took off. I vowed to always protect her in spite of what was happening to me.

She was a stray that had been hanging out around our house and I just decided to keep her and love her. She was missing a part of her ear and had lovely green-blue eyes that I found hypnotic. I would keep her in a separate room all to herself when we smoked. I felt it was wrong to expose animals to drugs. It would be like exposing a baby to drugs.

So we slept in my Honda Accord in the parking lot of the Holiday Inn Express because no one would bother me there. In the last month I’d smoked crack out of a Diet Coke can with this homeless guy who stayed with us for a while. And the month before that I started working at Club Vogue grinding against men’s erections hoping that they wouldn’t come because it was unhygienic and I could never look them in the eye afterwards. I could never look them in the eye during though. But I could go home with cash and smoke crank off of a piece of tin foil and it didn’t really bother me.

Asking me to become a prostitute was taking it too far. I had no money but still had my checkbook with one check left. I wrote a bad check to get a tank full of gas and headed back to Nebraska.
Dollar Party

The *Foxy Lady* is where strippers went to die. They took everyone from track marked junkies to three time mothers with stretch marks and floppy breasts. It existed on a lonely portion of O Street in Lincoln in a boarded up building painted black. The only sign was a pink neon lady whose hips swayed from right to left.

If I had been a more wholesome girl I could have worked at one of Lincoln’s classier strip clubs: The *Night Before* or *Shakers*. The girls at *Shakers* made the most money because they danced totally nude. But I was not wholesome. I had no track marks because I smoked meth. I just had painful, oozing sores around my mouth that I tried to cover with *Max Factor*
*Pan-cake* makeup. But the meth made me skinny. So I had that going for me.

The patrons weren’t much interested in how us girls looked. I could be politically correct and say that it was a blue collar bar. There were some blue collar workers who worked at the poultry packing plant and came in smelling of chicken fat. And there were ancient-looking men who came in at 10:00 AM and left at midnight when the bar closed. The rest of them were assorted college boys and unfortunate looking men.

A girl had to dance three sets on the stage per night. When she wasn’t dancing on the stage, she had to either dance on the bar or give lap dances in the VIP Room. It was hard for me to focus on stage because it had the best view on the club. The wall was lined with mirrors from ceiling to floor and it had a sign on it that said “NO HUMPING!” I never knew if it was directed at the dancers or the customers. I liked to watch the strangeness unfold each night. Girls were always fighting with each other right in front of everyone. At the center of the drama was usually a girl named Randi. She had frizzy, dyed red hair. She was even shorter than me at 4’11”. She would sleep with several girls at the same time. So they would fight over her and she would fight with them.

And she was mean. She once slid right off the pole and stormed off the stage in the middle of her set. She grabbed all our thighs. “Who the fuck was wearing lotion?” I never used the pole because I thought it was classless.

Randi didn’t bother me because I was protected by Blaze, another dancer. Her given name really was Blaze, which basically guaranteed her future as a stripper. I had known her since junior high but we were never really friends. She always liked me though. She called me “Mary Jane” when my name was really “Maryann” but I was afraid to correct her. She once beat her
own cousin up in study hall for painting her nails. The smell was bothering Blaze.

When I started at the *Foxy Lady*, she ran right over to me. “Oh my God! Mary Jane! You work here now?”

“Yeah, I’m here now,” I said. “My ‘name’ is Mia.”

Blaze was experienced and confident and I liked to be around her even though I was afraid of her. She told me the real money was in doing Dollar Parties. They were bachelor parties, private parties. They paid really well she told me.

“Do I have to have sex with them?” I asked her.

“You don’t *have* to,” she said. “You can just jerk them off or blow them. It’s easy. Sometimes they’re cute.” Blaze’s boyfriend would act as our bouncer. He was very large and imposing. I knew I would be safe between him and Blaze.

I was living in my car at the time. Sleeping in hotel parking lots. It was October and starting to get very cold in Nebraska. I thought I could make enough to stay in a motel for a week. I could shower and sleep in and watch TV. I could be like a regular person for a week. Or even a few days.

The party took place at some guy’s condo. There were only about ten men there and I felt very much on the spot. Blaze and I were to perform a “Two-Girl Show” and then stick around for “private dances.” A “Two-Girl Show” was me and Blaze rubbing each other and kissing each other while the men watched. We danced around to Mariah Carey and they all hollered.

“Show us some pink!” they yelled. It struck me as funny so I smiled and it looked to them like I was enjoying it. I didn’t mind it really. Blaze got a dildo from her gym bag. Was she going to use it on me? I felt like we should’ve discussed this before we began. But she just licked
it and sucked it and rubbed it around her breasts. She looked like a nice Nebraska girl really. She was hearty and brown skinned with dirty blonde hair. But there was always something hard about her, even in junior high school. She always looked angry.

While Blaze did her routine I looked around at the men. They were all rather non-descript. They wore *Cornhusker* sweatshirts and t-shirts. They were husky and red-faced. Some had brown hair and some had blonde hair but they all looked basically the same. It surprised me that such normal men would pay for sex.

I had decided beforehand that I would only give oral or hand jobs. But when I saw that there were only ten men there I became concerned. There would be no way for me get enough money for a hotel room for a week. Blaze told me that she got $100 for sex, $50 for blow jobs, and $40 for hand jobs. But of course I couldn’t give all of them hand jobs. But I could sleep inside for one night and maybe have enough to get something to eat. I had to keep that in mind.

“Do you want a private dance?” I asked one of them. That’s what we did at the club. The one I asked wasn’t totally awful looking.

“Sure,” he said. And when he said I realized that he had horrible teeth. Crooked, discolored, jagged. Normally that would be a deal breaker for me, but I was in no position to be picky.

He was fat and, I would soon learn, hairy. He sat on his friend’s bed.

“I have $50,” he said. I thought about just running out at that point. Just a few months earlier I had started college and was studying ballet. I could have been normal.

“Alright,” I said. “I’ll give you a blow job. Give me the money first.” I could spend $20 on a room, $20 on drugs, and $10 on food. It would be like a special treat for me. He gave me the
money. Two twenties and a ten. “You can go ahead and, you know, take your pants off.”

His belly hung over his penis. I wasn’t sure what to do about that. I was also shocked at
the amount of body hair on him. I’d never seen such a thing.

“Please tell me when you’re going to come,” I said. “Please don’t come in my mouth.”

He nodded.

I pushed his belly up with my elbow and went to work. He quickly got hard. I prayed to
God that this would be fast. I wondered how many women were praying for the same thing right
now.

“Oh yeah, suck my cock, oh yeah, suck my huge cock!” he moaned.


“Oh yeah, you’re my little slut, suck my cock you little slut!”

So I thought of how the hotel room would have heat and hot water and television. And I
thought of how I could buy real food and not just chips and pop. I could buy a salad, a chicken
Caesar salad from the Hi-Way Diner. They were always open. I could stay at the Holiday Inn
Express. The sheets would be clean and they would put an extra blanket on the bed. That would
be nice.

“I’m gonna come! I’m gonna come!”

So I stopped giving him a blow job and jerked him off until he came. I think it all
happened rather quickly but I didn’t time it. I could not look at him as he came. I was afraid of
laughing in his face.

He looked down on the semen on his stomach.

“That’s disgusting,” he said. I agreed with him in my head. It was disgusting. All that hair
and semen and fat. If I were in love with this man whose name I did not know it would not have been disgusting. I would have been into the whole thing. I felt like I might cry.

I got dressed in the bathroom and shouted Blaze’s boyfriend that I was leaving. I drove to the Hi-Way Diner and ordered my salad. The girl boxed it up for me and put it in a plastic bag. Then I drove to the Holiday Inn Express and registered and got my room. It was very nice and beige. Soothing. I showered first as I did not want to get into a clean bed while I was unclean. I used the provided shampoo and soap and coated myself with lotion.

I was excited to eat my salad. I hadn’t had real food in such a long time. I opened up the Styrofoam box and it looked delicious and fresh. I searched the bag for a plastic knife and fork. It was not inside the bag. Maybe there were utensils somewhere in the room. I opened every drawer. Nothing. Maybe the utensils had fallen out in my car on the ride over. I was getting upset and frantic at this point. I could feel that I was about to cry. There was nothing in my car.

I didn’t know what to do. I felt so defeated. I thought about just throwing the salad away but I was so hungry for something that wasn’t potato chips. So I picked up a piece of chicken and ate it. And some lettuce. And more and more until I was scooping up the salad and eating it like an animal with my hands. I caught sight of myself in the mirror and looked away.
Tell me a Story

“Tell me a story,” the man said.

And she looked toward the door. She could get one of the other girls. Sometimes men paid just to talk. They called it the “Girlfriend Experience.” They walked in the door and said “GFE” to the manager whose name was Al or Bob or something short like that. And it meant that they wanted to sit in the VIP room and just chat. But it was more than that. They wanted a girl who would act interested in them and say things like “How was your day honey?” Things that a real girlfriend would do.

The VIP room was not an executive suite full of important men surrounded by beautiful
women. The room looked like an afterthought. Al or Bob fixed pieces of a drop ceiling together and built a small room. The floor was covered in mattresses. Along the ceiling was a bar that a girl could hold onto and sort of hover over the man lying on the mattress below her.

She didn’t know what to say to him. So she shrugged and kept dancing over him. It was dark and she couldn’t see his face. He could see hers. That’s how the lights were set up. Like a police line-up. She was grateful she didn’t have to look into his eyes. That was how a girl made tips though, by making eye contact. Men loved that. She got tripped up when they asked her questions and talked to her. A girl was not supposed to give her real name. Her stripper name was Mia. But when they asked for her name she always said “Maryann. No! Mia!”

“Come on, tell me a story,” he said.

“I don’t know,” she said. “I grew up here. I used to go to college. I don’t know. What do you want to know?”

“You don’t have to tell me your life story,” he said. “Just a story. Any story.”

“Like a ‘Once upon a time…’ story?” she asked.

“That’s how all good stories start.”

“Once upon a time there was a girl named Cinderella. And she had a wicked stepmother and wicked stepsisters. And they were all jealous of Cinderella so they made her scrub the floors and do the laundry and all that.”

“You look more like Snow White,” said the man. “Your skin glows in the dark.”

She looked down at her very white thighs which looked gigantic on the spot like that. Even in the dark of the VIP room she looked large and white. Her skin was more waxy than porcelain.
“I’m like a vampire,” she said. “I only come out at night.” She wished she were like the other girls who were sassy and would have told him to go to Shakers or the Night Before if he wanted a girl with a fake tan. Those were the girls who tried to look beautiful and cared for themselves. They were working their way through college and would go on to lead normal lives one day. But the girls of the Foxy Lady could only be bothered to shave their legs and sometimes the line of their bikini.

It was the end of the line for strippers. It was where all the defective products were sent. The girls with stretch marks, track marks, cellulite, acne. Men paid in dollar bills. Sometimes she went home with only $5 in her pocket.

“Tell me about Snow White,” he said.

“I don’t know anything about her,” she said. “She lived with seven dwarves, ate a poison apple, a prince saved her or something.”

“What do you think she did with those seven dwarves?” he wanted to know.

Perhaps he had a fetish for little people. Or a fetish for fairy tales. They got people like that at the Foxy Lady. The bouncer would look the other way if a finger slipped here or there. And if you paid $100 you could watch a girl take a shower or get in there with her. Some girls would take a man back to their hotel room. Most just wanted a blow job. But some girls said there were men who wanted to be urinated on or crushed with stiletto high heels. And the girls would say that they were paid thousands of dollars. But they exaggerated.

“You think she banged them all?” she didn’t talk that way. But she was hovered over a man on a dirty mattress swaying to R&B music after all. The other girls talked dirty to the men and rubbed against their erections until they came in their pants. They tipped big out of
embarrassment.

Mia only got aroused once by a cowboy who was put up by his cowboy friends to get a private dance. He looked as young as her little brother who was a junior in high school. He was cute, this cowboy in a plaid shirt and tight jeans. And she rubbed up against him until she felt herself coming. His song wasn’t even finished. She told him “Thank you,” and patted him on the shoulder and left. He walked out looking bewildered.

“Tell me a story I’ve never heard before,” he said.

“The little girl,” she started but felt herself crying. “I don’t know why I started crying.”

“You were going to tell me something that touched you,” he said.

“The little girl had to sell matches, but she didn’t sell all of them, and she was afraid to go home because her father would beat her,” she told him this as she swayed over him wearing black patent leather underwear and nothing else. Not even shoes.

“Did your father beat you, little girl?” he asked. She thought he must be teasing her.

“No,” she said. “I wish he had.”

“Finish the story,” he told her.

“So she’s afraid to go home,” tears were running down her eyes but she could talk just fine. “And she lights one of the matches because it’s cold out. And in the flame she sees her grandmother. And her grandmother is the only person who ever loved her.”

“Didn’t anyone ever love you?” he asked her.

“Someone must have,” she said. “I can’t remember, but someone must have.”

“How does it end?”

“She keeps lighting the matches so she can see her grandmother,” she told him. “And in
the morning, someone finds her and she’s frozen to death.”

“This is a children’s story?” he said.

“The women here,” she said. “They have terrible lives.”

“Children’s stories are supposed to end ‘And they all lived happily ever after,’” he said.

And he walked out the door leaving her hanging onto the bar.

Smash Up

It all came to an end when I crashed my car into a ditch on the way home from the *Foxy Lady*. I’d been awake for two weeks straight. The doctors didn’t believe that when I finally got into intake. But I knew I hadn’t slept in two weeks. On my way to the motel parking lot that night after work, my body started to take over me and fall to sleep. There are stretches of interstate around the Midwest where you could go for miles without seeing another driver. It wasn’t exactly like that in Lincoln, but it was midnight and no one was around. The speed limit was 75 MPH, so I was doing 90 when I started to drift off.

I’d actually started falling asleep earlier that night in the VIP Room. If you keep smoking
and snorting meth, I think you could stay awake forever. That’s what I’d been doing day and night for two weeks. I would work a shift at the *Foxy Lady*, score, work another shift, and so on. It became like an experiment to see how long I could go. After two weeks I started to see things. The sores on my face wouldn’t scab over. They just oozed through my makeup. My eyes were so dilated they looked black. And I started to feel crazy all the time; I could hear people whispering my name and everything looked swirly. I wasn’t worried about overdosing. I was worried about staying permanently crazy.

So I crashed in the VIP Room and would have gotten a full night’s sleep if a girl hadn’t brought someone in to give a private dance. It was so nice and cozy in there with mattresses and pillows covering the floor. Everything was blood red and black. If the color scheme was different it would have reminded me of Jeannie’s bottle from *I Dream of Jeannie*. I stumbled out and the manager told me I had to go home and sleep it off. I was too tired to argue or get dressed. I just put my winter coat over my bikini. At one time, my bikini was covered in pink glitter. Now, after wearing it for weeks at a time and washing it in the bathroom sink, it was practically see-through. And I put on my flip-flops. When I first started as a stripper, I actually cared enough to wear cute little costumes and high platform heels. But lately, I’d been wearing my regular underwear and bare feet.

It was February but it wasn’t snowing. It was too cold to snow. I wore one of those quilted, puffy winter coats that go down to the floor. I left the heat off and turned up the radio to one of those right-wing talk shows that were so popular in Nebraska. My mom used to tell me that helped her stay awake. When she was a union organizer back when I was in high school, she would have to travel all over the state until 4:00 AM sometimes. But when she listened to a
conservative talk show, she would stay awake by arguing with them. But I felt myself drifting off anyway. And I could feel my car turning towards the ditch each time I drifted off.

In my delirium, I had a brilliant idea: If I just turned my wheel hard, away from the ditch, I could sleep for five minutes or so, then wake up and do it all over again until I reached the motel parking lot where I could sleep. The problem with turning the wheel when you’re going 90 MPH is that you just keep spinning until something stops you. It’s true that everything happens very fast when you’re in a car accident. But it also goes so slowly. The car spun around in circles on the pavement before it hit the side of the ditch. Dirt flew up on the windshield and I could feel it start to roll over. At that moment everything slowed down. I was screaming but on the inside I thought “Well, I’m going to die now,” very calmly. I thought about how I knew people in roll-over accidents and that they were dead and soon I would be dead too. And I felt okay with this. I didn’t see God or a white light or my life flashing before my eyes.

The seatbelt really did save me. Everything that wasn’t tied down was now outside of the car on the ground. My window was completely smashed out. And I was blinded. I wasn’t really, but my glasses were smashed and for a moment, I thought I was. I started to laugh hysterically when I thought about it. I unhooked myself from the seatbelt and fell onto my head and crawled out the broken window. I stood up and fell down and laughed some more. I rolled around the ditch laughing. My car/house was totaled.

I wondered about what to do next. I walked out to the side of the road and thought of flagging someone down. The first car drove past me. I guess I looked like a maniac in a winter coat and flip-flops trying to flag down a car. I looked like what I was. On the other side of the interstate, where the cars were going in the opposite direction, I saw a semi pull over. The driver
ran across four empty lanes. He looked like a trucker. He even wore a trucker hat and one of those vests that they wear.

“I saw your lights upside down from across the road!” he shouted. “Are you hurt?”

“I don’t know,” I said. “I might have hit my head. My glasses are broken.”

And he got on his walkie-talkie and said some code and said “Smash-up,” and “Possible head injury.” The ambulance would come. He told me not to worry, that he was just a normal guy, I would be okay. I hadn’t really considered the idea that he could be a serial killer. But he probably wouldn’t have called for help if he planned to murder me.

The only injury I had was a tiny bit of glass sticking in my arm. It would be no bigger than a kitten scratch. The EMT was very cute.

“Have you been drinking?” he asked.

“No.”

“Are you under the influence of any other… Substance?”

“Coming off it.”

“Is there anyone we should notify?”

I didn’t know what to do at that point. I didn’t have anything on me so I wasn’t going to jail. At least I didn’t think they could send me to jail just for being on something.

“My dad,” I said. “But I don’t want to call him.”

He didn’t even know I was back in Lincoln even though I’d been living there for three months. Once I saw someone he used to work with while I was dancing. I looked down from where I was on top of the bar and saw Mr. Carroll, the principal at the school my dad taught at. If he recognized me, he didn’t say anything. And I felt pretty sure he wouldn’t tell my dad about it
even if he had.

“I can talk to him if you want,” said the cute EMT.

“Sure,” I said. And I gave him the number.

The Letter

When I received her letter, I felt very happy to be safely shut away in a rehabilitation center. I knew that the doctors would protect me and not let her get to me. I only glanced through it, it was several pages long, and saw phrases like “bad daughter” and “selfish” and things like that. I knew I did not want to read it thoroughly.

I had individual therapy that day and my therapist showed me the letter that she had also received from my step-mother. My therapist, Dr. Marino, came from Brooklyn and really wanted me to move to New York one day and had already given me a list of pizza places I should go to.

“What did that bitch send to you?” she asked me.
So I gave her the letter and she glanced through the pages too, laughing at some parts.

“Did you read it?” she asked.

“Just flipped through it,” I told her.

“Good,” she said. “She sent me one about all the bad things you’ve ever done. She wants access to your patient records in here.”

She began to read from the best parts of the letter that Theresa sent to her. She told Dr. Marino that I wore black all the time and was obviously part of some “gothic gang” and that I wrote about sex (which she learned about when she read my diary) and that I was addicted to drugs and alcohol. Since I was in rehab for drug addiction, the last part was obvious. But I wore black because I wanted to look like a 60s beatnik, and I did write about sex, but I never kept a diary so I knew she made that up. I did keep millions of little notes to myself around my room and some of them probably talked about boyfriends I had or boys I liked.

Theresa was nice to me before she and my dad got married. She was younger than my mom and acted very hip, like she was going to be an older sister to me. We did talk about boys and about troubles I had at home. I began to panic after she and my father got engaged and things started to change. She had two children, a boy and a girl, who were both quite a lot younger than me. The boy was still in diapers and the girl had just started first grade. Before they got engaged, I used to babysit for them. I never wanted a brother or sister and was content to be an only child, but they were nice kids. But after they got engaged and everyone moved into my dad’s house, I wasn’t asked to babysit anymore. Theresa started bringing in girls from her church to babysit.

I was also concerned when I saw the dress she picked for me to wear in the wedding. It looked like something I had seen Mormon women wearing on polygamous compounds. It was
floral print with sleeves that reached my wrists, a skirt that touched the ground, and a collar that went half-way up my neck.

“It’s a little old-fashioned,” I said, because she had asked my honest opinion.

“It’s very tasteful,” she said.

And they got married. I suppose when people saw me crying at the wedding they thought it was because I was so full of joy. But I really suspected that my days were numbered in my dad’s house. I didn’t fit in with any of them. We got a family picture taken shortly after the wedding. Everyone is smiling and wearing soft colors of happiness. I am stuck in the back, sulking with pink hair and a black Chinese dress with red flowers on it. I look Photoshopped in, but I don’t think Photoshop existed yet.

She would often complain about her daughter’s room. She felt it was too small. But I didn’t pay much attention to that. One day I came home from school and found all my things had been packed into a red suitcase on wheels. All of her daughter’s things had been moved into my room.

“This isn’t working out,” my dad said. He wouldn’t even look me in the eye. I don’t know where Theresa or the kids were during all of this. So I took the suitcase and wheeled it all the way to my mom’s house. My mom was furious.

“I know that bitch is behind all of this!” I was shocked because my mom never cursed. She thought it was trashy. I knew my mom was probably right but I felt there was nothing I could do about it. I don’t think I cried.

I did not hear much from my father or Theresa throughout the years even though they only lived a few minutes away from my mom and me.
When I was eighteen I was date raped by the star of our school’s basketball team. My mom called my dad and he came to meet the police officer and the rest of us. I told the police officer what happened and my dad said he didn’t understand why I didn’t fight back more.

“Well I understand!” said my mom.

“Nope,” he said. “Doesn’t make sense to me.”

“With all due respect sir,” said the policewoman. “I believe what your daughter is telling me. I’m very sorry for what happened to her.”

That shut him up.

My dad went back to his place and I went to bed, very upset and exhausted. Theresa called. And my mom came into my room with the cordless phone.

“You don’t have to talk to her,” she whispered. But I said it was fine and took the phone.

“You know I was raped *twice* by the time I was your age,” she said. “So you should consider yourself *lucky* little girl!”

Later that night a lady from Planned Parenthood came by our house with a pamphlet called “It’s Not Your Fault!”

I told Dr. Marino about all of this in our sessions. And I told her that Theresa really had a terrible life. Her mother died when she was a little girl and the people who raped her were her father and brother. And that she was very fat and poor because her father worked for Gooch Family Pasta putting together boxes of dried macaroni and packets of dehydrated cheese and refused to join the union so he always made minimum wage.

“You can’t fix her though,” said Dr. Marino. “You just have to get out of here. You have to stay far, far away from her.”
Circe’s Feast

After rehab I moved to Connecticut and in with my mother who had moved there a couple years before. I got a job at a gourmet bakery and delicatessen called Circe’s Feast. The owner was named Deirdre and when I told her I was from Nebraska she said “Well, this isn’t like Nebraska.” So I hated her right away. She was right though that it was like no place I’d ever been before. She was gaunt and blonde with thin and curly hair. She was going through a divorce with a man who owned a wine shop in West Hartford and often took to her office to weep.

All the sandwiches were overpriced and contained ingredients like “rosemary aioli” which was really just mayonnaise with dried rosemary in it. And every sandwich seemed to
contain either sundried tomatoes or roasted red peppers as if those ingredients added some kind of richness to what was really just a turkey sandwich. It was my job to come to work early and prepare the sandwiches for the day and then act as a cashier. In the morning I also made coffee and set out pastries and Danish. We told people they were handmade but really they were ordered from some shop in Greenwich. We defrosted them the day before.

The only other person with me in the mornings was Isaiah who was from Haiti. He baked things and also acted as a janitor. He was a very large and imposing man but also very friendly. He would sing songs in Haitian as he mopped the floors until Deirdre came in early one day and scolded him. “Please lower your voice when singing your ethnic songs!” Isaiah told me that it was his mission to have a baby with a woman of every race. He called me “Sunshine.”

Before the lunch rush, a woman named Ellen would come in to work. She was middle aged and would have been a perfect WASP if she were not so fat. She lived on a fancy street not too far from the deli and her husband was in insurance or some such industry. She told me that she got bored being home all day so she decided to get a job. Her voice was so nasal that I thought there might be something wrong with her.

About a month into my employment at Circe’s Feast there was an incident where a local television news journalist who happened to be African American was jogging on Ellen’s street. He was dressed in the usual clothes for jogging: a t-shirt and sweatpants. But someone stopped him to ask what he was doing in the neighborhood. And they called the police and detained the newscaster until they got there. It was a big scandal. And Ellen came to work and proudly reported to me that it was her husband who stopped the journalist. “My husband could just tell that he didn’t belong in the neighborhood.”
“Yeah,” I said. “But he wasn’t doing anything. He was just out running.”

And she told me about how three years before there was a murder and robbery in her neighborhood.

“And when they caught the murderer,” she said. “He was Black!” And she looked at me like she expected me to high-five her in solidarity to White people.

The Jewish holidays were an interesting time at the deli. We advertised that we could cater all their dinners for Yom Kippur and all the others. None of the food was really kosher though. Deirdre told me that if anyone asked, I was supposed to say that it was “kosher-style,” whatever that meant.

We had the most delicious pastries during those times though like flourless chocolate tarts and chocolate dipped macaroons which I would eat all day. We had a customer named Rachel whose husband was an extremely successful real-estate agent around town. Their company name was on signs all over town. She was tiny. She might have weighed 85 lbs. and she had long brown hair. She was always very tan but not unnaturally. She would come in each day during macaroon season and order twenty chocolate covered macaroons, eat them in about five minutes, and then go to the bathroom to vomit them up.

Circe’s Feast was a block away from the Hebrew Home which was the nursing home for poor Jewish people. I enjoyed the elderly customers who would come to have coffee and a little snack each day and they were the only people who were nice to me.

One woman would come with her ancient Shar-Pei dog. I could see her walking across the parking lot, both she and the dog slowly plodding along until they made it here. She would tie him to a pole and come in for her coffee and cake. I would often sit with her even though it
upset Deirdre. I’d never met anyone like this woman before. She told me she came from Poland and that she and her family had to hide in the forest and live off berries during the war. She always came into the deli wearing exciting dresses in fuchsia and would often wear hats with veils.

“I have to put him to sleep,” she told me one day.

“Oh that’s terrible!” I said. “I would die if I had to do that to my dog.”

“Yes,” she said. “I probably will. He is my only family.”

And I sat there while she ate her cake and we held hands. Eventually, she stopped coming in. And I suppose she really did die.

Threesome

We talked about sex a lot because he’d never had a girlfriend that liked it before. Or if he did, then never one who would admit to it. I never said the words “Patrick, I enjoy having sexual intercourse.” No one says stuff like that. But when we had sex, I was into it and didn’t just lay there and sometimes I would tell him “Do this” or “That feels good.” It all seemed perfectly normal to me.

He was used to girls whose mothers told them that nice girls didn’t like sex. Or that nice girls didn’t have sex at all and I guess those girls become nuns. Patrick’s mother bought his underwear which I found very suspicious. “Doesn’t it seem odd that you’re thirty-five and your
mother buys your underwear for you?” But he said it was a special, breathable type of underwear that only she knew about.

She viewed me with suspicion as well. I was introduced to her on New Year’s Eve. I don’t do well when meeting the parents. I am quiet and nervous and I don’t think I have a wholesome look that I always assume parents are looking for. She was very tall and quite elegant looking even though her hair was a little too blonde and stiff. I think she thought of herself as the Rose Kennedy of Westchester even though her husband and sons were all just cops and firefighters. None of them even drank alcohol except for Patrick’s father who hid in his office drinking a beer he kept in his desk drawer. At least the Kennedys knew how to have a good time.

She asked me “Are you Irish?”

“Yes, yes, definitely… Well, Northern Irish. Belfast, Derry, I think that’s where my people come from. And I’m Scottish. And English.” It’s just not a big deal where your people come from when you grow up in the Midwest. There is no St. Patrick’s Day parade in Nebraska because it would consist of about ten people.

“But you’re Catholic right?” she asked. “I thought Patrick told me you were Catholic.”

I could have said that I was raised Methodist, which was true. I could have said that my Great-Grandmother Marian was Catholic which was also true. And I could have said this, but I was unprepared for such a question and made the mistake of telling the truth.

“Well, no, I’m not Catholic. I’m a Unitarian Universalist,” I told her.

“I don’t know what that means. What does that mean?”

There is no easy answer to this question. I mumbled something about social justice and tried to make a joke about how Unitarians have a lot of meetings. We do have a lot of meetings.
But Patrick’s mother, Kathleen, did not laugh.

“I don’t understand what you’re talking about,” she said. And she walked away from me.

If I were having a rare moment of high self-esteem, I would have said I was a good catch. That deep down I was a nice Midwestern girl who smiled often and went to a women’s college and had good birthing hips. And it’s not as though I told her I worshipped a golden calf. I believed in God and all that. And she should have asked normal questions about where I grew up and what I did in life. I had nice, prepared answers for all those questions.

Instead I felt depressed and angry. Patrick took me home and I cried about how she hated me. “She just doesn’t know you,” he told me. I tried to get him to admit that she didn’t like me, but he wouldn’t respond. She treated him as though he were the baby of the family. Maybe that would have been an excuse for buying his underwear and grilling me about my religion. But he was the middle child. He just acted like a baby. And that made me angry. But I turned the anger on me instead of Kathleen and Patrick. I wanted desperately to be normal and have a normal family that did normal things like go to church and enjoy football games. I used to see ads in the subway saying “Become a medical technician!” or “Have a career as a legal assistant!” And I thought it must be nice to have aspirations like that. It seemed so simple and your whole life would be planned out for you.

I grew up in a home where sex was embarrassingly normal to talk about and definitely not dirty. At least not in a bad way. My mother told me things like “Men like red skirts.” She was right. Whenever I wore a red skirt men turned to stare at me and were much more attentive to me in general. She also told me that men like large breasts and that my bra and underwear should always match if I had a date with a boy. “You never know,” she said. When she saw me
in a bathing suit she would whistle and say “Marilyn Monroe! Ooh La La!” It was embarrassing at eleven-years-old. As I got older, I began to appreciate it. Even though I prefer Jayne Mansfield to Marilyn Monroe because Jayne was brilliant and sexy and less complicated.

But I was never beautiful. Maybe you could say I was cute in the way that all short people are. There were moments when I possibly looked sexy because I was soft and had an hourglass figure. But my skin was uncooperative and I had a permanent blush, rosacea inherited from my father. I looked like a farm girl from Nebraska. But I was in New York now where the women were very angular and pale and towered over me. They looked so chic and sophisticated compared to me.

Patrick liked my looks. They were familiar to him. I had a round Irish face and he liked that. He was shocked when he realized how many tattoos I had. “Does it bother you?” I asked him. It didn’t. He stared at them for hours. Unable to look me in the face. He was fascinated and confused. He told me his story. He used to be a cop like his brothers and his father, but he became a fireman to rebel against them. He used to drink and do lots of drugs but he went to rehab and didn’t do that anymore. He used to cheat on all of his girlfriends with prostitutes because he liked to lead a double life. He liked to be a nice boy with them and a deviant on the side. It was interesting so I nodded and listened to him.

He started to laugh. “I can’t believe I’m telling you all of this,” he said. I just shrugged. “What do you like to do, sexually, that you couldn’t do with your girlfriend?” I asked him. “No, no, I can’t tell you that.” I knew what it was that he liked. “You mean a strap-on right? Yeah, every guy I’ve ever dated likes things up his ass…” Now he was blushing and shocked. It was true though. I didn’t know it was such a big deal. I never thought of myself as particularly
sexually knowledgeable, just up for anything. “I just think when you’re in love, when you’re really into another person, you should try to make them happy. It should turn you on to turn them on. As long as you’re not into little kids, what’s the big deal?”

I wasn’t trying to be provocative. It was just how I felt. He started testing me to see how far I would go and if I was serious about all this. “If we got married, and had kids, would everything change? Would you lose all interest in sex?” How could I know the answer to such a question? I told him that I didn’t think I would completely change. Obviously things would be different… But would I change who I inherently am? I didn’t think so. “In fact,” I told him, “I think marriage should make things extra exciting. Because then I would have no doubts about being completely open with you, and you should feel the same way.” He never thought of it that way. That was shocking to me.

“Would you ever have sex with another woman?” he asked me one day.

When I was fourteen I did have sex with another girl. Neither of us really knew what we were doing though so it didn’t really count and I didn’t really think he ought to know about it.

“I’m dating you,” I told him. “I wouldn’t have sex with another woman anymore than I would have sex with another man.”

“But what if I was there?”

“Oh, like to supervise?”

Why couldn’t he just say what he wanted to say? Did he think I would slap him across the face and scream “You fiend!” and run out of the room?

“Look, do you want to have a threeway? Why don’t you just say so!”

He wanted to have a threeway and he had a plan. He said that there were lots of girls
from Sarah Lawrence that were lesbians and I could just pick one up at a bar and bring her back to his place. That sounded like something serial killers would do. Like afterwards we would strangle her and stuff her body in a crawl space. And besides, girls don’t just go around seducing one another.

“The only time that happens is in porn,” I told him. “In real life, the girl would probably mace us and call the police.”

“It’s not like we would drug her or anything! Just get her kind of drunk…”

I thought it might be better to just hire a prostitute. That way she would know what she was doing and then just go away after it was over. A decent prostitute was expensive though. Especially for a couple.

Since I had no job, I would make cash by posing for naked pictures. It was very artistic of course, in black and white. I made friends with this girl, Traci, who posed with me. For the pictures we’d kissed and felt each other up, all in the name of art. And we’d had wine and pizza afterwards at her apartment in Coney Island. She told me she was a lesbian really, but she had a boyfriend and had sex with men. She was Italian and very beautiful. She had a large tattoo up the right side of her body of Japanese cherry blossoms. Where I had five extra pounds, she did not. Though I had reservations because she was so lovely, I knew she would work as the guest star in our threesome.

I asked her at our next photo shoot.

“Oh yeah shore!” she said in her Brooklyn accent. “What does your boyfriend look like?”

“Anderson Cooper. He gets mistaken for him all the time,” I told her.

“Oh yeah he’s so hot! But can we getta slice first? I’m starved!”
We took the A train uptown to my place and I took her to the pizza shop around the corner from me. It was owned by two Polish immigrants. The man was very good-looking but his wife was very old and ugly. I thought at first she was his mother until I saw them kissing one day. Traci told me about how she had to date boys because her parents couldn’t accept that she was a lesbian. And that sometimes she had sex with guys just because she felt like it. She was very loud and sassy and I liked that about her. I hoped we would become better friends through all of this.

Patrick was already at my place. I’d given him a key a few months ago in what I thought was a very significant gesture. I introduced the two of them and became very nervous.

“I’m going to drink some vodka. Do you want some vodka Traci? Patrick doesn’t drink but you might want to.”

I poured myself a full glass and drank it in one gulp. So I poured myself another glass and did it again. We sat on my sofa. One person per cushion. None of us looked at each other.

“Where’s your bathroom?” she asked me.

I pointed. “First door on the left.”

When she was in the bathroom Patrick told me “She’s cute. She seems nice.” They hadn’t spoken to each other. I started to laugh. That was the vodka.

“Let’s just go to bed you guys!” and I took Patrick’s hand and pulled him off the couch. And I pulled him over to Traci and took her hand too. Now we were all laughing.

My bed was unmade. Maybe I should have put more thought into the atmosphere.

“Now let’s all take off our clothes!” And that’s what we did. My bra and panties matched, pink and black lace. Traci didn’t wear a bra or underwear. She was very thin and didn’t
really need to.

“I wish I could go without a bra,” I told her.

“Are you kidding! I wish I had your rack!”

“We’re like opposites. The best of both girls. You’re so thin and I’m so round…”

“I’m a very lucky man,” Patrick said. I’d forgotten he was there. It was like when you’re getting a manicure and it’s all women, then suddenly a man comes in, and the whole vibe changes. We just looked at him. And suddenly, I didn’t want to go through with it. But what can you do when you have two naked people in the same room as you and you’re naked too? It’s easier just to do it.

Traci kissed me, more than she ever had in a photo shoot. She was soft, her lips and her body, the way that women are soft. We looked at each other and laughed.

I don’t know how scenarios are arranged in a threesome. They just sort of occur. She’s kissing me and his hand is between my legs. Then everyone shifts and Traci and I are on our knees giving him a blow job and kissing each other and I guess that’s thrilling for him. And then we shift again and he’s fucking her from behind and she’s going down on me. I’m not going to have an orgasm. I’m thinking about how it must be hard for Traci to be fucked and concentrate on me at the same time. So we switch again and I’m getting fucked and going down on Traci. She tastes like herbs, like basil and oregano. I think it must be because she is Italian. I wonder what I taste like. And that’s how it goes, like vignettes in a film that I am watching and in at the same time. No one says “Now, I will do this and you will do that.” These things just happen.

Patrick has an orgasm. Men are less complicated in that way. I know I don’t and I’m sure Traci doesn’t have one. But it wasn’t unpleasant. It was interesting and now I can say I’ve had a
threesome and that will make me a more fascinating person. We lay there for a while. Patrick is in the middle and his arm is around me. I think we are silent. I ask her if she wants to spend the night.

She kisses me on the cheek and gets dressed and goes home. I don’t walk her to the door.

Baby Story

I like to tell myself that I would be a terrible mother. It is probably true. I am very messy and impatient and most moms with fancy strollers are probably very clean and have endless patience. So I tell myself I would be a terrible mother, and that not everyone is meant to be a mother anyway. And if you can’t have kids, you just should accept that and move on and have cats or dogs or something. Or I could be one of those desperate women who adopt babies from Russia with mental problems. Or women that spend millions of dollars on designer sperm and fertility treatments. Or maybe I could try acupuncture or yoga. I guess I wouldn’t mind a kid with mental problems.
I used to torture myself by looking at the available children for adoption in New York City. I once requested information about the adoption process. There was a girl I wanted very much as my own daughter. Her name was Daria and she was eleven years old and very pretty with a sweet smile. She was Dominican and liked singing in the church choir. And I could imagine picking her up from school and taking her to various play dates and appointments. But they want really normal people to adopt children. They don’t want ex-strippers, ex-drug addicts, girls who have to get lithium injections twice a month to keep the voices away. So I gave it up. She was listed for a long time on that adoption website. I don’t think she is anymore.

But I’ve always known I couldn’t have kids. Even before I knew it. When I was fourteen they diagnosed me with endometriosis. It means you bleed too much when you have your period. And I did. Once I fainted in the school bathroom because I’d lost too much blood at once. But that was nice because I got to go home from school early. Anyway, my mom took me to the gynecologist and that’s what she said I had. Marilyn Monroe had it too. So did Carole Landis. They wanted babies very much. And all of us look like it would be easy for us to have them. Large breasts, round tummies, wide hips.

I do not like children automatically. I do not like most children. Most children are annoying. They are loud and bratty and gross. But if I had my own kid, I’d probably like it. Lots of women see small children and start to make ridiculous faces at them and wish to cuddle them. When new moms ask me “Do you want to hold the baby?” the answer is no. I do not want to hold the baby. Why would I want to? It’s a presumptuous question anyway.

Marilyn Monroe got pregnant when she was with Arthur Miller. I really hoped those two would work out. I think he treated her with a little respect and they had a basset hound named
Hugo that she fussed over. She got pregnant and had a miscarriage. She got checked into the hospital so they could remove the fetus from her womb. The press took a picture of them after it all happened. She looks plump and healthy and wears a white eyelet dress. Her body still thought it was pregnant, that was why she was plump. And she smiles just a little because it is her job to smile. And Arthur Miller holds her hand.

It doesn’t mean anything at fourteen to hear you probably cannot have kids. At fourteen you think, “Thank God I cannot have kids!” because fourteen year old boyfriends don’t like to wear condoms, and fourteen year old me didn’t like to press the issue. And I used to say that having a child was the worst STD of all.

At nineteen I did get pregnant. It was a bad situation. I was getting beat up all the time, and my mind was falling apart, and there were the drugs and the drinking. I knew I would have an abortion. I never thought for a second that I wouldn’t have an abortion. So I told Eric that I was pregnant. He started to cry – and not tears of joy. “I can’t deal with this now! How could you do this to me!” Except that he would never wear a condom and my parents had cut me off from health insurance so I wasn’t on the pill. He knew all of that.

For a minute I thought about having the baby. Just thought about what it would be like. And I could get away from the boyfriend, and move into my own apartment, go to rehab and clean myself up. I did want the baby. Very much. But I never would have had it. Even if I could.

The abortion only cost ninety-five dollars. They make it cheap because they don’t want poor people having kids. The boyfriend didn’t go with me. Alyson waited outside. She wanted to come back but she was not allowed. She started crying when the nurse told her she could not go back. I told her it would be okay, that I would be fine. I had to have the local anesthetic. To put
you totally under cost more money. The nurse was young and Hispanic and she seemed hip to my plight.

“I’m going to show you the needles first,” she said. “This will be the worst part. Prepare yourself.”

It was a three pronged needle attached to a syringe filled with anesthetic. They insert all three prongs into your cervix at once. At this point I thought about just letting nature take its course. I would probably have a miscarriage. But there was a small chance that the baby would be born. And I just couldn’t take the chance.

“Having a kid hurts worse,” said the nurse. “And it’s really expensive.”

She left the room so I could change into my little hospital gown. It was violet. I felt like she was gone a long time. It’s funny how they leave the room so you can have some privacy. Soon, she and the doctor would be opening my vagina with a speculum. And later they would insert the needles and it would be the worst pain I’ve ever felt (except for when I had kidney stones). I got sick after it was all over. I was vomiting a lot and Alyson was worried about me. I did get to my lowest weight ever though. So that was nice.

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I got Jasper after I broke up with Patrick. My mom took me to the Humane Society. She said it always made her feel better to get a new dog or cat. At one point she had three dogs and two cats. Jasper was the smallest of dogs. And all of his hair had fallen out. He was named Goober by the Humane Society. But that’s a terrible name. He was pressed up against the cage, curled in a ball. The staff took him out of the cage and into a special room where we could play with him. He was gray, he was missing most of his teeth. He was nine years old and came from a
puppy mill. He had been a cage for his whole life. He only weighed about half of what he should and you could feel his bones when you picked him up.

“Well, at least give him a better name,” said my mom. She thought it should be something sophisticated, and possibly French-sounding. He was almost Francoise, but he became Jasper. He was cheap too because he was so old.

For a year he would hide under my couch and would not come out until you yanked his legs. He would not go on walks because he didn’t know how. So we got better together. He learned how to chew on things and learned how to go on walks. And his hair grew back and was soft. He gained twice as much weight as he should.

My mom and I had a Massingil moment on one Christmas visit to her house in Connecticut. We walked through the snowy forest and looked at the trees.

“You know,” she said. “It’s really okay if you never get married.”

And I laughed a little and thanked her.

“I wish,” she continued. “That you could have a baby.”

And I was going to start a fight with her about her nagging. “Jesus Christ!” I said. “Why do you have to ruin everything? Why do you have to start something?”

“It’s just that… Well, look at what you did with Jasper!”
Thank You for Calling 311

My unemployment was due to run out in a month so the civil service people had me up against a wall. I showed up to the interview twenty minutes early. The girl who interviewed me looked twenty years old and wore flip flops with her business suit. She read me questions off a sheet of paper.

“How important to you is providing good customer service?”

“Very important. I know how frustrating it can be to speak to someone on the phone who seems unconcerned and checked-out and I want to change all that.”

She wrote down “very.”
“How would you deal with an angry caller?”

“I would be very patient; I would try to let them voice their concerns and then do anything I could to help them.”

She wrote down “patient.”

“What is your attitude about showing up late to work or calling out?”

“I try never to be late. I think it’s acceptable to call out if you’re truly sick or if someone in your family dies.”

“We never find it acceptable to show up late,” she told me. “In fact, you should be at least thirty minutes early for each of your shifts.”

“What if I get sick?”

She sighed. “You’re not going to last at this job if you’re calling in sick all the time.”

“Oh, I hardly ever get sick. I was just curious.”

I got the job. The girl called me the next day to tell me about training.

“Monday-Friday, 8:30-4:30. You need to arrive half an hour early. If you show up just one minute late the trainers will lock the doors on you and you will be ineligible for the future Call Center Representative civil service tests. And if you call out for any reason at any time during the training, you will be ineligible.”

Like I said, they had me against a wall.

I had to be there at 8:00 AM for training which meant I had to leave my apartment at 7:00 and actually wake up at 6:00 so I could eat breakfast, get ready and walk the dog before I left. It was February; the sub wasn’t even up when the alarm went off. I tried to take my dog out for his walk and he immediately turned around to go back.
But I got there, thirty minutes early. The trainers were twenty minutes late. I waited for them in the lobby with my fellow trainees. No one spoke. I was the only White person.

I sat in the front row next to a girl named Laura who wouldn’t stop coughing. Not a minute would go by without a cough. Maybe it was a nervous habit. As we settled in, she said to me, confidentially, “Girl, this class is so early I am mortified! Do you know the definition of the word mortified? Because I am mortified!” I came to know that Laura did not know the definition of the word mortified. I also learned that it was her favorite word. Throughout the two weeks she would tell me things like “I was so sore after yoga! I was mortified!” and “If I don’t have my coffee in the morning I will be mortified!”

The first half of the day was a PowerPoint presentation about the importance of being on time and not calling out for any reason. I thought that if I took notes on everything, it would help me stay awake. But I started to feel my body giving up. The room was so cold and windowless and all I could think about was how my bed was soft and snuggly. I looked up at the clock. Five hours to go.

So I started to write an erotic letter to a married man I had a crush on and tried to make it look like I was taking diligent notes. But I got too turned on and was also concerned that someone might read over my shoulder. So that was out.

We were allowed a thirty minute lunch break which was really at breakfast time. They had a cafeteria on the first floor of the building in Lower Manhattan. It reminded me of college when I lived in the dorms except that I was never up early enough for breakfast in college. I took scrambled eggs, sausages and fruit from the buffet. My thinking was that if I just ate protein and other healthy foods, I would be able to stay awake. I didn’t drink coffee. I never liked the taste.
But maybe now would be a good time to develop a love for it.

The other trainees sat at a table with each other and talked and laughed like old friends. I ate alone. All I wanted was my paycheck and to go home. I had to interest in socializing. Their happiness was irritating to me.

The second half of the day was all about the history of 311. There was a picture on the PowerPoint of Mayor Bloomberg.

A man in the row behind me started to drift off.

“Jacob!” the trainer shouted. “If you fall asleep I’m throwing your ass out of here!” The trainer was a tall, wan Russian man named Eugene. “That goes for all of you,” he added.

By the end of the day I was crazed by mental and physical exhaustion. I tried going to the bathroom every hour so that I would be forced to stand up and walk about. I wondered if I could take a five minute nap while I sat on the toilet lid. I wondered if that would really help.

Training began to remind me of jail. I had only been in jail a few days in my life for protesting the Republican National Convention. They said I was inciting a riot. There were no windows in jail and the florescent lights were constantly turned on. You began to lose all sense of time and become hyper-sensitive to sound and smell.

“It’s very disorienting,” I explained to my therapist that evening. Tears started to run down my face. She tried to comfort me by saying “It’s only two weeks…”

The next day we began to learn about different types of calls. Noise complaints were the most common.

_The City accepts complaints about noise from neighbors. Officers from your local precinct will respond when they are not handling emergencies._
That was what we had to read to the caller before we could start to take their complaint.

Eugene explained “If you don’t read the detailed description, you’ll have points taken off your QA score.”

QA was “Quality Assurance.” You start with one-hundred points and they start deducting points for mistakes you make as the Call Center Representative. You got points taken off for “tone of voice,” but not for telling a customer to fuck off. You can do that. Just don’t hang up on them after you say it or you’ll get points taken off. And don’t show up late.

“Your introduction always has to be the same,” Eugene told us. “Say ‘Thank you for calling Three-One-One. This is (and say your name), how can I help you today?’” We all nodded our heads. “And never say Three-Eleven! It’s always Three-One-One.”

The other trainer, Germaine, cut in “But you can mix it up a little if you like. Like you can say ‘Good morning’ or ‘Good afternoon’ before your introduction.” Germaine was a tall West-Indian woman with braids. I liked her.

A girl in the row next to me raised her hand and asked “But what do we say if it’s evening?”

Germaine rolled her eyes. “You can say ‘Good evening’ Jennifer.”

Jennifer was very concerned about doing a good job. She told us all that she wanted to be a social worker and that she really wanted to help people. She would work herself into such a frenzy of good customer service that I thought she might go completely mad one day. Even Germaine and Eugene were concerned.

“Jennifer,” Germaine told her. “Everyone has moments where they just snap at a caller. All you need to remember is to show up on time and don’t call out sick. You’ll be all set if you
just keep that in mind.”

The idea of anyone snapping at a caller seemed to upset Jennifer a great deal. She repeated “I just want to do a good job! I just want to do a good job!”

Jennifer smiled all the time and was very popular amongst the other trainees. She often set up events for happy hour so everyone could hang out. I was asked to go but I was always too tired and completely disinterested.

Jennifer approached me one day after work. “Why do you always look so serious all the time?” she asked me. “It makes you look mean.”

“Thank you for saying that. It makes me want to smile all the time and be cheerful,” I told her.

She looked shocked and then like she might cry. I did not apologize because I wasn’t sorry. Her enthusiasm for this job was sickening to me.

I thought of telling her that it wasn’t anything personal. That this was just a job to me and I wasn’t interested in making it a part of my social life. But I didn’t say it because even though it was all true, I still didn’t like her. She ran off to go home.

During the second week of training there was a blizzard overnight. I cursed everyone in New York City government as I tried to make my way up to the A train. “Of course they didn’t plow the streets up here,” I thought. “We’re just poor brown people to them!” I wasn’t really brown but I was poor and that is why I was killing myself to get to this terrible training session. The snow was so deep that it was coming over the tops of my boots. An old woman coming out of the YMHA nursing home trying to make her way to her Access-a-Ride fell down in front of me. Normally I would have stopped and helped her, saw to it that she was okay. But I was so
worried that the blizzard was going to throw off my schedule that I just trudged past her. I could lose my job and there was no unemployment left.

I made my way up the hill of Bennett Avenue. I was only one block away from the station but every time the wind blew I was blasted in the face with snow. It stung. I thought about just lying down and going to sleep.

I made it to the train station and, surprisingly, the train arrived as soon as I got to the platform. I felt blessed by God. I was still on schedule. My pants were completely soaked and mascara was smeared all over my face, but I was going to be on time.

Everyone was in the training room at their assigned seats but Jennifer. Even the Germaine and Eugene were on time. The minutes passed by but Jennifer did not appear. We all watched the clock silently. At exactly 8:30 Eugene shut the door and locked it.

“Everyone else was on time. It’s not fair to you all to make an exception for her.”

No one said anything.

The day’s lesson was dealing with mentally ill callers.

“Now,” Eugene began. “When someone says they’re being poisoned by the Mayor, you gotta take that seriously and transfer to 911. But if they say they’re marrying him, that’s another story.”

There was a timid knock at the door about three minutes into the lesson. Poor Jennifer. Maybe she lived somewhere really far away like the Bronx. Germaine went outside to speak to her.

We all knew it was curtains for her. I couldn’t understand what she was saying but she was making the high-pitched sound of a girl trying to cry and talk at the same time. Germaine
came inside a couple of minutes later. Jennifer was gone.

“This should just serve as a reminder to you all: be on time and don’t call out. If you remember that, you’ll be successful at this job.”

The Visit

She was starting to get car sick. The car smelled like dog. He told her she could bring her dog, Elsie, and she was grateful for that. At least she would have the dog to talk to. She looked out at the horizon. Her mother taught her to look toward the horizon whenever she felt car sick. Luckily, South Dakota was very flat, just field after field of wheat and soy and sometimes cows grazing. But mostly just snow now. But her stomach would not settle and she began to think of their breakfast. Robert was a good cook. He made them scrambled eggs, bacon, and toast. But suddenly the scrambled eggs seemed disgusting, sitting there, glistening. She tried to put it out of her head so she didn’t vomit. He would be upset if they had to pull the car over.
“It smells like dog in here,” Robert said. “It’s making me sick.”

“I don’t smell anything,” said Sarah. Elsie was asleep on her lap with her nose buried in Sue’s lap.

The trip took a couple of hours and Sarah and Robert didn’t speak. Robert played the radio. It was on a country and western station that Sarah hated. But she didn’t say anything. It was just easier that way. The temperature was well below zero but they didn’t dare turn the heat up in the truck. It made the smell that much worse. She was happy to have Elsie with her despite the stink.

Sarah’s mother had warned her “Now, they’re not like us. People who live out in the country are different. Prepare yourself. It will be like the time we visited Pine Ridge.” Sue’s parents thought it was important for their children to see the kind of poverty the Indians lived in on Pine Ridge. So they drove them there one Sunday after church in the springtime. There were no paved roads and the car got stuck in the mud. They saw that people lived in shacks or trailers and that there was no running water or electricity. Sarah and her younger brother walked to the top of the hill wear Wounded Knee church sat. Her mother gave them some money to buy real beaded moccasins but Sue kept it to save up for Minnetonka moccasins.

It made her feel close to Robert to think of how poor his family probably was. It confirmed her belief in him as a troubled genius who only she understood. She knew he was the only one in his family to go to college, and that his father died when Robert was fourteen after he was gored by a bull. He told her these things while they lay in bed together after they made love. She rested in the crook of his arm and looked up at him while he told her his stories. Elsie slept on the floor at the end of their bed. Neither of their parents knew that they lived together. It was
their private universe.

Sarah felt prepared as her mother told her to be. She would be polite and not gape at the poverty she expected to see. She would act as if everything about Robert’s family was normal. She would offer to help make Christmas dinner and clean it up. She would listen very closely to his mother so that she understood every word she said. His mother was from Scotland. “Some people can’t understand her,” Robert explained. “I can translate if you can’t.” Sarah had never seen a picture of any of them. There were five kids altogether and his mother. They did not have a camera so there were no pictures to see.

“Well,” he said. “I guess this is it.”

They actually had a large house. It had been white once but now the paint was chipping and peeling and it looked gray. There was a porch all around the outside of the house with a porch swing and a sofa sitting near the front door. There was the house, and the red barn and the windmill and then nothing but field and sky. There were no trees or anything to break up the landscape.

“Be careful when you step out,” Robert said. “It might be kind of slick.” There was a still lot of snow on the ground. She supposed there was no sanitation crew to come clear it away as they did at her parents’ home in the suburbs. Sue stepped out of the truck and immediately felt the shock and sting of a snowball to her nose. She heard some young men laughing. She did not know what the look on her face said. She smiled politely. “It’s okay,” she said to no one. Robert was already walking toward the house. She wiped the snow away from her eyes and looked in the passenger side mirror. Her eyeliner, which had taken hours to apply, was streaked down her cheeks. She tried to wipe it away as best she could. She looked up at the
laughing men who looked just like Robert with their red hair and freckles. There were three of them but she did not know which was which since Robert had left her standing at the truck.

She held Elsie close to her and walked up the steps of the porch. She knocked on the door. Should she just walk in? She heard voices inside. One must be his mother but everything was so muffled she could not understand what was being said. She knocked again at the door and waited. A young girl with red hair and freckles answered the door.

“Hi,” Sarah said. “You’re Ginger?”

The girl smiled. She had a gap between her front two teeth that suited her. “Yep,” she said. She looked like a Ginger. She wore an oversized plaid shirt and dungarees that were rolled up at the bottom. She was barefoot and Sarah watched the brown soles of her feet as Ginger led her to the kitchen where Robert and the others were.

“What have you just been standin’ out there then?” She could understand his mother though she talked very fast. She was very short and solid and had red hair like all the others Sue had met. She had no freckles but had very pale skin and very blue eyes. “And look at you wit your bald head! Why, should I call ye George or Frank then?” Sue reached up to touch her head.

“She means your short hair,” said a taller version of his mother. Jessica was the oldest, Ginger was the youngest. Sarah could tell the girls apart. Jessica had brown hair and eyes and didn’t look like any of the rest. She looked very Midwestern though, small on top and wide on the bottom. She wore large glasses and had a worried, frantic way about her.

Sue wanted to cry or lie down and take a nap right there on the floor. She wanted to be home with her parents and her brother in front of their artificial silver Christmas tree watching television. It was not dirty in the house, but it was sort of dark and cavernous. There was no
refrigerator, no light fixtures. She realized there was no electricity at all. In the kitchen was a long table for preparing food and a large bucket containing water. Sarah had seen the pump outside. Robert had told her that they had no plumbing but she had never seen such a thing close up. The kitchen smelled nice like turkey.

“We’re eatin’ turkey and green beans,” said his mother. “So I hope that suits you.”

“Yes!” Sarah said. “Everything smells so good! Can I help in any way?”

“No, no,” Jessica jumped in. “We’ve got everything under control.”

“I see Robert doesn’t see fit to introduce us properly,” said his mother.

“Oh, yeah, sorry,” he said. “Mother, this is Sarah. Sarah this is Mother.”

Sue smiled politely and said “It’s so nice to finally meet you Mrs. Brady!” She had expected and hoped that Mrs. Brady would say, “Please, call me Nora. We’re going to be family soon!” But she mumbled “Yes, yes…”

“And I am Jessica,” said his sister. “I will show you around. Please put the dog down.”

So Sarah placed Elsie gently on the floor. The dog stayed close to her as Jessica showed her the living room. There were photographs of Robert and his two brothers on the mantle of the fireplace in their military uniforms. All of them were marines. She knew Robert’s youngest brother, Thomas, had lied about his age so he could enlist. Jessica saw her looking at the pictures and said “We’re so glad to have them back. Thomas will be doing another tour soon though.”

“That’s awful,” said Sarah. “We shouldn’t even be involved over there. It’s so sad he has to go back. He’s so young…”

Jessica screwed up her face. “It was their duty as Americans! I think it’s awful the way they’re being treated since they’ve come home. It’s attitudes like that…”
“Oh, no!” said Sarah. “I didn’t mean anything… I mean… I don’t really know about politics or anything.”

Sarah’s father was very opposed to US involvement in Vietnam. He tried to organize a protest at the college where he was a professor, and where Sarah and Robert attended school, but only a few people showed up. Her father would often rant at the television when they would announce the number of Viet-Cong that had been killed. “Lies!” he would yell. “All this misinformation!” And her mother would tell him to calm down so he didn’t get another ulcer.

Jessica scowled. “I should get back to the cooking,” she said. “The potatoes have to be peeled.”

“Oh, please,” said Sarah. “Please, let me! I can do that!”

So Jessica set down a sack of brown potatoes and an empty bucket next to the kitchen table and handed Sarah a small knife. “Do you have a peeler?” she asked. “Never mind… This will be fine.” And she set to work peeling the potatoes although she had never peeled any before. Soon she peeled them down to the size of small pebbles. They didn’t look right. But what were they supposed to look like? At Sarah’s house they would be having ham that was pre-cooked and coated with Coca-Cola and covered with a couple of pineapple slices stuck in with toothpicks. They would be sitting at the table and discussing the news. They would play the radio and have neighbors over for cocktails in the evening.

Ginger sat in a chair near Sarah with her legs crossed and just stared at her. Sarah looked up and Ginger smiled in the way girls smile when they’re caught staring. “I like your boots,” said Ginger.

“Thank you!” said Sarah. They were white go-go boots. Sarah was the first of all her
friends to get them. She wore them with a festive red and green jumper and looked like a chic elf.

“And I like your makeup,” said Ginger. “You look like a model!”

“It doesn’t really suit me,” said Jessica to no one in particular. “I think ladies should wear lipstick.”

And Ginger explained that no one wore lipstick anymore. “Are your eyelashes real?” she asked Sarah. “I really want to wear fake eyelashes. But I’m not allowed to wear makeup.”

“You don’t need to wear makeup,” said Sarah. “You’re naturally very pretty.” It was true. She knew that Ginger was turning the house upside down with boys and dates and sneaking out and stealing the car. Robert told Sarah all about it though it made him uncomfortable to think of his little sister having boyfriends.

“She might be very pretty,” said Jessica. “If she would dress like a young lady, and maybe put some shoes on.”

But Ginger just giggled and rolled her eyes so that only Sarah could see. And Sarah smiled at her and felt like she had one friend in the house that was human and not a dog. Nora was outside calling the rest of the boys inside. She walked in and looked at the pile of small potatoes that Sarah had peeled. “These will have to do,” she said. The boys followed her inside and sat around the kitchen.

Robert said, “This is Thomas, this is Henry, this here is Sarah.” Henry was the oldest boy and Thomas was the youngest. Henry was friendly and Thomas was crazy from Vietnam. That is what Robert explained. But Thomas may have been crazy before Vietnam. He had trouble dealing with others and preferred to spend his time in the barn talking to the horses.
Henry smiled at Sue and looked away like he was bashful. Thomas did not acknowledge her but instead turned to his mother “Why did you make us come in here if nothing’s ready?” She did not respond. Sarah thought it was strange the way they related to one another. No one talked, everyone seemed angry and tense and not happy to be with one another. If they didn’t look so similar she would not have known they were a family. There was a black and white photograph on the wall of the kitchen of a man on a white horse. His face was covered by the brim of his cowboy hat. Sue could tell that it was taken on Robert’s farm.

“That’s Dad,” Robert said. And Sarah thought she saw Robert’s eyes get watery. But maybe she didn’t really see that. Maybe she imagined it. He was not a very emotional person. She had tried many times to discuss his experiences in Vietnam. He would shake his head and change the subject. Her own father had been a Marine and he would do the same thing if you asked him about World War II. He would only say “It made me grow up very quickly.” But Sarah knew that the things that went on in Vietnam were different from any other war. And that the men they sent over there were not prepared. She knew from what her father told her. She didn’t know how he knew these things though.

They all sat around two tables that were pushed together in the living room. It was starting to get dark. It got dark so early in the winter. Robert’s mother lit long red candles and made everything look almost romantic. There was turkey and green beans and a small bowl of potatoes. “I don’t know if you like sweet potato pie,” said Mrs. Brady. “But that’s what we’ve got.” Sarah nodded and smiled to show that she did like it. There was no Christmas tree with Christmas presents. There were no stockings hung on the mantle of the fireplace.

Sarah felt like they were trapped in a photograph of the Great Depression. Mrs. Brady
did have that hard and tough look of the women Sarah had seen in books from the 1930s. No one spoke at dinner except for Thomas. “Why are there no mashed potatoes?” he asked when the small bowl was passed to him. Sarah felt her face get hot and she said “I’m sorry,” very quietly. She didn’t think anyone heard. She could feel Ginger staring at her and smiling but it did not make her feel warm inside. Elsie put her paws up on Sarah chair to beg for food and Mrs. Brady watching them. Sarah pushed the dog away.

The meal was silent except for the sounds of people eating. Sarah still felt sick and like she had no appetite. But she pushed the food around on her plate so she looked busy. It probably was very delicious. There was the turkey and green beans and a small dollop of mashed potatoes and bread she knew Mrs. Brady had baked herself. It smelled like Christmas, at least.

“I’m sorry,” said Sarah. “I need the ladies room.”

Jessica got up to show her to the outhouse.

“She’s not expectin’ is she?” Mrs. Brady asked Robert.

“We don’t want kids,” Robert said.

It was windy outside. Sarah had used an outhouse once when she and her parents went camping. The Brady outhouse was in a small shack. It basically looked like a toilet on the inside. It smelled awful even in bitter cold. “I can’t imagine this in the summertime,” Sarah thought. She also thought about vomiting. But she felt too sick to even put her head in the hole cut into the wooden planks. So she stood in the little shack and put her head against the door and closed her eyes. She breathed in through her mouth but even that felt foul.

She walked back inside where everyone had now moved onto the pie. Robert spoke up. “Sarah’s not feeling well. We have to go.” Ginger frowned but no one else had much of a
reaction. “Can’t you stay?” Ginger said.

“No,” said Robert. “Maybe some other time.”

“Mother worked all day on this for you and you’re leaving right away!” said Jessica. “That’s just like you.”

But Robert did not respond. Sarah wondered if he was like this when he was outside with his brothers. Or if he was happy with them and felt like he could relax. But she was happy that they would leave. She felt closer to him, like he understood how uncomfortable she was and was trying to rescue her. He picked up Elsie and held Sarah’s arm as he walked them out to the truck. Mrs. Brady followed them. She wrapped a scarf around her shoulders.

“Get home safe then,” she said. She did not say that it was nice to meet Sarah. And Sarah did not say it was nice to meet Mrs. Brady.

“Yep,” said Robert. “We will.”

And they both got into the truck and set Elsie in between them. It was very dark outside and you could see the stars. That was the nice thing about the country. You could always see the stars at night.

“It gets dark so early,” said Sarah. And she put her hand on Robert’s neck and ran her fingers through his hair.

“They’re just,” said Robert. “They’re just good… People…” He had said this many times before.

“Yes,” said Sarah. “Everyone was so nice.”

And she tried to look for the horizon in the dark.