

# Short Pieces by A Tall Woman

by

Ruth Bonnet

*To my friends, for inspiration, advice and laughter,  
and to the love of my life. (You know who you are.)*



Short Pieces by a Tall Woman

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## Introduction

Someone far more brilliant than I once said that the difference between an amateur and a writer is that a writer finishes. In battling the penultimate section of my ongoing novel, I have managed to churn out dozens of short pieces, establishing myself as a finisher, although not of the actual piece I am meant to be working on.

This collection mixes biographical, observational, and travel writing, along with fiction. I suppose it's up to the reader to decide which is which.

Any similarity to those living or dead are because I was too lazy to change the names.

I hope I make you laugh and that you want to spread the word. Remember my mantra: what doesn't kill you makes great material...

## Enough, Already

When I was five, I wanted to live in New York City. Inspired by the shenanigans of three sailors, who have twenty-four hours to see the sights (from Battery Park way up to Washington Heights), the MGM classic musical “On the Town” had sealed my fate. London was simply too dull and boring for me.

I arrived in Manhattan in 1988, when there was still rampant crime and hooliganism, at the peak of the crack epidemic, and I was jubilant to make this vulgar, crazy, loud city my home. My eccentricities were less noticeable on an island chock full of people who appear to talk to themselves (and this was before cell phone era).

Eighteen years later, and considerably older, if not wiser or more refined, I was beginning to tire of city life. I had lived in New York on and off for eleven years, and had spent time in both Los Angeles and Chicago, so I knew that it wasn't this particular city that was draining me: it was city life.

Working ten hours a day, and commuting a further two (an obscenity if you live in Manhattan, whose greatest feature is its compact geography), I was paying someone to walk my dog, another to clean, and numerous local eateries to bring

food to my door. All this is fine if you are making enough money to support an affluent lifestyle, and I was earning a decent salary, but certainly not anywhere in the six-figures of my friends. Certainly, there were some of the greatest museums, galleries, theater works and restaurants in the world in Manhattan, but most were out of my reach, either because of time or expense.

Added to this was my sense of being unfulfilled. I reasoned that the things I loved to do (read, spend time with my dog, listen to NPR) could all be done pretty much anywhere, and that my increasing cortisone levels were too high a price to pay for living in the greatest city in the world. I wasn't a "Sex and the City" girl; I wasn't a fashionista. The city had somehow outgrown me, beaten me down, and left me directionless.

Growing up, the idea of country living appalled me. With the advent of modern technology (long-distance phone calls not costing more than a meal at Le Cirque, the internet, cell phones, etcetera), living a simpler life, without sacrificing contact with the world seemed more appealing.

A few months ago, I sub-let my apartment and hauled most of my possessions up to New England, to Western Massachusetts' beautiful Berkshire County. Settled in the



18<sup>th</sup> century, Berkshire County is full of villages you expect to see in movies about New England life: white, shingled cottages, Shaker-style churches, small farms selling manure and other fine produce, and – for me – the perfect rental property.

It seemed redundant to move to a rural area and live in apartment. I found a small cottage with idyllic grounds, and settled in. My goal was to write. I didn't expect the great American novel (or even a mediocre English one) but I thought I'd be inspired, without all the stress and time-consuming commute and office work.

It's astounding how much one can get accomplished when one is procrastinating. I have grown tomatoes from seed, planted cucumbers that have taken over my garden, and delighted in my herbs' progress. And don't get me started on my compost.

I have green Wellington boots, and don't wear make-up much. I live in jeans and T-shirts, and braid my hair. Rather than trying to emulate a sophisticated Manhattanite, I resemble Rosie the Riveter. Despite the sunscreen, my freckles are joining together. Somehow the bags under my eyes are now rather small pocketbooks.

Yet every week, when I call England, I am asked the same question: “So? Are you writing?”

Let’s forget momentarily that I am ethnically Jewish and therefore cosmically linked to guilt. We can pretend that I don’t want to hold the phone away from my ear and use it beat myself severely over the head.

Daily I sit down to write. Daily I find fascinating articles on the internet about the afore-mentioned compost, or the fact that the state congressman I met was not, as I had thought, an evil Republican, but one of us. (By “us,” I am referring to former Upper West Side trendy liberals, who move to the country and grow vegetables.) Every day should be a little death for my writing, and yet every day I seem to be happier, healthier and less frustrated by my lack of creative prowess.

So I can’t talk intelligently about the latest play or exhibit. And I don’t shop for designer clothes. And I’m not writing. I didn’t do any of those things in New York, either.

But I am happier. And that should be enough. Right?

June 2008

## The Second Level of Singles' Hell

There is little worse than someone on whom you have a crush suggesting that you attend a singles event. OK, maybe it's slightly more agonizing when that person leaves a message on your cell phone just before you go, letting you know that he thinks you're beautiful, intelligent, sexy and smart. If I'm all that and a bag of chips, why is he trying to pawn me off on some dreadful singles event?

On the web, Gotham Parties lists itself as offering "age 35-55 upscale singles events with entertainment."

If you think a guy walking around with a huge paper mache David Letterman head constitutes "entertainment," then I guess you get out even less frequently than even me. Is "upscale" a code word for "completely desperate?" So it would seem. As to the age range, most of them men hadn't seen their fifties since the eighties.

But I digress. Let me take you on my ride of torment from the beginning. The venue was Vue, right next to my office, so I went straight from work. I was wearing a gorgeous mid-calf gored skirt, matching heels, and a flowery twin-set, which I thought made me appear demure and chic, but in retrospect might have given the impression that I had fashioned clothing

from my grandmother's sofa.

As I approached the club, I wondered if I was wearing enough make-up, but then saw some of the women outside, who fell into the trowel category, and figured "less is more." Inside, mercifully, it was dark.

I order a gin and tonic, and the charmer of a bartender yells "Six," at me, in lieu of actually wasting precious syllables and saying "Six dollars, please." I feel like a lot number in a very cheap auction. And that was **before** I looked around the room.

I find a place on one of several banquettes. All the women are lined up on these over-stuffed, deceptively hard benches; most looked miserable and mortified. I don't think I am the only person thinking, "Maybe I should have settled for [fill in name of pathetic loser here] all those years ago." I glanced around. The man sitting nearest me is definitely gay. I want to go and tell him, for everyone's sake. The air is one of gloom and misery, except for the people sporting "Host!" buttons, who are flaunting their air of superiority and sense of belonging.

Forty minutes into torture and Grace Jones is pumped up. I'm glad somebody is. The waiters are cute and my gin and tonic

is draining, so I am beginning to find the whole thing pretty funny, especially when I discover that all the men are walking by me not because I am a sex goddess, but because I am sitting next to the men's room.

I am wondering how bad would it look for me to eat the entire bowl of Ripples potato chips AND the four foil-wrapped chocolate hearts on the tables (those would be the "decorations"), when I spot someone who might be close to my age. Unfortunately, he is wearing a mustache akin to the ones made famous by Adolf Hitler and the guy from Sparks. If this is an example of a typical fifty-five-year-old male, the specimens are not aging well. One Larry David look-alike seems to be contemplating suicide. I am tempted to talk to him, but am lacking the psychological profiling technique to talk someone down from a potential hari kiri exhibition.

The ratio of women to men is nine to one: the men look pretty happy about it; the women, not so much. Naturally, because I can and will talk to anyone as long as I am not interested in them romantically (or they in me), I chat to two very nice women, one with a Ph.D. in English and one who works for a theater company. Why can't the men be nearly as interesting? Why aren't I a lesbian? If Christians take homosexuals into "re-training," can I be trained *into* lesbianism, do you think?

One man with hair-plugs, black suit, black shirt and a truly awful tie is doing card tricks, and I really can't decide if he's "entertainment" or just using magic as an unorthodox pick-up tool.

I am now lounging on the sofa feeling like a dance hall hostess in 'Sweet Charity,' or an extra in one of those films about the Korean or Vietnam wars. ["Hey, soldier! Me love you long time!"]. I find myself swaying on my tushy cheeks to a great salsa version of "Let's Face the Music and Dance," and wonder how long I can stay here to justify the foolishness of having paid \$20 for the privilege, when two men walk by, one carrying a suit bag, the other three huge garbage bags. This is apropos of nothing, except that it's worth mentioning because this is by far the most interesting development of the evening.

Larry David just crossed over to the table giving out information (make that "sales spiel") about house-sharing in the Hamptons. He must have seen me scribbling in my notebook and chuckling because he shot me a look of pure venom. Oh dear.

Suddenly there appears another guy with poor choice in facial hair: a walrus mustache. Does he think that this might

hide his jowls, thereby making him look less like a bloodhound? And what is with the 1980's baseball player mustaches and bad haircuts? (And that's just the women, folks - no, but seriously...). There are Supercuts salons all over Manhattan. There is simply no excuse for a man to have terrible hair unless he's Donald Trump or Bill Gates and is so rich he doesn't have to care.

And now I'm wondering if I will bump into any of the men from my horrifying internet dating experiences, and then realize that they were all too cheap to spring for a cup of coffee, so it's unlikely that they'll be here.

Thank God! A person of color in this overly Caucasian room! Apart from a very corporate Asian woman, I am the most ethnic thing in the room (me and Grace Jones, of course). Here is a legitimate black man swigging from a bottle of Corona. Pity he has bad posture.

A pencil-thin blond woman is leaning against the bar, daintily fondling a martini. She sighs audibly over the pulsating music and I feel her pain. I **really** feel her pain.

At this point, the gin is sinking in and I call my crush and tell his voice mail that I am going to hunt him down and maim him for putting me through this. Just as I am closing my cell

phone, a man walks by who could be under 50. On closer inspection, it seems that either he is the recipient of really bad plastic surgery, or he has spent an inordinate amount of time in a burn unit. Either way, I pity him.

Woah - there's another baseball mustache! It's a theme evening! And now I am questioning how nasty and judgmental I am. Am I that shallow that I won't take my fat ass off this comfortable nubby couch to try to make conversation with any of these men based on their facial hair? The answer is, of course, yes, I am that shallow.

I get a second drink and actually have a conversation with the cutest boy in the room, who thinks that I have razor sharp wit. I feel as though it's been somewhat blunted by alcohol and an air of bitter defeat.

Fully convinced that I am as unappealing as I am superficial, I leave with a modicum of dignity intact and sob on the phone with a friend on the cross-town bus home.

October 2003



## We People Rule: A Road Trip

JD is my bestest friend and - for reasons too awful to go into here - now lives in southern Illinois, near a town named Effingham. Here is a sample excerpt from one of our conversations:

JD:     We have seven truck stops, three McDonald's and  
          NOTHING ELSE!

Ruth:    You lie: you have a Diary Queen.

JD:     Unfortunately, he milks COWS for a living...

We spend a large proportion of our time hysterical at American Idol. One night, as I lay in bed coughing my guts up in bronchial fashion, I caught "Hit Me Baby One More Time" on NBC and instinctively called JD, who was stifling his own hysteria when he picked up the phone. I only had to say, "NBC?" and we both exploded into guffaws, and spent the next 20 minutes gasping for air. The preceding summations will paint something of a picture for you as to our relationship.

So JD got this free timeshare weekend. I figure it had to be worth the trip: I had an unused plane ticket from my last job so it would only cost me \$70 in extra fare, and he could drive. We were meant to see beautiful (and blue-haired)

Branson, Missouri, which would have been funny enough, but we were unceremoniously bumped by the timeshare company, and thrust an hour south to Arkansas, just on the border with Missouri, a town with eight golf courses and many retirement homes. The city won't even build a school because they don't want to encourage breeding (which is funny, considering Arkansas was one of the eleven states who recently banned gay marriage: you'd think they'd want young heterosexuals moving in, wouldn't you?). Oh, and it's a dry town, which makes the whole adventure even sillier for those of you who know JD.

JD met me a scant five minutes after I disembarked from a surprisingly no-hassle journey. Did you know Cincinnati Airport was in Kentucky? Neither did I. We oohed and ahed over how fabulous we both looked and he noticed my weight loss and my expensively professionally-shaped eyebrows immediately. This is why I need a gay man in my life. Without too much delay, we navigated to 44 West and finally 71 South. It appears that I am quite butch when it comes to roadmaps.

Did you know that Arkansas' state motto is not, as JD suggested, "Please don't pronounce it Ar-Kansas," but "The people rule." I wanted you to know that I did take this anthropological experiment seriously enough to do some research before I went.

You might be surprised to know that the Ozarks are stunningly beautiful, despite the preponderance of vast American flags, and Missouri's bizarre accumulation of fireworks (I think Dick Gephardt likes the fireworks industry: Missouri seems to be one of the few states in the Union that allow miles of explosives sold everywhere, including gas stations - two! two explosives in one!).

We were also witness to a peculiarly American phenomenon: a wasteland for dead farm equipment. All manner of tractors, backhoes, combines and other agricultural machinery sat rusting by the side of the road, in varying degrees of dilapidation. One could almost hear it sigh with sadness at its own futility. The mound of metal went on for what seemed like a mile. Quite extraordinary.

After an hour of breathtaking, blasted highway, we were getting hungry and road-weary (poor JD had been driving for six hours before he met me, and I have no excuse except that I am a lightweight). Nonetheless, determined to reach our destination before dark, we ploughed on, stopping only once for gas. I was fascinated by the signage on the gas station, which promised a plethora of assorted "Indian goods," candies and tourist kitsch. We entered to pay and wandered round an assortment of mish-mashed crap. There were no two items the same, leading JD to stage-whisper, "It's a GARAGE sale." For the sake of protocol, we handled

a few items with apparent interest, admired the fireworks display, and then headed out quickly to slather ourselves in hand sanitizer. We snapped a picture from a safe distance. The electronic switch on a single lens reflex camera could probably light that entire place up like the Fourth of July.

We praised the WPA projects that helped blast the rock to put in the highway and wondered where those projects were today (oh, that's right! They money is going to Halliburton to rebuild a country that we bombed into the fourth circle of hell). Then, JD turned to me, solemnly, and asked me, "Honey, promise me one thing: no matter what happens this weekend....don't let me ride a mechanical bull."

We pulled into the Eureka! (punctuation, theirs) office after they had shut, but we followed our directions and opened the key safe. Miraculously, there was a folder with our names on, and the keys. On the keys were more directions. I kid you not: S on 71. L on Trafalgar. R on Commonwealth. L on Fairway. 39 Fairway Drive.

Upon recovering from this setback, we began driving. And driving. And driving. True, Trafalgar was only a few stoplights on 71 past the Eureka! offices, but we were on that winding, hilly road for a damn long time. Eventually, we found Commonwealth, and drove another few miles of hair-raising bends and finally into Stalag Retirement. These tiny

houses were admittedly on a rather spectacular golf course (one of the eight) and seemed rather cute on first glance. Not ours, however. We walked with trepidation up the path, taking in the rusty chairs, broken birdbath and possum-infested grill. I noticed ivy at the foot of the front door and wondered if it was trying to enter or escape. It became quickly apparent that if it were ivy of a modicum of taste, it would be staging a breakout.

I opened the door and recoiled in horror at the shag carpeting. The Ropers would turn down this decor. The rug color was similar to my Border collie's stool when he's been fed yam to stabilize his stomach: a sort of rust meets sweet potato meets just the wrong shade of anything you could imagine. The Barcalounger was held together with duct tape, as was part of the baseboard. The two-bedroom, two-bathroom we were promised was a one-bedroom, one-bathroom, with two single beds in a separate open loft area and a downstairs half-bathroom. JD ricocheted off the walls, gasping at the ghastliness of it all. Inhuman, guttural squawks and soprano-like squeaks emitted from him as he discovered peeling lilac plastic butterflies in the bathtub, sunflower lining paper in the drawers, and a turquoise shaggy rug in the downstairs bathroom, which blended with precisely no other item in the entire place. There was even had a fluffy toilet-seat cover.

Had we been golfers, however, I could have seen the attraction, because we were in constant danger of being hit by an errant drive, sitting right off a green (I didn't ask which number, because it seemed highly irrelevant). Alas, neither of us knows anything about strokes or swinging, so we concentrated on the urgent matter in hand: that of finding libation and cholesterol-laden food. Armed with an assortment of maps and a cell phone, we headed back to the highway, noting with some trepidation that there were more churches than restaurants. How can that be? How can you keep people physically starved and just feed their spirit? It seems ungodly to me, and that, my friends, was an intentional pun.

Most places seem to shut at 9:00 p.m. (what is this, Bournemouth?) but we tire-squealed into one place with the lights still burning, and they served until 10:00 p.m. and had a beer license, which was good enough for us. We ate a vast amount of barbequed food, and guzzled cold, frothy beer, until we could barely move. Our server was clearly scared to death of us sophisticated Northerners, but I think we redeemed ourselves by being loud and silly, and leaving a 25% tip (having seen a table of eight depart leaving \$4 on the table). I couldn't help wondering what she might have thought of us had I shown up sporting my old buzz-cut.

The following day, we visited the local movie theater, agog to see that matinees were \$3.50. As I write, most movie theaters in New York City don't have matinee prices and tickets are over \$10.00. We decided to indulge our delight in sophisticated comedy, and chose "Monster-in-Law" starring the luminescent Jennifer Lopez. As we hauled ourselves out of the car onto the steaming tarmac and made our way to the theater, I was waylaid by melting gum on the sole of my shoe. I lost it, New York style:

"All these churches and no one knows it's just WRONG to spit GUM on the SIDEWALK?"

The other movie-goers were split between expressions of scandalous horror and those of great amusement.

After the film, we had our obligatory visit to the mall's grocery store, so that we could walk around like snobby Northerners and say, "It's SO Cheap!!!" I was quite surprised at the amount of gourmet food available. Actually, I'm not being sarcastic.

The deal with staying two nights in the shithole that was our "time-share" unit, was that we had to undergo the interminable process of sitting through a timeshare presentation. For those of you who are not familiar with the procedure, the people who give these sales spiels trained with the CIA, and have worked at Guantanamo Bay. They

have the tenacity of pit-bulls, the enthusiasm of missionaries, and are altogether worse than the aluminum siding guys in Tin Men. They start slowly, with the soft touch.

We were led into a vault (I kid you not: we have the pictures) to watch a video of all the wonderful time-share opportunities. I particularly loved the section covering Alaskan cruising, in which we saw a gorgeous wolf, legs wide in a proud stance... wait – that’s no proud stance! She’s urinating! Indeed, a steady trail of liquid was making its way from under her back legs into the glacial paradise. I didn’t know if that was some sort of editorial comment on the program, or whether it had just slipped through unnoticed.

Then Cindy, a nice, rotund woman from California, collected us and took us in her truck to several gorgeous “show houses,” which were right out of “Better Homes and Gardens” magazine (an edition from the very late part of the last millennium). Instead of wooing us, however, it made both of us pissier: you’re showing us this, but putting us up over in *that??* Not surprisingly, our tour guide didn’t want to make the long shlep to see our accommodations, despite our frequent urging, and lead us back to the Eureka! offices where Cindy gave us the soft sell and showed us all the other benefits of time-sharing.



I had thought that JD and I had to pretend to be somehow legally connected in order to participate in any of this malarkey, and so I had invested \$8 in the largest fake diamond ring I could find. I sported this with great aplomb as Cindy asked, "So, how do you know each other?"

"Friends," said JD.

She looked rather puzzled.

"Are you getting married soon?"

"God, no. I'm gay," he chirped, and I tried to slide the rock off my ring finger.

The very long story cut extremely short is that we didn't buy. Cindy went to call in the manager, Dan. He was a nice enough chap, but the longer he pitched us, the more irritated we became. I couldn't get him to understand that they could show us the Taj Mahal itself, but if they put us up in the Taj Mahal of Atlantic City, we were going to be rather suspicious. It was like a reverse bait and switch. Dan kept reiterating that our housing was a mistake, and I kept batting back at him that there was nothing to prove that every single time-share unit wasn't going to be a similar mistake.

The pressure was really on, because they know that once you walk out of the office, the likelihood of buying diminishes

significantly; in our case, by about one hundred percent. A white trash family with a child (who was clearly going never going to live to see four years of age, judging by the number of calamities that befell it while her parents ogled over timeshare brochures and dizzying arrays of numbers) seemed to be buying what they were selling. And, let's be honest: if we didn't buy, they had given us a free weekend, which is what we wanted anyway.

Dan and Cindy left the table disgruntled, and called in The Big Honcho (complete with pinky ring) for the final charge. By this point, we had spent over two hours being wooed and the romance was certainly diminishing rapidly. We were almost rude to the big boss: it was the only way to get out of there without actually stabbing him in the eye with a Eureka! pen.

During the time that Cindy was being nice to us, thinking that we were going to get her a commission check, she had told us about a karaoke bar from which she had been banned for having a fist fight with another woman. That was a strong enough recommendation to get JD and I excited, so we set off there that night, aglow with anticipation.

Bringing to mind a wonderful scene from *The Blues Brothers*, this bar where they had two kinds of music: Country AND Western! I had been suffering from a horrible bronchial

infection, which had landed me in the emergency room just days before. So would this prevent me singing in a smoky bar to a bunch of farmers? Hell, no. Undeterred, I sang "These Boots Are Made for Walking," which is my perfect karaoke song, in my key and bouncy. They had no idea how to react. Then I tried to compromise by singing "Let's Give Them Something to Talk About." What they'll be talking about is that I fulfilled a personal reoccurring nightmare in which I start a song and then get to a bit that is completely unfamiliar, and stand there, a blank amateur, flailing in the backing vocals. Praise be to all that might be holy to some, because at least I remembered the chorus (which is all anyone knows).

After the manager asked to sing a duet with me (only to be disappointed because I know NO Garth Brooks/Faith Hill songs and he didn't know "Paradise by the Dashboard Light," I gained my faith back in my shallow lungs and left them speechless with Blondie's "One Way or Another."

Hot damn, they were confused!

After much tinkering with the 1970s electric clock radio, I lay awake watching the lightening through the skylight above my lumpy single bed, and understood why people with no hope for the future sign up to serve their country: it was that miserable.

By some feat of pure luck, the alarm woke us up in time for a coffee-filled drive back to Branson Airport, although the farm equipment graveyard eluded us. Either we were too hung over and sleep deprived to notice its absence, or someone had cleaned it up or. Yes, clean-up. That's what happened, clearly.

JD dropped me off and we hugged, knowing that Arkansas and Missouri would not be our final road trip. God forbid. If we could survive this, we were destined to be friends for life....

July 2005

## Oscar Ballot

It was the city's high holy day. In Los Angeles, with its bustling Latino population, this was not Cinco de Mayo; and despite the preponderance of Jews in the entertainment industry, it was not Yom Kippur. The ultimate festival of celebration and sombre reflection fell in February and was referred to by a name hitherto held by the geek, the buffoon and, conversely, one of Ireland's greatest wits: Oscar.

In Beverly Hills, traffic was at a standstill as bony women with traces of expensive cosmetic surgery tried to find the perfect pump, the elegant purse. In Hollywood, lines stretched for hundreds of yards outside the La Brea Bakery while sundry maids, chefs' assistants and middle-class housewives thronged to buy \$6 loaves to accompany the poached salmon, the frothy soufflé, the pasta salad.

As the sun beat down, and the gentle heat waves rippled over the city of expectation, every one—from studio head to mailroom clerk—had an opinion as to who should win which award, and why. In every window office in every gleaming, mirrored building; in each cubicle in each trailer on each studio lot; in acting classes, beauty salons and phone sex headquarters all around southern California, picks were being made, bets being laid, ballots being cast. As traditional as the day off after Thanksgiving and casual dress on Fridays, was

the office pool.

The Receptionist was the assigned coordinator in the insignificant Entertainment Company. Hers was the first face that producers saw as they slided into the impressive suite of offices, the first voice any helpless client heard as they tried to illicit information regarding payment of royalties.

Like so many other small cogs in the entertainment wheel of Los Angeles, the Company was erected of smoke and mirrors, and kept up a glamorous front while remaining hollow and soulless on the inside. But the Manager, fresh from the East Coast and its accompanying brutal honesty, had not seen beyond the mirrors, through the smoke. He was to be viewing the Academy Awards three hours earlier than usual for the first time, in Hollywood, in front of his television, and he was thrilled to be a part of the Dream.

Two days previously, the Receptionist had copied ballot forms and distributed them with instructions to the twenty or so jaded employees (also to the Manager, too new to have become jaded). To enter the Company pool, the form had to be completed with predictions as to the recipients of each award, and returned with \$1 attached to the Receptionist before 17:00 hours on the Day. There was even a tie-breaker thrown in for good measure, wherein the entrants had to

guess the maximum number of awards garnered by the most popular movie. Most people had two forms: one with the people who should by rights walk home with an award, and one for the predicted actual winners, since the twain rarely met. A small stack of forms and paper clipped dollar bills began forming on the Receptionist's desk.

A little before the pool deadline, staff began drifting home, or to various parties, where newly-purchased large screen TVs were to thrust them into the very action of the Dorothy Chandler Pavilion. The Manager packed up his desk a little after 17:30 hours, said goodnight to the Assistants and to the Vice President, and strolled down to his '86 Honda Civic for the four mile drive back to his apartment in the foothills.

As always, the winners of the various Academy Awards were not necessarily the most deserving. A popular actor won for Best Director, even though his directorial vision was not even as good as his acting (but, my, what a cute face). A newcomer garnered the Best Supporting Actress title, beating out rich performances from talented, seasoned professionals. The Academy members swelled up in their tuxes with pride as newly-created categories provided various crew members with statuettes, this even though there were more creative people who were not as *visible* (i.e. crippled, burnt, one-eyed, or generally disfigured in some way). The trophy spouses

beamed their love; in their eyes burnt the unmistakable signs of the almighty dollar (and the blueprints of the new tennis court).

When it was all over, the Manager lit one last cigarette for the night (he had not been in town long enough to realize that if one *had* to smoke it had better be an illicit Cuban cigar, not a Marlboro Light) and flipped off his paltry 20" television screen. He knew he had not won the Office pool and did not much care. There had been a record-high total of \$17 to win, and although his Visa bill was high this month, he could cope without the spoils of this particular war. He watched the searchlights from a hundred different restaurants as they battled for dominant position in the night sky, stubbed out his cigarette butt, and went to bed.

The following morning, everyone's first words to the Receptionist were in the form of an inquiry as to who had won the \$17. The Receptionist had enough to deal with, chatting with messengers, straightening the trades, answering the phones a dozen times an hour without these insignificant questions. As the Manager walked in at 09:02 hours and he was the first *not* to ask the result of the pool, the Receptionist grandly handed him the pile of forms and asked him to mark them appropriately and advise her of the results.



The Manager had been taught to pick his battles, and a three-minute ballot-marking exercise did not seem to be as important as not getting his messages, so he smiled wanly, brought the flimsy stack into his office, and began checking them off, sipping from his Starbucks paper cup.

The Vice President was not prone to visits to subordinates' offices. His usual method was to buzz his people on the intercom and demand their presence immediately in his quarters. But today he was restless and smog hung over his view of the hills, so he ventured the dozen yards to the Manager's desk to strike up a casual conversation. It was good to practice charm on the underlings once in a while, and kept him fresh when dealing with really Important People.

At first irritated that the Manager had been assigned a task by the beautiful, stupid and grossly overpaid Receptionist, he was as curious as everyone else as to who had won the Big Bounty. Taking half of the unmarked papers, he began to check them himself, in confident sweeping motions. After a few minutes, the totals were computed and the result was a draw between the Vice President and a newly-hired part-time Assistant in a rival department.

The Manager knew that the Assistant was so broke that she walked the two miles to work (almost as unthinkable as

smoking) rather than take the bus, as a car was far beyond her means. He also knew that the Vice President was planning to redecorate his house, as Mexican casa was out and Armisch wood was in. By strange coincidence, despite their disparity, the Vice President and the Assistant had both heard of the death of a near relative on the same day, a few months earlier. The Assistant wept openly at her desk, and returned to the office each day for a week with puffy eyes, shaded in an unmistakable pink. Conversely, the Vice President told raucous stories about his grandmother which always seemed to end in a vulgar phrase, and was delighted to come into a sizable inheritance from the woman he maligned.

The tie breaker would decide. The actor-slash-director's film had won eight awards. The Vice President had guessed eleven; the Assistant, eight. The Manager smiled tactfully: close call, he commented. The Vice President bristled. "I won," he insisted. "No one will ever know that I lost to that stupid cow with her cheap shoes and her bad highlights. You wouldn't tell, would you?"

The Vice President bought a cheap bottle of wine and a nice loaf of bread at the La Brea Bakery that night. They accompanied his wife's paella beautifully. The Assistant walked home, blissfully unaware at how close she had come

to doubling her half-day's pay. The Manager learnt his first lesson in Hollywood politics that day and went home feeling ill at ease, a unsettling emotion that he would learn to live with as his days with the Company grew into months and then years.

February 1994

## Crazy Jane

Crazy Jane sits on a gently rolling hill in Central Park, her big, hairy dog, Grady at her side.

She might not be clinically crazy. I am no shrink. But she's a little more than eccentric.

Jane grew up on Long Island, the youngest child. When the penultimate child left home, after World War II, her mother announced to her father, "I'm damned if I'm going to sit out the rest of my years stuck out here!" and persuaded him to buy them an apartment on Fifth Avenue, opposite the Metropolitan Museum.

They are long gone, and Jane has the apartment. Her neighbors are all swanky Fifth Avenue types, and here she is, this battered old bird with a ratty dog.

Married for years to a man she hated, Jane stuck out everything for the sake of the children, as was the norm for women of her generation. She put up with the verbal abuse, but once her husband struck her, she left him and, to the astonishment of her grown children, divorced him.

A radical of sorts, she became a teacher in the South Bronx

to pay for the maintenance on her apartment. The public schools of this (or pretty much any inner city) borough are not prone to welcome middle-aged white teachers, and to make matters worse, Jane happens to be Jewish. A crime against humanity, it would seem. She dealt with slurs from her peers and her students. One day, she was tripped by a wily 7th Grader and held onto him as she fell. She was suspended for assault. The irony was - *is* - astounding.

One of Jane's many intriguing dichotomies is her relationship with money. Like all of us, she dresses in raggedy garb on the muddy slopes of the park, but I have also observed niggardliness on her part when casual conversation turns to shopping for herself. However, she gets her hair cut at a very chic boutique, and when I once visited her apartment, I was stunned at the beautifully detailed kitchen, complete with marble and designer refrigerator.

She has had to retire in any case, since both her hips needed replacing, and I believe her shoulders too. She is a veritable Bionic Woman. She shakes all the time, in a Katherine Hepburnesque manner.

Eccentric, yes. But also a little crazy. Her gangly dog became so territorial in his one spot in the park that he attacked a tiny terrier, a long-time playmate of his. When

Jane called the owner, she told her in no uncertain terms that if the owner was intimidated by Grady, she should keep the little pooch away from the Park.

It is often said that dogs are like their owners. Grady gets along famously with his buddies and then one day will turn on them, rendering both canine and owner shocked, trembling, one in need of stitches the other in need of a large scotch.

Similarly, Jane has on-again, off-again (mostly on) battles with her children and has also fallen out with most of the other dog owners at one time or another. The stoics amongst us learn to shrug, and after a few weeks, we just wave from a distance, as she no doubt wonders why we don't stop to speak with her any more.

So she perches on the bedraggled lawn, The New York Times in one hand, a cup of coffee in another, her dog at her side, waiting to fight her next battle.

April 2000

## IdealMan

I have slept in one tiny sliver of my bed for as long as I can remember. I think it's a throwback to times I was in a dwindling relationship, or sleeping next to someone I would rather not have been.

It was no surprise that morning, then, to find myself wrapped around a couple of pillows, with one arm dangling on the carpet, the cat sniffing my fingers with a classically feline air of suspicion.

Except. Instead of another of my plethora of foam cushions embracing my back, there was definitely a body. This realization dawned on me very slowly, similar to one of those alarm clocks that wakens the rested soul by getting brighter and filling the room with ambient light (not that that would work on me; I need a vibrating pillow with a timer, and the television and clock radio both set to go off simultaneously. I am a slow waker).

Instead of jumping up and screaming, as one is certain to do should one find oneself acting the part of Victim in a television movie, I lay there, in my sliver of the bed, feeling this being breathe next to me, in and out, until mine matched

his, and our lungs were expanding and contracting as one. I contemplated the possibilities that could have led me here.

I was certainly in my own bed, of this there was no doubt. I had not gone out the night before, so no stranger had slipped a rufie into my beer. In fact, I had performed my Wednesday night ritual of taking off my make-up and slathering with night-cream during the closing credits of *The West Wing*, peeking out to see the opening tease of *Law & Order*, before brushing my teeth during the commercials and climbing into bed. I generally fell asleep before the end of the show, so there are many episodes in which I see the crime, the arrest, some of the court case, but never the verdict. Such is my life: much suspense and investigating, but no closure.

I may wake slowly, but I walk fast. Friends comment on my long strides, my purposeful, driven strut, with its sense of urgency. This gait, it has been said, gives me an air of arrogance, as if no event could begin without me, as if the punctuality of the world depended upon my soles.

The truth is that I am impatient. Once I make a decision, I have to act on it. This is not the same as impetuosity, for that implies lack of thought. I will spend a great deal of time pondering.... But once the results are in, the deed must be done. This might be why I spent a large part of my twenties



waking up next to someone I didn't really know. I leapt. Sometimes, months went by before I realized that the men were strangers.

Strangers on my cotton pima sheets; in my subway-tiled shower, which I had re-grouted with exquisite care; straining pasta in my Williams-Sonoma colander, an unusually rash purchase one rainy Sunday afternoon.

This man, however, was a complete stranger in the real sense. I had never seen him before in my life. I knew this instinctively, for I had yet to turn around to get a full look at him. There was no way to break into my apartment without knocking over the urban clutter that surrounded me, thereby doing what all the alarm-clocks and vibrating pillows could not (waking me instantly), yet for an inexplicable reason, I was not panicking. Conversely, it felt natural.

The man yawned and stretched, and turned over, giving me the ideal opportunity to turn in tandem, as if to spoon him, and look closer.

He was nice-looking. Mrs. Lyman, my composition teacher in grade school had told her class that “nice” was the worst thing you could say about someone. But he had a comforting face — good-looking enough that you wouldn't have to

constantly be on the lookout for competition, rugged enough that you knew he was a Man, and with — yes, he smiled in his sleep — dimples. I was so fascinated by his face that I felt compelled to explore further. Strong neck, wide shoulders... I lifted the comforter up an inch to peek beneath and he awoke.

“Maggie, good morning.”

So now he knew my name.

Flustered, I mumbled an excuse and scurried to the bathroom, convinced that I would turn on the light and find myself aged ten years (this theory being the result of bad 70's television and the thought that maybe I had been in a coma or undergoing temporary amnesia) but I had not aged. Like many women of my age, I spend a fair amount of time examining my face, and I knew that the laugh lines were no more dense or deep than they had been eight hours earlier, when Jerry Orbach had been making some wise-crack about his ex-wife.

Since the panic had still not set in, I made coffee, as I do each morning and returned to the bedroom, where my companion was dozing.

“Um, how do you take your coffee?” I asked.

“Maggie. Will you never learn,” he teased, sleepily. “Light and sweet.”

“Unlike your women.”

I froze. The words had spilled out of us simultaneously, and as weird as that seemed to me, he was pleasantly amused. I returned with the coffee and sat on the bed, next to him. He took the mug with one hand, my palm in the other, and stroked it, gently and firmly. The perfect touch.

“The thing is, I don’t really know who you are.”

“I assume you’re telling me, the philosophy student, and not me, your boyfriend?”

Not entirely. But I least I knew what he did. He must be up at Columbia, a few blocks from my apartment.

“Well, we could start with your name.”

He appeared confused for just a moment before laughing heartily, throwing his head back and managing not to spill a drop of that light, sweet coffee. I noticed that he had no fillings. Then he ruffled my hair. Actually ruffled it. And I felt at peace.

August 2003

## Club Med - And Not A Week Too Soon

So, to answer the numerous enquiries as to my first week-long beach vacation in ten years, let me first say that I feel for a friend who flew out to Club Med Turks and Caicos two days after I got back, and is, at the time of writing, presumed alive but battered by Hurricane Frances.

It's hard to appear nonchalantly beautiful at five in the morning, but I did my best, as I got to JFK in time to board our retro-plane. I do not use the word "retro" in the positive sense. The plane was right out of the 1960s, as were the crew, and it scared me half to death. Even my immediate travelers were scary: a possible halfway trannie (female to male) with too much gold and nails bitten down to the quick, a slimy Italian guy from Brooklyn with really bad hair implants, and an octogenarian with hair worthy of an RNC delegate, who told me he'd been going to Club Med for thirty years.

Thankfully, we landed safely, and I met one normal person waiting to clear Immigration: a man my age with a dog-grooming shop and two Akitas. Alas, as is the case with me nowadays, he showed no interest in me whatsoever, but we hung out and chatted during the earlier part of the trip.

The transfer to the village (that's what Club Med calls their gated community) went smoothly, and we were welcomed

with a chilled beverage and a short spiel, after which we were walked to our various rooms. I was in building F, or, as I referred to it, Cuba. As I am a New Yorker, the half-mile shlep was not a big deal, even in stifling heat, but I pity the suburbanites who had to make that trek! The people who run the villages are called GOs (Gentile Operators?) and the boy (really, he must have been twenty) who was my tour guide commented that this was the best food he'd ever eaten.

"Honey," I called out over my group. "Where are you from?"

"Wisconsin!" he replied. That explains the food remark, I thought.

My room was surprisingly good. I am so used to those cheap Greek vacations, where you basically get a mattress and a shower, that it was a pleasure to find lots of hanging space for the elegant fashions that I did not bring with me, a safe, a coffee-maker (which made arguably the worst coffee in the world), and a well-equipped bathroom area (separate toilet) with towels aplenty, and even a clothes drying rack.

I swiftly unpacked, changed into my bikini, looked at myself in the full-length mirror, changed OUT of my bikini, put on a swimsuit and a sarong, and hit the bar/pool area. It takes a little while to get used to the fact that everyone is so damn friendly.

Without boring the pants off you, let me just say that I met a really nice bunch of people, a few couples who had wisely deposited their kids with grandparents, some hilarious teachers, some neurotic Jews (what else is new?) and completely incomprehensible French Canadians (what language IS that, because it's certainly not French.)

Let me break down the Club Med Experience for you:

### Food

Club Med is all-inclusive, and where they may have made a profit from me on the bar (lightweight that I am), they sure lost money on the food.

Breakfast comprised some of the best breads I have tasted outside of France, including croissants (plain et chocolat!), walnut bread, which chocolate brioche, etc. There was also the standard egg and meat breakfast, and the Euro cold meat and cheese stuff. My one complaint was the appalling coffee, which made me revert to Britishness and drink tea.

Lunch was pretty much the same every day, and would have been monotonous had it not been for the vast array of choices: pizza, pasta, salads, fish, meat, etc. One lunchtime they even provided us with BBQ. Dinner was themed each night, and the "elegant" night was fantastic: lobster, salmon, etc. Naturally, I had two appetizers and four deserts and

skipped the inconsequential entree -- one has to have priorities, you know. Meals are taken in a large dining room and the local staff seat you so that you are always with a table of people, some of whom you know, some of whom you might not want to know, but that's the game. The GOs eat with the guests, which must be torture for them (the same asinine questions that I asked must be answered five days a week).

## Sports

I sailed. I understood almost nothing of the lesson (partly because ropes and sails mean little to me, and partly because the French Canadian GO had such bad English and I couldn't follow his French!), but once i got out there, it was easy. Of course, I was expecting a boat that slept six, and came with a full crew, including masseur: that's yachting, surely? However, I handled the tiny sailing boat pretty well. I also went on the snorkel boat. I didn't actually snorkel, you understand. But I swam about in the warm water. There are barracuda sharks aplenty around the Bahamas, so I didn't go too far for too long.

Then there was the horseback riding. The last (and only) time I was on a horse was with my ex back in 1998. It seemed time to break that spell and try again. Six years ago, maybe because I was leading such an - ahem - active life with the



ex, I had no physical repercussions from my equestrian tryout. This time was different. My pony was called Rapido. That was my first clue. Rapido and I fell madly in love when we had all six feet on the ground. Once astride (and that was an event worth watching, let me tell you -- me getting on the damn thing), he decided that I was a complete wimp, and started eating everything in sight, including the wooden fence of the holding pen. This did not let up on our sojourn down to the beach. Rapido was under the impression that the trail was a salad bar. The ponies have been trained to speed up upon hearing the click click sound that you have heard aplenty in cowboy movies. Rapido had remarkable ears, apparently, because someone could make that sound in Staten Island, and the little bastard would speed up.

I had him somewhat under control, when we hit the beach. This was apparently his visual clue to take off at great speed. No thanks to years of therapy and mounds of anti-anxiety medication, I underwent a complete panic attack, and missed all the scenery while clinging to my steed. I finally realized that if I were to live out this vacation, I would have to remember to breathe deeply, and I calmed down enough to pull his reins in and tell him "Woah, boy" (another thing I learnt while watching "The Virginian" all those years ago). He thought the whole thing was a hoot, especially at the end when I had to dismount (another scene).

The next day, my arms hurt so much from gripping the reins and saddle, that I had to go to a yoga class. Yes, me doing yoga. Again, not a sight for the weak. Luckily, I was the only person in the class, and so the nice teacher went at idiot pace. It helped tremendously and I was able to swing my arms without screaming within the day.

Each day around noon, there was water aerobics in the pool, and I did most of it for a few days. There then followed a spirited game of water polo. One of the rules was that the men must not touch the ladies. I thought this gave the ladies a huge advantage and was surprised and shocked that no one took full advantage of this. At last, on the fourth day, I ventured in and warned my team members of my plan. There were only a few women on either team. So if a member of the opposing team had the ball, and was male, I simply did my utmost to distract him, either by groping him, or pulling down his trunks. It was fun.

### Shows

The talented GOs are forced into performing in these nightly efforts, which might impress people from Wisconsin, but were highly entertaining from my point of view because they were so dreadful: lots of lip-synching and not a drag-queen in sight! What made it all the more hilarious was that there was this ice-queen choreographer from Texas who took it all terribly

seriously, and got extremely irritated when the other performers got the giggles or screwed up (which happened frequently). I thoroughly enjoyed watching her grind her teeth through this really fake home-coming queen smile (someone has to tell her that when you're doing Fosse, you don't grin.)

### Crazy Signs

My niece had warned me about this. "On the first day, you're going to see people doing all these stupid dance movements and you're going to think they're idiots," she gleefully told me. How true. And did I succumb to the Club Med frenzy of line dancing with alcohol? Of course I did. To make matters worse, I had to rush home and download Ricky Martin's "She Bangs" and Tom Jones' "Sex Bomb."

### Returning to Reality

The flight back was a disaster, which entailed the pilot telling us we didn't actually have enough fuel to make it all the way to JFK, but we got back eventually. I am proud to say that, with the combination of sleeping in air conditioning on most afternoons, using SPF40, and sitting in the shade, my whiter-than-white skin hardly burnt.

And I came back fully refreshed and ready for my new job, which is going well, considering it's the first week and I had a migraine on Wednesday (I just love being peri-menopausal).

September 2004

## The Jungle: A Memoir

There was a Jungle at the bottom of my garden. And we didn't even live in Africa or South America or anywhere exotic. I grew up in Wimbledon, which was then, with the notable exception of two weeks each summer, a sleepy little hamlet on the outskirts of London.

Every week, my mother used to pay a visit to the hair salon to get her bouffant (this was the late 60's) while I trotted down the High Street to the toyshop to spend my pocket money. This was only on the weeks when I had bought every Puffin paperback in the bookshop a few doors away.

In the Village High Street, there was also an appliance shop that sold (and repaired) vacuum cleaners and radios, and, in an adjacent cubbyhole of a room, Long Playing Records and Singles with little plastic wheels that came out and were interchangeable (which color should I pop in The Carpenters' *Top of the World?*). I spent a fair amount of money there too, once I discovered pop music and had worn out my mother's show tune collection. The first album I bought was by David Essex; I'd just seen him in 'Godspell' and was in love. I was eleven. I believe my first single was by Ringo Starr, but I wouldn't swear to it.

My mother used to send me on my bicycle to the Village to get something she may have forgotten. I knew all the back streets, because the main road that ran along the Common was **DANGEROUS**; the cars belted along at **MORE THAN TWENTY** miles an hour. I was a stern cyclist. I always looked over my shoulder and performed dramatic hand signals before pulling out to overtake stationary vehicles. And if I took the back roads, I wouldn't have to pass the houses at the end of the street.

On the left was a veritable fortress with a tall brick wall and an ominous gate, which seemed fairly flimsy to me, since it was the only thing separating me from two enormously loud Pyrenean Mountain dogs, whose great joy in life seemed to be making my heart jump right out of its skinny body, as I shook with abject terror each time they hurled themselves against the metal. On the right was Old Man Someone's home, which has since been torn down and made into about a dozen little box houses. Bet they cost a fortune. After all, we lived on The Best Road in Wimbledon. I can't even imagine the look on the workers' faces when they had to tackle Old Man Someone's garden. It was almost a Jungle too.

Ah, yes -- The Jungle. To understand the Jungle, you have to understand the house. When you grow up with something,

it seems perfectly normal. Anything new is strange, don't you think? It seemed rather peculiar to me that my friends lived in houses that overlooked their own gardens.

Ours was a Victorian colossus, which had been split up years before into two still adequately vast homes. The next door neighbors got the best of the bargain, if you ask me, because their house always seemed so cozy. But we had the echoing entrance hall and the dramatic mahogany banister, off which I fell on more than one occasion. I can still remember my mother with the forerunner of the Dust Buster, a weighty mini-vacuum cleaner with a seemingly endless cord, on her hands and knees moving exactly down the endless staircase. Not at her most glamorous, I grant you, but that's how I remember her. And the smell of wood polish on the edges, the three inches on each side bare of carpeting.

And then there was fish frying. Frying fish was a big thing in our household and whatever happened You Had To Close The Bloody Kitchen Door because The Smell would permeate every molecule of the house. Even with the door firmly shut, you could have smelled the fish at The Bottom of the Hill if you had asked me. So, I had to be either In the kitchen or Out of it, but no entering or exiting during the frying process.

My mother had been apparently gargantuanly pregnant with me, and my parents were desperate to find something that was easily commutable to the school attended by my siblings. It must have been a shock to move from the center of town to the suburbs, from a flat to a house. With a garden. I don't suppose it occurred to anyone that a normal family moving into a seven-bedroom, three reception-room house would want to overlook their own garden. In our case, you had to turn right out of the front door and skip down a long path, paved with stones that had revolted against any manner of decorum, and lay higgeldy piggeldy in preparation for somebody's mighty fall.

Halfway down this lane was a massive gnarled tree, perfect for climbing. The neighbors were constantly glancing up and seeing this solemn little girl calmly monitoring their every move. They had garden gnomes. When I first saw a lawn jockey, I assumed a jockey lived in the house. I don't know why. People with garden gnomes aren't necessarily funny little men with white beards and jolly smiles, are they?

Past the tree you could choose to go straight over a bridge which had, at one point in its illustrious past, traversed a pond, the sole remnant of which was a stately weeping willow tree. From the pathway you could see what I suppose was some sort of gazebo, but I have no idea what we called it.



Whatever its name, it was infested with silverfish. Even today, just typing that word makes my jaw shudder involuntarily. Silverfish. Eeeoo.

If you sensibly veered right before the bridge, however, you could wander through some shrubbery and stumble upon lilies of the valley. That's another smell I remember. Either way, eventually you opened up onto a spreading lawn, the worthy opponent of my father, who did battle with it on a continuous basis. There was the Stump, the remnants of a very old tree. I know it was old, because I tried to count the rings one lazy summer day, but I didn't know quite enough numbers to get there. Either that, or I lost patience. I was very good at losing both my patience and my temper, stamping my little feet like a height-impaired diva. It's a skill I have since developed to perfection.

On the far side of the lawn was a shed, which always smelt of damp rotting wood, where the lawn mower and countless insects lived, and the greenhouses, where my father tried to grow vines. I'm not sure why. I can only remember vile, bitter little grapes coming out of the greenhouse. Maybe because the south of England does not share the sun-soaked climate or the rich soils of Bordeaux or Tuscany.

Behind these structures lay The Jungle. I don't know if any of the garden had been landscaped when we moved in, but I suspect that even if it had, The Jungle would have beaten any attempt to tame it. There were only a couple of entrances through the sharp branches, and you had to know exactly how to maneuver around the thorny bushes that reached out to engulf your vulnerable and bony frame.

At the bottom of one part of The Jungle lay Jock Scott's house. I still don't quite understand the outdated and ludicrous knightship hoohah in England, but his father was the Honorable Lord Encombe (Encombe even though his last name had to be Scott too, surely?), a title he inherited upon his own father's demise. Jock and I were inseparable for a while. So much so that my father built a little gate in the fence that separated the two properties. A couple of things broke up that particular friendship, one of which was him knocking me flat on my back at his seventh birthday party (with fireworks!), fracturing my wrist. I had to wear a cast that itched like crazy. It was the only time I have ever voluntarily carried a knitting needle. An earlier incident involved both us showing each other our privates, and being discovered by his mother. I don't suppose she was overly thrilled that the future Lord Encombe was fumbling around with the daughter of a Jewish fish merchant. In any case, either or both incidences

caused the boarding up of the gate, and a rift between our families.

The other property adjoining ours belonged to an old man who died. That much I remember, because I think my mother called that one. Or at least found out and had to notify the relatives. In any case, he had a fierce gardener who scared the living daylights out of me when Jock and I threw old bricks onto their property. In retrospect, I sort of see why.

The first smell of pollen, and the accompanying runny eyes and itchy nose, always remind me of lazy afternoons in our garden, safe from The Jungle. My mother would play "I Spy." She would patiently indulge my barbaric yet inventive attacks on her beloved English language, bearing an expression of astonishment at my brilliance when I pronounced "Th" is for "Thlowers" and the like. I had a swing and a huge wooden climbing frame, both stuck in the shade of a stately pine tree taller than even our roof, but I don't recall playing on either very much.

Things have changed in the Village. Where there was a greengrocer, there is now a lingerie store where they don't sell sports bras, and there is a distinct absence of man-made fabric. And if an excited eight-year-old wants to spend her allowance now, she'll have to go to K-Mart or some such

ghastly place Down The Hill in Wimbledon Proper. Or (perish the thought) buy it online. And I don't recall having seen the hairdressers' recently, but I bet it's changed too. I expect the stylists all wear black leather, and, because no one gets their hair blown out weekly, you know the prices have increased more than the rate of inflation.

But no one can take away from me the visceral memory of the dampness of the trees, the crunch of the pungent wood chips under my feet, as I ducked and turned through my Jungle, thousands of miles from home, on hot afternoons back in the days when you could still buy toys locally, and no one from any sort of reasonable home had ever laid eyes on a luxury lingerie shop, in a sleepy little village on the outskirts of London.

May 2001

## The Guitarists' Girlfriend

You've met people like me before. We're the ones sitting quietly at the side of the stage, sipping a soda, gazing lovingly at some longhaired dude as he does sound-check with his band. We're the ones weak from lack of sleep, stumbling out of a van at six in the morning after the long drive back from some Podunk little town where nobody cared that the band's drummer once sat in with a Top 40 group in the Seventies.

I was a Guitarist Girlfriend. Thankfully, Jimmy had realized a few years before I met him that he would never be Jimmy Page or Eric Clapton, and had developed tech skills that enabled him to not only earn a living and pay rent, but also indulge his musical passion that included twenty-something guitars.

This is the usual path of a Guitarist relationship with a Guitarist Girlfriend: the woman is thrilled to be with a rock demi-god of sorts, and he is flattered that she is a fan. It's the reason he took up the guitar in the first place: he is nearly always the guy who could not get a date any other way.

They become involved and no sooner does she move in, than she resents his playing. I know, it makes no sense to me either, but this is what happens. I don't mean that she is jealous that he is flirting with other women from the stage (with those lights in the eyes and all the worry about whether the D string will flat out, they are not usually thinking about sex with you or anyone else, trust me). Or that she is possessive about her time with him and resents all those tedious rehearsals in smoky studios, decibel levels bordering on the threshold of pain. No, she is jealous if he picks up a Stratocaster and strums it quietly, sans amp, with just a plinky sound to let you know he's working. She's jealous if he gets excited about a new riff or a cool chord sequence.

This was never me. I was a great Guitarist Girlfriend. At parties, if I was tired, I didn't whine and groan about going home: I found a spot near his case and other sundry equipment and curled up with the spare cords, napping while the music throbbed. When he was ready to go, I would awake, gentle smile playing on my lips, wipe the sleep from my mascara-smudged eyes, and help him pack up.

When I met Jimmy, his guitars were in storage, and I encouraged him to release them, to breathe life into them again. I loved to watch him tinker and practice, change

strings, take apart old pedals and try to fix them. I just loved that part of him as much as any part.

I was a rare bird.

Breaking yourself of the guitar-player-as-boyfriend habit is not easy. It is said that smoking is fifty times more difficult to quit than heroin. If that is the case, then think of normal men as heroin. Then multiply that by the nicotine factor and you can see what women like me are up against. We are always drawn to these boy-men, these creative, crazy, child-like creatures, who, despite any appearance of maturity, aspire to rock 'n' roll greatness.

Adrian was such a different species, so grounded, that I really thought I had broken by pattern and that we had a chance. Until he mentioned wanting a family. The kid gthing. It made me want to rip my uterus out. I was so livid.

Guitarists often don't want children because they have their gear. Pedals and amps and so on are surrogate children, much as dogs are to many women. They are non-threatening, and are less needy.

I once found Jimmy in tears. This is a man who didn't cry when his father died or when he walked in on his ex-girlfriend

screwing his bass player. He had been to an auction and had managed to acquire a cherry red 1959 Gibson Les Paul Junior guitar. This he planned on putting straight into a Trainwreck Express, which he had bought the year before, and a 1974 checkerboard Marshall 4x12 angle cabinet loaded with Weber VST Bluedogs, something he had found over five years earlier. He had been saving a George L. guitar cable and Monster oxygen-free copper speaker wires for just such a purpose. It was a perfect set-up, and one he had been dreaming about since he was eleven years old.

This particular Gibson was the final element in a chain of gear that could send any guitarist into instant and continuous orgasm.

It was very sweet.

I held him for a while, then made tea for both of us, and sat on the floor watching him fastidiously clean all the connectors, hook everything up, and then, silently and somewhat in awe of the moment, he slung the guitar round his neck and began to play.

The house filled with rich tones, blazing and burnished, and I understood the pure emotion of it all. I couldn't play, but I was a fan, and I was able to hear the difference, and it made



me cry too. We sat there, as the sun set over our balcony, and marveled at the sounds together, our tea growing colder, our love growing older and with a new bond between us.

As we fell asleep that night, one of his arms around me, the other embracing the new guitar, I wondered how many hours of work it would take before he could afford the next item on his list, if he were ever to find it: a 1967 Marshall 100-watt Plexi with a full stack of salt & pepper 4x12 cabinets loaded with 25-watt Celestion Greenbacks. It was to be the start of his Jimi Hendrix set-up.

I knew this stuff. I knew Jimmy and I understood Jimi. I was a Guitarist Girlfriend.

September 2003

## A SoCal Sport

Let me introduce you to a uniquely Southern Californian phenomenon: the high-speed freeway chase. Rather misleadingly, this does not always refer to chases at high speed, but has several constants:

### The Chased

One or more people (usually male) whose combined IQ is less than that of a squeegee in a car or truck, usually stolen.

### The Law Enforcement

Sometimes California Highway Patrol, sometimes several local sheriffs' departments, all a little nervous and increasingly irritated as the chase progresses.

### The Helicopters

In addition to the media choppers, the number of which vary according to the level of crime or celebrity involved, there are more law enforcement aircraft, all of them shining a gigantic spotlight on The Chased's car.

I don't think I am alone in loving these events. Normally, someone will call me, from the living room or on the phone,

and refer me to the appropriate local channel. I grab a bowl of snacks, a glass of water, or something stronger if it's the evening, and hunker down for a good laugh.

Recently, for example, a driver tried to ram another car, prompting an hour-long, high-speed chase in which the woman drove the car in circles, went the wrong way on a toll-way and even got out of the car to gesture at officers. Now, I know it's mean to mock the afflicted, but the people who end up these situations are biblically stupid. By the time you have several cops on your tail and over you with rotors, don't you think it might be time to pull over and assume the position? The position, in this case, is flat on the ground, face down, with your hands behind your head.

But somewhere between grand theft auto (and attempted kidnapping or domestic violence, or whatever these bozos have been caught doing) and the assumed position, there are hours of fun as they drive around the Southland. All this is made more fabulous by the desperate media trying to talk for the entire duration while sounding knowledgeable and original, grasping at really flimsy straws.

"Well, Sylvia, this freeway interchange saw a similar chase back in 1973 and I think he crossed over three lanes in one

maneuver!”

In one recent case, the afflicted in question drove from the desert into downtown Los Angeles in rush hour, then made his way up to the most crowded freeway in town. You can drive along the 405 at four o'clock in the morning and you won't be able to do more than 60 mph, but somehow, this guy wove in and out of heavy traffic speeding. I was mightily impressed. If he weren't irretrievably stupid and probably facing a good deal of time in jail, he could try out for Formula One.

I was having a rollicking good time racking up the other charges he would face when he inevitably got nabbed: speeding, changing lanes without signaling, using the car pool lane when driving alone, not wearing a seat-belt, and talking on his cell phone without a headset.

As for the last charge, I can only guess that he had no headset. He had been on the phone with the police negotiator to say that he would surrender when he was able to talk to his girlfriend. According to media sources, “the girlfriend is not cooperating.” I bet she isn't. The entire situation would be utterly mortifying.

And my assumption that he was not wearing a seatbelt came from the charming views of his naked torso sticking out of the window with both arms waving in the air. This might have been to prove that he had no weapon, or to confirm that he was certifiable.

From the famously sluggish 405, he took the freeway leading back to whence he came. Great stuff! It had now gotten dark and he began to slow down, presumably because he was running out of gas (literally and metaphorically). It was at this point that the local news helicopter guy began telling the viewers “this is highly dangerous.” He was the only person on the freeway: how dangerous could it be? As the camera pulled back, we saw the seven or so police cars, and then a line about six miles long of extremely aggravated commuters, having to crawl at 40 mph because of this brainless schlemiel.

Because the excitement was so high at the start of the chase and we were all hoping for a speedy, dramatic, and maybe violent end to the broadcast, the station had postponed all the scheduled commercial breaks, so by the second half of the second hour (and two glasses of wine on my part), there were breaks every minute or so to catch up on the station’s commitments. This was infuriating because I really didn’t want the finish to occur during an ad for a Snuggie (note to

self: although these are ridiculous items, find out if they come in cashmere).

Frequently, these chases end when the car runs out of gas or gets a flat tire. I noticed the front, driver's side tire and knew, alas, that the end was nigh. Cut to commercial break. Cut back to see the car with a donut (or space-saver spare tire). What happened during the 90-second break? Was he actually with Formula One and had a pit crew standing by? Did the cops actually allow him to change the tire, and if so, he should get a big raise at Pep Boys, because that is one awesomely fast tire-change.

He finally surrendered at a Sheriff station, and we missed that denouement because of commercials as well. But I did see him get out of the car, disrobe, and then assume the position.

All the time this was going on, eight or so helicopters were buzzing around a few miles away: Michael Jackson was being buried. Again.

Only in Los Angeles.

September 2009

## Buzz Cut: A Two Sided Short Story

I just don't know what to do with it.

Such a broad statement of confusion and defeat, to be sure. In Sammy's case, it represented her failure at managing both her hair and her life.

Within a month of finding her husband in bed with their neighbor (the one with the immensely annoying toy poodle), and subsequent separation, she had walked into a local barber's and told them to shave it all off. The barber, an elderly Italian man, looked bewildered.

"But you have such wonderful hair," he crooned musically.

This was her mother's same reaction, minus the harmonics. Add the roar of a jet plane, the screech of nails on a chalkboard and a touch of guilt, and you can simulate the abrasion of Sammy's eardrum from the telephone receiver when she broadcast her news.

"You must look like a lesbian!" her mother roared.

Sammy didn't think this was such a bad thing. She had never wanted to be a lesbian, but alienating cheating heterosexual men for a while seemed eminently appropriate.

*It's not all fun and games working in a beauty supply store.*

*Of course, there are the perks, such as beautiful women coming in. But we also get irritating, flamboyant young men. And both groups assume I'm gay. Which I'm not.*

At the age of twelve, her mother had taken her to a beauty salon, where a flamboyant young man had grasped her long ponytail and chopped it off with a few short flicks of his shiny scissors. Sammy could still recall the foreign stench of chemicals that would later, in her teens, become customary: those of permanent solutions. The long strand swept away and bagged for her mother's memory chest, young Samantha had then been led to a chair that reclined like the one at the dentist's.

This was a less horrible experience, however, as a girl not even twice her age lovingly massaged shampoo and conditioner onto her scalp and remaining locks, before sitting her up, gently wrapping her head in the towel that had been protecting her small frame, and returning her to the young man. He had then taken the formless remains of her hair and



shaped them into a fitting, elegant but not sophisticated cut, suitable for a preadolescent girl in the early 1970's.

Until five years before, Sammy's hair had fluctuated in length between the bottom of her ears and the top of her shoulders. Spikier in the late '70's, bigger in the '80's, red with henna in the early '90's and then... Provoked by a combination of boredom and rage, she had shaved her brown curls, and dyed the remaining shreds platinum. She tried to look at herself in the mirror and back on that half-decade, and reconcile the length of her hair to her turbulent existence.

*I just like the fact that this store is a few short blocks from my house and I can be home to get on with my life just minutes after locking up. Within half an hour of the shop closing, I can be in the woods with my binoculars, naming birds you've never heard of, like the golden-crowned kinglet. Some say I moved here because I already knew all the birds back in Yorkshire.*

*Anyroad, there are actually some aspects of my job I enjoy. Dealing with the salespeople, fr'instance. They're a nice bunch of lads, and we usually share stories of loathsome customers and cosmetic disasters. I get to hear about other stores' problems and successes. I imagine it to be rather like the Pony Express in the old days.*

In the ensuing months, she learnt to buzz her own scalp every ten days or so, whenever she could grasp a tiny section of hair between her forefinger and thumb. She realized that the bleach and the toner seemed to adhere better when placed on actual hair, as opposed to a quarter of an inch of stubble, so she began the two hours dying process the day before the shave. It was a ritual she grew to enjoy, being as it was, a symbol of her manless existence, her newfound freedom.

The few occasions, which found her in bed with a man, gave rise to complaints on their part that her head irritated their skin, encouraging small welts as it pricked and poked at their delicate backs and arms. She shrugged.

"Love me, love my buzz."

*Stocking, though. That is the bane of my entire existence. Do you know how tiny those bases are on the hair toner bottles? They are forever tipping over, and after a while, all the code numbers look the same.*

*We have to stock these enormous tubs of whitening powder and gallon containers of 30 proof bleach, even though I know that the average consumer will throw it all away because*

*either they get bored with the bleaching, or it will go bad before they can use it all up. Or their hair falls out. That last thing almost never happens, but still.*

One day her razor stopped working. This was after almost one hundred and fifty shaves, it had to be said, but she was at once irritated at its lack of tenacity, and saddened by the loss of a hitherto faithful friend. Entering the beauty supply store on the edge of town, she couldn't help but notice the array of baubles and ribbons that women use to adorn their heads, and managed to suppress a smile at the bulky hairdryers with which less liberated women had to wrestle on a daily basis.

*A girl came in one time all hysterical like because she'd fallen asleep with the solution on, and her hair had come out in chunks. I thought she looked rather nice bald. That's the joke, you see. I make a living selling cosmetics and hair products to vain women, and the ones I am attracted to don't usually wear make-up or care about how they look. I'm a nature man, you see.*

Not wishing to appear the sort of woman she had been during her marriage, one that would linger in a cosmetics aisle, for example, she approached the man whose back she could see behind the counter, as he struggled to fit many boxes of

disposable rubber gloves into a drawer at least half too small to adequately contain them.

*So, one day I was struggling with the latex gloves. Laugh away: I know how that sounds, but you know the ones I'm talking about, right? The ladies use them to protect their French manicured hands from all the chemicals they pile on their head. Why would you put something on your head that you're afraid to touch with your hands, I wonder?*

*You can get these protective gloves in packs of 20 or so, but I thought what if someone wants to experiment? They don't want to make that sort of commitment to latex, do they? So I bought a case of 500 of the things, and set about to make a tidy profit for the store. We sell them by the pair. That was my idea. I wanted to keep them up by the register and whip them out when I needed them, but they're not something you can actually display, latex gloves. So I was trying to fit them all into this drawer behind the counter and they were bouncing all over the place, refusing to go in.*

*Of course, right in the middle of this, I heard the door open, but usually these women just want to mosey around. They get quite offended if you offer to help them. I think they're embarrassed, you see. It's not like I'm not going to know they have false fingernails once they plonk their basket on the*

*counter and I ring them up, is it? Anyhow, I've learned to mind well enough alone.*

*This one didn't even have time to look around.*

"Excuse me, but do you sell electrical razors?"

*What do they think I am, Monty Wards? I don't have toasters or irons either. I ask you. I didn't even bother to turn around, but suggested a local department store that stocks those Remington things.*

"No, buzz cut razors. For me."

*Then I spun around to face her, and those bloody latex gloves went flying all over the place. But I didn't notice at the time, because I was too busy staring at her with this gormless grin on my face.*

"For you?" he smiled. "Wow. That looks great on you. Not many women could carry that off."

"What do you mean?" she replied with hostility. "Only butch women can wear short hair?"

"On the contrary," he corrected her, a gentle smile playing on his lips. "Only feminine women with unspeakably beautiful cheekbones."

*I don't know where I got that. I mean, flowery phrases don't easily trip off a Yorkshireman's tongue. That's an Irish thing, isn't it? She just inspired me. What little hair there was had been dyed platinum and at first glance, she looked like that bald gal who'd had the oversleeping incident. But Samantha - that was her name - her skull just radiated underneath it. It was as though all the fakery I see every day here in the store had drifted away, and I was looking at a real woman, and not some image she was trying to project.*

Their first date was a picnic in the woods, which made Samantha extremely anxious, since this was a man who had access to scissors and razors and bleach. But he seemed harmless enough, and once she relaxed, she enjoyed herself immensely, and found herself giddy with laughter as he talked about his eccentric family so many miles away. She was fascinated by his ornithological prowess. She told him that, and he replied, "And I know a lot about birds, too." She was charmed.

*Talk about nervous! I make it a rule never to go out with customers because you never know if they're after your thirty*

*percent discount, and anyway, as I said, they're not usually my type. And I don't get to meet women really anywhere else. But she had this warmth, Samantha, buried deep inside her, like a volcano waiting to erupt. Well, that sounds a little bit sexual, but that's not what I mean. Honest. She'd been hurt; any fool could see that. I just knew that beneath that tough exterior, there was a sweet woman.*

They dated for about three months before Sammy became bored with the adoration. Back home, she sat for many minutes over a cup of hot tea pondering why she could not return the affection of a perfectly good man. And she realized that it was not that she was still hurt over the infidelity of her ex-husband, for all that hurt and pain had passed. She just did not love the beauty supply man. For no reason other than.... she just didn't.

*I was right sad for a while. But you know how it is; eventually, the pain went away.*

Samantha went to the cabinet beneath her sink, and removed the bleach, the whitening solution, the toner, and lastly, her three-month old razor. She placed them all in a shopping bag and carried them out to the trashcan.

Then she returned to her tea, and waited for her hair to grow.

June 2002



## Criteria

You would think that the older a woman gets, what with her being more likely to die in a freak shaving accident than get a second date, or whatever that ridiculous statistic is, and all... You would think that her list of 'Must Have's' and 'Can't Have's' for romantic partners would grow shorter, since there is a slimmer chance with every second that she will meet the prince on the proverbial white horse who will sweep her off her feet and leave hoof prints all over her Crate and Barrel rug.

The reverse seems to be true for me. My teenage lists were fairly short. The 'Must Have's' didn't even exist. The 'Can't Have's' were facial hair, dirty fingernails, and really thick eyeglasses. Now the "No Ways" include drugs, the longing to have children, the same hygiene disqualifications from years before, and Republicans. Oh, and religious fanatics, homophobes and pro-lifers. And married men or those otherwise involved (usually with themselves).

Money has never bothered me (rather, the absence of it) but I would like Mr. Right to have some sort of job that would get him off the sofa from time to time. Guitar players are probably not a good risk, but I have dated chefs, and they are pretty much cut from the same cloth. Both are on a cowboy

mission for artistic perfection, living for the moment, and performing for an audience (you think dishwashers and waiters don't constitute an audience?), creating wonders in a given amount of time before collapsing, and expecting to be waited on. But always the music/food is on their minds and is their first love. If you learn nothing from my mistakes, take this thought with you: guitar players are the same as chefs.

So I found myself recently separated, and the more I heard about other peoples' love lives, and the more I tried to go out on my own dates, the longer the list grew, stretching in an elastic manner from here to the deepest reaches of Loveland. It was only a matter of time before it was pulled to its limit, and catapulted back to slap me in my face.

And so it was that I met -- let's call him Ben -- one evening, as I was enjoying a skim milk iced cappuccino outside my local Starbucks. I know I shouldn't patronize Starbucks. I know that they are taking over neighborhoods, spreading green logos like cream cheese over the sesame bagels that were independent coffee places. But I can't help myself. They have outside seating, and at last, the few days of the intense heat had passed, leaving New York with the gentle blush of summer nights without the heavy foundation of warm sweat that envelopes it during heatwaves.

So, there I was, and “Ben” wanted to read a section of The Times that had been left on my table. Ostensibly.

“It’s not mine,” I told him, glancing up from The Village Voice. “Feel free to take it.”

“What’s in the Voice that’s more interesting?” he grinned.

I could have pretended to be reading the art installation review or the listings for the Pretentious European Film Festival, but instead, as I didn’t care if I impressed him or not, I told the truth.

“It’s about cyberporn.”

There was a beat as he tried to figure out how to respond to this, since there was clearly no way to turn that into a pick-up segueway (“Hey, wanna come up to my place and check it out online? I have a cable modem!” for example).

“I don’t get it,” he said, shaking his head, and running his (nice, I noticed) hands through his hair. “I have enough neuroses without worrying about my typing speed.”

We ended up going to dinner at an Italian eatery around the corner. The Upper East Side is positively littered with these

places, all charging \$15 and upwards for a plate of pasta whose base ingredients cost about \$2. See, I told you I had dated chefs.

We had what I thought was a lovely evening. There was no stilted conversation, no awkward moments. From what little I knew of him, he fitted my list profile adequately (at least on social issues, and he wasn't musical and couldn't cook). He had a warm smile and a quick wit. I was just beginning to think that this dating thing wasn't all that bad, and that maybe there was hope for me yet.

When the check came, I made the perfunctory reach for my purse.

Ben brushed my gesture away and paid cash, swiftly leaving the table and walking away from the restaurant. I followed, as soon as I had extricated myself from the table, and caught up to him.

"Well," I said. "Thank you for a lovely meal."

"You're welcome," Ben replied. "See you in the neighborhood."

And that was it. I was left in front of a brownstone with The Village Voice in my hand and a big lump in my throat. As for

my self-esteem, that had trickled into the gutter, right next to a big pile of dried doggie doo.

Days later, I ran into Ben again at the Starbucks, and he gave me a half-smile in the way that one does when one is pretending not to remember exactly who the other person is. I had nothing to lose, so I went over to his table, and just asked him why he hadn't wanted to see me again.

"Look," he said patiently, as if speaking to a very small child. "You seem like a nice person. It's just that you don't meet the criteria."

"The criteria?"

"Yes. It means 'standard of comparison.'"

"I know what it means!" I roared. "But can you be a little bit more specific."

"Well, I have this list...."

And he proceeded to tell me that he had always seen himself with a lawyer or a doctor, that he thought my hair was a little too frizzy, that I hadn't been familiar enough with Noam Chomsky's work (not the politic, mind you, but the linguistic,

if you can believe it), and that, finally, he didn't think women should offer to pay on a first date.

I went home in a state of shock and tried to take a good hard look at my own criteria. (I did know what it meant, you know, linguistics or no.) For a long time, I struggled with each and every nuance, trying to understand what it was that made each item a deal-breaker, realizing how cruel it must be to be eliminated from the running by something as relatively unimportant as.... The trouble was, for me, there was nothing relatively unimportant about any of the points. There was nothing I could do about it. And I felt sorry for myself and for Ben.

Frizzy, indeed!

August 2001

## My Dawn: The Great Cruise Adventure

You've seen the television commercials: luxury on the waves, a moving hotel taking you from one exotic location to the next, filled with beautiful people who have spent way too much on teeth whitening and swishy fabrics, swaying to and fro, presumably to music, but perhaps to the rhythm of the ocean.

### The Embarkation

The Norwegian Dawn cruise liner departs from New York, so I had no expectations of mystery on my departure, but the remnants of movie memories flooded me, and I half expected people in hats waving from the pier as I departed. The idea was to avoid the horrors of New York area airports, and just wheel my stuff onto the ship. That was my first mistake. At least if you fly, you limit your luggage somewhat.

I had the obligatory BFC (big f\*cking case) filled with shoes, books, clothes (casual and work-out, because I was determined to do yoga and hit the gym each day) and a fabulous hat that can be sat on by a German shot-putter and still retain its shape. Then there was the garment bag, holding swishy garments for formal evenings. Then there was my hand-luggage. Just roll onto the ship, right? The

nightmare started when my car service showed up and the driver would not (or could not) lift my bags into the trunk of the limo. Soon I was wishing that I had climbed in after my bags, because the trunk could not smell as bad as the passenger area; the driver had not bathed since the Carter administration, and I had no control over the electric windows. Also, having boasted about how he had been driving in the city for two years, he had no notion of how to get to the pier. Luckily, the Dawn is not subtle in appearance, and is noticeable, apart from its sheer size, by the (I would guess copies of) Matisse and Monet painted on the sides. Real classy.

It took us forever to get to the pier and I was gagging by the time I stumbled out of the car, hoping that I hadn't absorbed his odor. The porters were fabulous. It's amazing how quickly some people can move when you shake a fistful of dollars at them. However, I still had with me my hand baggage, a rolling cart that fits the maximum carry-on for most airlines. This was packed full with sundry glamour supplies and accessories, my lifeline (iPod), and – well that's it. I guess I need a lot of make-up to be at ease. At any rate, it weighed a ton. I swankily strolled into the building, only to be grumpily directed upstairs. *Stairs?* Are you *kidding* me? I dragged the 100lb case up one long flight and joined the unwashed masses. It reminded me a lot of Ellis Island.



Below us were three lines of people: the ones with seats had been there since early morning (it was now 1:00 p.m.), and the other two were the cruise equivalent of frequent flyers, the “Latitudes” members.

Eventually, we were ordered downstairs, and we shuffled (and, in my case, heaved) our way through security where, bizarrely, they had already confiscated two handguns and five knives. Actual check-in was easy because I had registered online, so I got my stateroom key, which doubles as a charge card on board, and rolled to my room. I just had time to unpack (miraculously, my bags were there – see what I mean about a wad of singles?) before donning my unflattering lifejacket and moving to Deck 7 for the unconditional safety drill. A little cold? It’s so not like me to be vulgar, but I nearly froze my tits off.

I shivered back to my room (Aft Deck 9) just in time to see the Statue of Liberty go by my window. Yes, I had upgraded not only to a window, but to a balcony! My theory was this: if I want to get away from everyone (how prescient was that thought), I can lounge on my balcony. I hadn’t taken into consideration the fact that the people in the two adjoining staterooms might be yelling and hooting and generally carrying-on on their own balconies, separated by just a piece of opaque Plexiglas. That was a complete waste of money.

## The Cruisers

I will now describe my fellow passengers with the skill that comes from years of singing to pissy gay men and living in Manhattan and having been brought up British, which enables me to do snobbery better than most. About fifteen percent were good solid blue-collar workers. Nothing wrong with that. Another fifteen percent were loud, obnoxious Long Island Jews (here's a caveat: I am Jewish, so let's accuse me of snobbery, certainly, but not anti-Semitism). About twenty percent were babies – really, and they were all lovely (cruises keep kids occupied so the cute babies can just be adored and they pretty much sleep). Of the remaining half, the majority were made up of white trash and mafia. When I say “white trash,” I would like to refer you to “Jerry Springer.” When I say mafia, I don't mean those swarthy Italian guys who, despite drug-running and prostitution actually keep to some code of honor; no, I mean Russian mob, who scare the living daylights out of me. There was a smattering of very nice Chinese people, who spent large amounts in the casino but dressed for dinner and behaved impeccably.

I even showed up at the “Friends of Dorothy Rainbow Connection” meeting in one of the thirteen bars. That's subtle. They might just have well had printed “Big Ol' Fag-

Meet.” Turns out that I was the gayest man on the boat, or at least the only one that showed up. There were plenty of closet-cases and I had fun watching them from a distance, all tattooed and muscled (them, not me).

### The Food

Let’s talk about eating, shall we? Now, I can eat. A *lot*. But I recently joined Weight Watchers and dropped two dress sizes, so I was determined to keep it together. The first evening saw me in the steak house, Cagney’s, for a \$10 surcharge. I had a shrimp cocktail (2 points) and the most delicious filet mignon (6 points) with, I relented, the potato wedges and asparagus. Yes, I had the cheesecake: I was on vacation, and had my gym session ahead of me.

I had the opportunity to watch, as one does the gorilla cage, a table not far from me devouring everything on the menu. In England, the roadways are repaired by the men lovingly referred to as “the boys from the black stuff” (that being asphalt) and they drink their thermos flasks of tea in little orange tents. I think one of the men at the table near me was using one of these tents as a shirt. He was enormous – the size of one the “It’s only wafer-thin” guy in the Monty Python film of old. It was grotesque and I was fascinated in the same

way that a particularly gory scene from CSI captures my attention when channel-surfing.

The next morning I awoke to glorious sunshine. I swiftly changed into my nylon yoga pants and a sports bra and t-shirt and ran to one of the three formal restaurants on Deck 6. The staff was rather horrified by my breakfast strategy (one poached egg, one piece of whole-wheat toast, a non-fat yoghurt, and coffee with skim milk). I can do this diet thing. Then I ran, yoga mat in hand, onto the deck and nearly got blown into the side of the ship. Clearly I would have to wait until we were further south before I put that particular plan into action. I went directly to the gym and found an unused studio to do my yoga, and followed that up with twenty minutes on the life-cycle with my iPod, totally rocking out, laughing internally at the neighboring biddies doing two miles an hour, as I pumped up the levels and broke into a sweat.

Invigorated and hungry, I hit the shower and then the buffet. Cruise comics always laugh about the showers being small, but let me tell you, as someone who has kept her original 24" x 48" bathtub, and battles a shower curtain daily, this shower was huge. Anyhow, I picked up some fresh-cut fruit at the buffet and looked for a place to lay my tray. There were three tables for two together, and one was being occupied by two women, who weighed more than most hippos. (No one said I

was nice, so if you're looking for a humanitarian spin on vacationing on the high seas, you're reading the wrong missive.)

"May I join you?" I enquired.

"Sure," they beckoned eagerly. "Join us in prayer!"

Too late to actually back away in horror, I sat silently and respectfully through endless thanks to their savior, savoring the moment that I could (a) attack the fruit, and (b) retell this episode to the people who know me well.

The Garden Buffet, where this took place, was tellingly located on Deck 12 and I had to cross through it to get to the pool and outside deck areas. Every time I did, I wanted to double back to the gym. Not enough to actually do so, of course, but it did cross my mind. Here, the great American bulk sauntered, plates piled high with fat and grease, leaving sloth in their wake. It was a truly disgusting spectacle.

### A Quick Aside

My mother, who was in the Royal Navy, and served the Canadians in Ceylon in World War II, only has to see a paddleboat to turn green. I seemed to have sea legs,

because the gentle rocking only soothed me into a relatively good sleep (as good as I could get without my Tempur-Pedic mattress, that is).

That first day marked my only visit to the gym, except by accident, when I nearly got blown off the deck and needed an escape inwards, and for a relaxation class, which I could have led better.

“Lie down,” said the friendly chap from Manchester, England (England, across the Atlantic Sea). “Now breathe.” That was all he said for twenty minutes, which reminded me of that old Jewish-Buddhist theme: “Breathe in, breathe out. If you can’t do that much, you’re in trouble.”

### Food, continued

Eating became a much-anticipated event, and I fell swiftly and firmly off my diet at alarming velocity. At first it was those potato wedges with the steak. Then *one* croissant would surely not hurt. By the time we reached the Famous Norwegian Dawn Chocolate Buffet at three o’clock on the fifth day, anyone standing between me and the dessert was going to be injured. Not pretty, but deeply satisfying.

The restaurant staff were highly trained in traditional fine dining hospitality, but their concern for my social life was a little more than I could bear. I accept that the hostess has to ask “Table for one?” I can even accept that the sub-hostess who actually walks me to the table and gives me the menu asks the same question. But then the bus boy, the bread person, the waiter and the food runner seemed (in that order) progressively more upset about this than I. There I am, grazing over romaine lettuce (it doesn’t matter how the salad is described: it consists largely of romaine), reading a book, and here they come, one after another. “Dining alone, ma’am?” I felt as though I was swatting away a swarm of flies. By the end of the week, I was sorely tempted to snap, “No, I’m just ignoring my invisible friend.”

### The Talent Contest – Part One

Every evening, coming back to a scrupulously clean cabin, with turned-down bed and mint on the pillow, there was a copy of the cruise events for the following day. I noticed with some glee that there was to be a sign-up for a talent contest. Me in a talent contest? Can you imagine such a thing?

I showed up early, of course, and met the piano player, who looked as if he’d only started shaving that week. He was filled with trepidation when I told him I wanted to sing and

schlepped out his collection of fake books. To which I whisked out my charts, gave him the count, and said “Hit it!” I had chosen my friend Wayne Moore’s “Doncha Wanna Know,” a great, vampy torch song that builds to a loud grind-and-bump and is always a crowd-pleaser. We loved the effect and when the musical director appeared, he asked to copy the music so he could arrange it for his orchestra. I rolled my eyes inwardly (a distinct talent that does not work on a big stage) at this dorky guy who had a distinctly 1974 hairstyle and the polyester pants to match.

Other people who showed were Jade, an adorable young slip of a girl, with almost no voice, who chose to sing a challenging Whitney Houston song; Phil, a wonderful mensch magician, and David, an elderly Chinese gentleman, who wanted to perform a traditional Chinese fan dance.

Unfortunately, he had left his music at home and spent the better part of an hour trying to sing it to the pianist and band leader, changing it slightly every time. My psychic powers kicked in and I knew the musicians were thinking, “We don’t get paid nearly enough for this.” There was Ruth-Ann, an unlikely looking entertainer (rather rotund and shy, with a walking stick) who said she was going to do “a comedy piece.” Rounding out the talent was Anthony, heavy metal dude with guitar, and others who we wouldn’t meet until the rehearsal. I’ll revisit that debacle later!



It's strange how, on a boat of 4,000 people or so (including crew), you run into the same few over and over again. Thus it was with Phil, Anthony and I, and a very strange trio were we! I wish I had a picture to show you, but imagine a good-looking, more suave Ed McMann and a young Meatloaf hanging out with the Cabaret Diva.

### The Excursions

The point of a cruise, I suppose is that the sights come to you. Our first stop was Canaveral, famous for the NASA Space Station, which I had seen already (but it's mighty impressive). In a moment of misplaced enthusiasm, I had signed up to go on an excursion not to Disneyland, Universal Studios or any other theme park, but to Cocoa Village. Pardon me, *historic* Cocoa Village. Well, there was nothing historic about it, except for its population. There was a rather cute aromatherapy store and massage place, which was unfortunately fully booked: yoga or not, I was already clenching my shoulders. I wandered along the beach and met a very cute Lab and that made the trip worthwhile, along with a second-hand bookstore, where I greedily stocked up on trashy reading for the remainder of what was clearly going to be a long week. The couple who owned the bookstore spoke

lovingly of Brooklyn, ruining the day that they had migrated south to “this white trash town.” So it *wasn’t* just me.

Next up was Miami, where I hurled myself into a cab, screaming “Get me to South Beach!” and spent a good few hours wandering around gorgeous art deco buildings, surrounded by high fashion and homosexuals, and felt suitably refreshed. I even spent a couple of hours at the Jewish Museum of Florida, with a wonderful docent who totally captivated me. I learnt a lot about my newly-discovered Sephardic roots and was quite moved.

Ignoring all advice to the contrary, I steered my way back to the ship by public transportation. Most of the way, at least: the last half mile was on highway that was apparently verboten to pedestrians, so I had to grab a cab. A New Yorker through and through, I resented not being able to walk.

The next “get off the boat” fiasco was an island in the Bahamas privately owned by the cruise line. I boarded an early tender and ran as quickly as I could across the beach (an ungainly sight, to be sure) to the furthest-most hammock in the shade, in which I plopped with my iPod, big sunhat and SPF50. It was a blissful few hours, but then the barbeque appeared and I couldn’t stand the feeding frenzy. It’s funny,

having lost a whole pound, I still wouldn't wear a bikini in public. I wear a bikini top, and then cover up my still sizable rear with a sarong. Therefore, I have problem understanding why any woman weighing over 300lb would walk around barely dressed in public and then stuff pork into her mouth. Maybe it's just me....

As we docked in Bermuda at night, I elected not to wander round Nassau after dark, and we only had a few hours there the following morning. With the dollar so weak against the pound, and having spent every nickel on the cruise itself, there seemed little point shopping anyhow.

### The Shows

This annoying Russian pianist seemed to be everywhere I went, piped in if not in person. I am sure he was very talented and was just catering to his public, but everything was a little too tinkly and flowery, and there was a whole heap of Andrew Lloyd Weber material. This is maybe the only person on the planet who could make "Take the A-Train" sugary.

There was a fabulous female singer-pianist of whom I didn't hear enough. She normally works on the luxury liners, like the Queen Mary II, so they were darn lucky to have her, and I don't think anyone truly appreciated how talented she was.

I walked out of the first show because, although the performers were extraordinarily talented, the whole production was just too Vegas-y for my tastes. The second show started with a juggler, and I left thirty seconds into that. Then there was Second City.

For those few who don't know, the biggest stars from Saturday Night Live came out of this comic improvisation troupe from Chicago, including John Belushi, Dan Ackroyd, Bill Murray and Tina Fey. I loved their show and went to their workshop a few days later, where I teamed up with Phil (I was the mother to his annoying 12-year old boy) and a few other brave souls to create some laughter.

Most shows were family-friendly, but one night, the kids were cleared out of the Spinnaker Lounge (a gorgeous room reminiscent of a 1950s club) and the Dawn's version of "To Tell The Truth" was staged with the assistant cruise director, the juggler, the magician, and a hilariously talented Molly from Second City. The idea is that a word is given to the panel and they each give a definition of the word, from which the audience concludes who is actually telling the truth. It really matters not which group of audience members won; the fun was to be had in the outrageous stories that accompanied each description. Wonderful stuff.

The final night on the ship saw two shows: the talent show (wait for it, wait for it) and a re-run of the juggler (Edge) and a magician (Ed Alonzo). I have to say that they were both hilarious and brilliant, but the stormy seas sent many people running up the aisles, particularly when watching fluorescent balls bounce all over the stage in rapid succession. I don't know how the hell he managed it, to be honest, as I had enough trouble walking around in sneakers keeping myself in one position....

### What You've Been Waiting For: The Talent Show

I had made an astonishing discovery throughout the week: that I walk much more steadily on heels when I've had a drink or two. This has been verified by other women, who wince to dinner and spring merrily home after a few bottles of wine. That having been noted, I don't drink and sing, so was stone cold sober at both the rehearsal, where I wore the shoes I was going to wear that night, and for the show. I did not take into account the fact that the boat would be rocking much harder at 7:30 p.m. than at 3:00 p.m., when the swaying was already considerable.

Our opening act was a troupe of adolescent girl dancers clad in red sequins, each of whom were upstaged by a young man

by the name of Johnny who sang to the backing track and was a complete star. They were tapping their little souls out and it was clear that no one would notice.

Now over to the rotting masses: us. I had greatly impressed by the band, expecting worse after having noticed the musical director's dubious sense of style. The brass section, which he led with a trumpet, was filled out with a sax and a trombone, and they were wonderfully tight. I spent a few evenings in the Spinnaker Lounge listening to them play dance music for two couples: one Asian, who were graceful and elegant, and one white, who were a little over-enthusiastic and clumsy.

First up was little Jade who clutched the sheet music in her trembling hand as she croaked her way through "The Greatest Love of All." It was really horrible. The next up was Anthony Luchi, rock 'n' roller. In a brilliant move, he'd brought his acoustic along, and played "Rock This Town" by The Stray Cats. The band joined in and it sounded great. We had a couple of break-dancers doing things that would put me in the hospital for weeks, and a guy who sang "Beyond the Sea" to the Bobby Darin backing track. Another male singer took on The Stones' "Honky Tonk Woman" and bitched that there was no electric guitar to make it sound good. No comment from this peanut gallery. Ruth-Ann was

surprisingly charming. She did a bit about getting old and finished with a parody of “Are You Lonesome Tonight” on the topic.

My rehearsal turn came, and I approached the band.

“You’re the maestro, obviously, but I was thinking piano alone, with bass and drums coming in about here...”

He finished my sentence, “And then the brass coming in here. We were going to do just that.”

Wow. It worked a treat.

All this left poor Phil barely enough time to explain what musical cues he required, but he and the band were all experienced pros.

I went back to my room to shake out the nerves (this was not in the Spinnaker Room but in the Stardust Theater, which is described in the literature as: “... spectacular ... reaching up three decks, [with] traditional European opera house ambiance and *world-class entertainment*.” And that was what I was going to give them.

My dress was a tiny bit tight after all those croissants, and I didn't want the ensuing Visible Panty Line, so I was considering going panty-less until I put on my shoes and fell onto the bed. I've never been the sort of entertainer that gets singles shoved into what passes for my cleavage, and it was, after all, a family show with no cover or drink minimum, so on went the underwear and the dress, panty line be damned.

By an hour before show-time I was pumped up on adrenaline and my make up was flawless. The same could not be said for my dress any time I sat down, since my bra showed, but standing up it was fine, and it was my singular goal to remain on my feet throughout the performance. There was a tremendous camaraderie among the performers; Jade asked me about the last few bars of her song, and I was happy to help her and tried to allay her fears by advising her just to just enjoy herself.

The sloppy adolescent sequined dancers opened the show and, as predicted, everyone just watched the singer. Then Anthony was called up. Like a seasoned pro, he adjusted his mic and plugged in his guitar. "We're going to keep the swing groove going, I guess," he prefaced, introducing his song. The band kicked in and the place went wild. I hate to sound like Paula Abdul, but I was very proud.



I was eighth in the line-up of nine, and I have to say that it was a jolly good old-time variety show. I almost expected Ed Sullivan to come barreling on to introduce us. My turn came and I tottered to the mic and leaned against the piano. I have been singing this song for about seven years now, so I was not in the least bit nervous about the lyrics. My main concern was not falling on my face. I stepped off the piano platform onto the stage, as the bass and drums came in, and nearly went down. I finished however, with a big brass finish and rapturous applause.

When they called us all up to announce Anthony as the winner, the entire boat saw him look at me and mouth “Holy Sh\*t!” I was thrilled for him, and his entire family flocked around him. He might have gotten the trophy, but I got the ultimate compliment from his four-year-old niece, who said I was her favorite. I’m never letting him forget that! No doubt he won’t let me forget the fact that the video of the event, taped by Anthony’s mother with Phil’s camera, shows me confidently putting my “everyone’s a winner” NCL tote bag over my shoulder so that I could be prepared to graciously step forward and claim my trophy. Which, of course, I didn’t win. It’s quite a hoot to see over and over again.

## The End

Anthony and I celebrated over ginger ales in the Spinnaker Lounge, which was spinning considerably by late evening. The boat was pretty dead, as most people had tried to pass out. Our bags had to be outside our doors by 2:00 a.m. and I, for one, was fast asleep long before that.

The following morning, I cleared out the rest of my things, and hung out with Anthony and his family in the Spinnaker lounge as we crossed under the Verrazano-Narrows Bridge and past the Statue of Liberty. It was an awesome sight. We must have docked at around 9:00 a.m. but it took a good three hours to get off the damn boat, because we were called by luggage tag color. I was a white person. I mean, I always will be Caucasian, but my luggage tag was also white. I exploded down the gangplank to a scene that made embarkation seem positively sublime. Complete chaos ensued as I tried to find my two roll-ons and garment bag, and then maneuver them through Customs and out into the bright spring day. I called a limo company and waited for ages, because police were not letting limos through. From what I could gather, there were three thousand people trying to get on the ship, while three thousand people were getting off, in an area designed for maybe twelve hundred folk.

Finally, a very sweet lesbian cop helped me cross 12<sup>th</sup> Avenue where I met up with my limo driver and we sped up the West Side Highway for ten minutes.... And I was home.

### Post Script

No one ever talks about sea legs. I was staggering all over the place like a drunken sailor for days. I think colleagues thought I was still recovering from all the Jack Daniels I imbibed (I didn't – hate the stuff). Be warned, if you decide to cruise after reading this: never try to do laundry the day you return to shore.

June 2004

## Poltergeist, Shmoltergeist

The coffee woke me today. I don't mean the caffeine. The coffee pot literally flew off the counter, half-brewed, and flung itself across the floor, leaving the maximum coffee-ground-and-hot-water mess possible. Naturally, I rushed to pick up the drip machine, which was precariously dangling from its electric cord, and burnt the living daylights out of my thumb.

All this would not have been so bad had I not actually mopped the kitchen floor the day before (a rare occurrence). I am not a slob. I vacuum almost daily (including the kitchen floor) because I live in the rural countryside on a dirt road with an overbearingly hairy dog, and I can fill my Dyson three times a day if I really apply myself.

This time though, I had actually mopped with organic cleaning fluid, and left it to dry, so my kitchen smelt of lemons and ginger which, coupled with the drying basil and mint dangling from the ceiling, left me chock full of a calm Zen-like state, until the coffee threw itself across my clean floor. My language was not terribly Zen-like.

My cottage's previous tenant for some forty years was my landlady's mother. She was legally blind and lived until 99. She loved her garden, to which she would apply herself

vigorously, followed by a nice cold Guinness on the deck. She seems to have inhabited me, because I (who has until this year been unable to keep even a Black-Eyed Susan alive) have grown thousands of bitter green tomatoes, some of which I was going to attempt to pickle today; however, I think my kitchen has seen enough excitement for this week.

When I first moved in, I would hear the stairs creaking, and the lights turn go on and off of their own free will. I used to talk to the old lady, and let her know that I would look after her garden and her home. Then my at-the-time live-in boyfriend, who had plenty of demons of his own, without looking around at his surroundings, decided that there were evil spirits here, and rather than let me sage the house (in the tradition of the mad Irish), he stomped down the narrow staircase one night when I was sound asleep and yelled at the spirits to get the heck out of Dodge. Well, I'm pretty sure his language was stronger than that, but I wasn't awake to hear it.

No more creaking steps, no more flickering lights; in fact nothing until this morning, where my Red-Pad Thumb is proof of an act of pure maliciousness. What sort of spirit would deprive a writer of her morning coffee, I ask you?

This morning, despite excessive mopping and sweeping, my kitchen floor has taken on the odor of Starbucks coffee, in addition to its ginger, lemon, basil and mint aroma. And my feet are wet and covered in grounds. At least it's good exfoliation.

I wonder if this could be a sign that someone on the other side thinks I need a pedicure?

July 2007

## A Dream Assignment

“So, let me get this straight,” the therapist asked, glasses lowered past the bridge of her nose, clipboard in hand, pen poised. “You were walking up a big tower?”

The girl shifted on the soft couch cushions, tucking her legs under her.

“Not at first,” she corrected her, enthusiastically. “At first I was walking along a main street - somewhere suburban with hardly any sidewalk. No people; lots of cars.”□□ “And then you came across a tower?” asked the therapist.

“Yes!” replied the girl. “Almost vertical. All flagstone steps. And the strange thing is that I had to climb them because that was the only way to get to where I was going.”

“And that would be where?”

The girl inhaled and then paused. Twisted pretzel-style, she used her right hand to massage the ball of her left foot and looked puzzled. “I’m not sure. Maybe meeting friends or something? It wasn’t even important.”

“But important enough for you to feel the need to climb the

staircase?”□

“Here’s the thing: it took almost no energy. I wasn’t winded or anything.”

She paused as the therapist scribbled frantically on her pad. Giving the older woman time to catch up, she took in the titles on the bookshelf. It was an eclectic collection, and not what one would expect in a psychotherapist’s library. “Then again, who says the only thing a shrink reads is Freud and Jung,” thought the girl. “I suppose there’s room for Robert Ludlum.”

The therapist paused from writing and looked up, catching the girl’s observation. “You know, this isn’t my office,” she said, gently. “It’s temporary. Those aren’t my books.”

The girl thought the therapist was being rather defensive, but let it drop, and continued with her dream. “And at the top was this level area, again flagstaff and the only way out seemed to be this big wooden door.”

“It sounds a lot like ‘Vertigo,’” commented the therapist, wryly.

“Well, that’s where it gets strange... because as I got the door and I thought, ‘I’m not going in here!,’ that’s when I saw the spiral staircase. But not really like a spiral because it was - you know - squarish. Made of tiny wooden steps. It was a



huge pain to clamber down all those little, teensy stairs.”

“And the staircase led you where?” □ □ “Through people’s houses - like through the sides of them. And I was embarrassed to be caught there because, well, how would you like it if someone came clomping into your living room on their way to the street.”

“I can see that it might be distracting,” said the therapist □ □ “Quite!” exclaimed the girl. “So I get back onto the street and the numbers have screwed me up.”

The therapist looked lost, and the girl grimaced. How to explain?

“It all seemed so clear.... Say I had to get to 120th Street, and I had entered the tunnel at 54th? I came out of staircase at 150th and I thought I’d missed my exit, see?” So, I asked someone -”

“What tunnel?” the therapist interrupted, not even glancing up from her notes. □ □ “What?”

“You said tunnel,” said the therapist, leafing through her copious papers. “It was a tower before.”

“Tower, tunnel, whatever,” countered the girl, impatiently. “The point is that I asked this person and - “□□”It’s very relevant,” replied the therapist sternly. “A tower implies phallic representation whereas a tunnel is vaginal.”

The girl studied the therapist for a few moments. “Really? You think this is all sexual?”□□”Well, it’s not my place to commit to that. Let’s see how it plays out.”

“I asked someone and I was really pissed. I mean, how did I miss the street, right? How do I get access to where I need to go? I mean, if that stupid tower and bridge and staircase are blocking me?”

She watched the therapist underscore a few words before she continued. “Turns out that the numbering CHANGED. I was only at 80th Street and I had to keep going. You know how that happens.”

“And then?”□

“And then I woke up. I wasn’t anxious or anything. It was just a matter-of-fact kind of dream.”

“Do you think the spiral might represent something that’s impeding your progress in life?” asked the therapist.

“You’re the shrink. You tell me,” thought the girl, but what came out of her mouth was “It was a squarish spiral, not a round one. Does that make a difference?”

“Time’s up!” cried the therapist, and the girl uncurled herself from the sofa, walked past the seedy thrillers and the fake Monets out into the cool breeze of the street, and wondered what tale she could make up the following week.

October 2002

## My Secret Gardening

Until very recently, my only experience with things agricultural involved occasionally dumping some loose change into the blue and white box that would miraculously transform itself into tree saplings in Israel. Although it was the land of my forefathers some five thousand years ago, they needed new trees. Who knew?

My father took on our family garden with a combination of grace, enthusiasm and an abundance of bad language. I took refuge inside the house when he mowed, my allergies rendering me hopeless from May until mid-October. Why we could plant trees in Israel but not dose me up with anti-histamines is still a mystery.

I moved to rural Western Massachusetts a few months ago, delighted to find a cottage whose owner would be responsible for both snowplowing and landscaping. I could enjoy the country without actually getting my hands dirty, it seemed.

The cottage had previously been inhabited for about forty years by one Cecilia, mother to afore-mentioned landlady, and she remained there, legally blind, until she died at the grand old age of 99. Until she lost most of her sight, she doggedly worked her garden, and had quite the magic touch.

Inspired by this, I planted tomato seeds in little pots, and furiously stared at them for several hours a day, watering, ensuring their warmth, and generally paying more attention to them than to my amused boyfriend.

To my amazement, the little seeds bore fruition; well, that might be a little optimistic, but they sprouted what looked a lot like... well, salad sprouts. Every morning, after the frigid Berkshire County Spring air rose above 60 degrees, I would carry the pots onto the deck and sit them in the sun, only to bring them into captivity as the evening chill approached.

Stunned by my prowess, I decided to take on an actual garden bed. I had remarked how well everything seemed to be doing, only to be informed that the spectacular greenery was predominantly weeds. I plucked them out, leaving little stumps. It rained. The weeds doubled in size. Clearly a battle was called for.

One hot day, covered in sunscreen and wearing a particularly comical yellow hat, I sat down with a tiny shovel and a ton of determination. After a while, I switched from shovel to pitchfork, and dug furiously into the neglected soil. What I discovered was incredible: you can dig up a patch of earth, and discover yards of weed roots which, if you pull at exactly the correct angle, can emerge from the ground, rather like a

wool sweater unraveling. It was like a magic trick. The more I dug, the more ambitious I became, the more ruthless and relentless.

Eight hours later, sore, weary, and horribly burnt on the bottom of my back, where my shirt had risen up, I sat on my heels and marveled at the sight of a well-tilled bed. I hadn't had this much satisfaction since I had written "The End" on my first screenplay (one of many still waiting to be discovered).

I recalled with fondness seeing my father with a giant sifter, sorting the rocks and weeds from the fertile soil, and I wished I had such an implement. I was bonding with my deceased father. This was great therapy, a wonderful way to get fresh air and exercise and it was free!

My first trip to the garden center was ostensibly to buy some full-sun perennials (I had researched everything thoroughly on the internet, and it seemed silly to waste money on a one-season flower, when I could have a long and fruitful relationship with reoccurring plants). I also purchased topsoil and asked about compost. Please refer to the third paragraph of this essay: I live in the middle of nowhere. Everyone prepares his or her own compost, it seems. The only alternative was cow manure and because pine trees

surround me, this was apparently not a very apt solution. I lugged home something lime-ish to sprinkle on my clay-like, pine-laden soil, along with a handful of plants.

The soil added a nice sheen to my pristine garden. The new plants looked rather small and lonely, but I took comfort in the richness of the soil (I must have personally apologized to eighty earthworms while tilling), and sat back to admire it.

Something was missing. A frantic Internet search pulled up mulch. I thought mulch was some sort of seafarers' disease, like scurvy, but apparently it helps prevent the reoccurrence of weeds. Well, I wasn't having weeds coming back, so I began the hunt for mulch.

One site recommended pine needles, and I had them by the bucket should I have the desire to actually collect them, but it would have required a three inch layer of needles over what was now fifty square feet. Frugal and eco-aware am I, but there was no way this Jewish princess was going to collect almost a thousand cubic inches of pine needles.

I found mulch at a different landscaping center and loaded up the wagon again. My car was beginning to smell like the inside of a garden shed.

Back home, I spread the mulch with abandon, only to discover that I only had about inch coverage, and needed more. A quick spreadsheet revealed that I had already spent \$87.35 on my free enterprise. But I rationalized this by thinking how much I would save on tomatoes and cucumbers. Oh, yes, I had bought a cucumber plant as well.

It's two weeks later, and I am still gardening like a lunatic. My manicure is ruined, and I just inherited a composter, which I am feverishly filling with a ratio of brown to green at 25:1. Green is easy. Brown is harder. But the entire enterprise is terribly green in an eco sense, so I can sleep at nights. The best part is rolling the composter around to aerate the soil.

I have been dubbed The Constant Gardener. They won't be laughing when all I have to eat are tomatoes, cucumbers, mint, parsley and chives. And basil. You have to have basil to ward off insects from the tomatoes. So I had to buy basil. It's all completely justifiable.

I now have to find marigolds for my cucumber plant, because they are meant to ward off insects.

Is there a twelve-step program for gardeners, I wonder?

July 2007



## Overdressed

I never dress appropriately.

It's not like I'm a teenager, and it's a sign of rebellion. It's just bad timing. Or bad taste. Or both.

When Richard from Accounting said he'd take me dancing, I was thrilled.

I don't get out much. I'm not the sort men flock to, like Lisa, who sits at the next desk to mine. She works for Mr. Flannery, and he buzzes round her like all the other men in the office. And he's married. I think it's disgusting. I try not to seem like too much of a prude, but some of these newer girls that come in really flaunt themselves.

Me, I've been at Locke and Flannery for eight years. Joined right out of school. I worked my way up out of the typing pool to be exclusive secretary for Mr. Smiting. One day, I might even get promoted to work for Mr. Locke. That's if that old battle-ax, Mrs. Witherspoone, ever retires. She scares the life out of me, with her sensible shoes and her tweed suits. I wonder if she thinks of me with the same disdain that I think of Lisa and her ilk.

Anyhow, I dress fine for the office. It's not hard. A few knee length skirts and blouses, a dress or two, and a host of cardigans for when it gets a little drafty.

It's outside of work that I seem to run into difficulties. I don't make that much at Locke and Flannery, even with the promotions, and so much goes to my mother. She's not well enough to work any more, and my dad died years ago leaving us with almost nothing, because he'd missed a couple of payments on his life insurance. Terrible shame, everyone said, but at least she has a daughter to look after her. And that's what I do. So I don't go out much. And it's not as if Lisa and the girls don't ask me.

I went out with them once. They made a real scene, cackling and giggling, and heads burrowed together like so many chickens scratching for food. I felt really out of place. They had lovely clothes, some of those girls.

The next time they asked me, I told them I had to look after my mother. I think they were just asking because they felt sorry for me.

There was another time, when I got asked to help at the church bazaar. I thought I'd put on a nice pair of slacks to help sort through all that stuff, price it, and the like. But when

I got there, all the other girls were in twin-sets and pearls. I felt like an idiot. They treated me like I was a maid then, because it obviously didn't matter if I got dusty. So I got to do all the grunt work while they sat around drinking coffee and giving directions. I was so vexed.

Richard from Accounting seems like a nice young man. Tall, too. Always has a nice shine on his shoes, and that's a good sign, my mother always told me. It took him three months to talk to me, and when he finally asked me out, I have to say I was a little surprised. But I got the girl next door in to sit for mother, and here I am.

I haven't gone dancing for years. Not since high school, really. I don't have that many clothes: the ones for work, and a pair of slacks for housework. And this strapless gown. I saw it on sale in Hecht's and just had to have it. This was about four years ago. It just called my name. I never went to the prom, what with my dad being so poorly, so this was like a reward for missing out on that special day.

Finally I was going to have a chance to wear it.

Richard picked me up promptly at seven o'clock, like he said he would, shoes shined nicely. He looked a bit taken aback when he saw me, but I thought it was because he expected

my dad to answer the door, or at least my mother. He doesn't know about my family circumstances. Then I thought that he hadn't expected me to look so good. My hair was down and he hadn't seen it like that. I couldn't decide which of the two necklaces I have I should wear, so I thought, oh, you only live once, and put them both on! So I was quite a picture, I thought.

When we got to the dance club, I thought there had been a terrible mistake. The last time I went dancing, there was a man with a bow tie letting people in through a velvet rope, and the waiters carried their trays over their heads. This place was nothing like that. Just a hole in the wall, really.

The girls were all in tight pants. I had no idea that society had fallen into such a state of poor dress. Whereas I was usually the one underdressed, with nothing to wear that would rise to the occasion, here I was, dolled up and looking magnificent, and everyone else looked like, well I'm not sure I'm using the word in the right context, but they looked like beatniks!

Richard sat me at a table and got me a martini, but it wasn't five minutes before this other girl came over to him. She was wearing the tightest pants of all, and had the biggest hair. She didn't look at his shoes, but she certainly looked me over, with this sort of amused, condescending glance.

“Is it alright if I take a quick spin with Veronica?” he asked me. I didn’t think I was in a position to say no. That wouldn’t have been ladylike.

So I sat there nursing my gimlet as one dance blended into another, and watched as Richard spun Veronica around the floor.

He fell back onto the booth, his spindly legs flailing from the exertion.

“Well, that was fun!” he said cheerily.

I was wondering if he was going to ask me to dance, but he seemed a little weary from his last jig. But he recovered alright when Jane showed up at our table.

He wasn’t back five minutes from spinning Jane around, when another hussy came up and grabbed him. We didn’t have one dance together. Not that I would have wanted to, after they’d had their hands all over him. Turns out he wasn’t that shy after all, not once he heard some music.

Richard gave me money for a taxicab, and I let myself in to the apartment really quietly so I wouldn’t wake mother. I took

off the necklaces, and hung up my dress, which had still not gotten its first twirl.

Then I went to bed, and put any thoughts of Richard out of my mind. I wondered if the skirt of my frock would ever float up, if I would ever be spun around. Or if I would ever wear that dress again.

Seems like nice clothes, like nice girls, aren't so fashionable any more.

He was a lovely dancer, though.

September 2000

## Subway Seat Etiquette

There is an early Disney cartoon in which Pluto (or is it Goofy- I can't recall), a mild-mannered, sweet guy, becomes a raving maniac once he sits behind the wheel of a car. I think men in Manhattan are suffering from the same syndrome.

Above ground, they are polite and tender, but once they descend into the subway, their alpha personalities and territorial tendencies blossom, like so many peacocks, tails erect.

Men will straddle two plastic molded seats on the older cars, and simply sprawl on the newer ones that have no defining butt lines. Some of them spread their legs so wide, that they are in danger of splitting their scrotums. Interestingly, it always appears that people reading religious tracts are the most resentful of moving their bag off the bench, or shifting a few inches, almost as if it's their God-given right to occupy one-and-a-half (or sometimes two) seats.

I am an equal opportunity seat-requester. I politely smile, and pointedly, with no hint of sarcasm or bitterness, and adding just soupcon of charm, say "Excuse me, Sir/Madam.

Could you move over a bit?" This is followed by shuffling on their part and a relieved and grateful "Thank you!" on mine.

It seems to work most of the time. A few days ago, a young man sighed an obscenity and asked "How many people are supposed to fit here?" As I squeezed in, I answered his rhetorical question: in these new cars, seven: three and four on either side of the bar, respectively.

Then there was the time a train arrived in rush hour simply brimming with strap-hangers (or pole-hangers now, I suppose) and a few sullen youths spread out over the vast expanse of benches. The upstanding folk were clearly intimidated by these kids' angry glares of "just try it" looks, but I wasn't. I thought about it for a moment and decided that not asking for a seat because I was in some way nervous about approaching people of color would be just racist.

I raised my eyebrows enquiringly at two teenage girls; they rolled their eyes back at me. I tried my polite request. No luck. I turned opposite them to find a skinny young man almost prostrate across three seats.

"Excuse me, Sir. Could you move over a bit?" I asked.



“Sheeee-it,” he replied. “I gotta move over for your skinny white ass?”

I thanked him for saying that my behind was of small proportions, and agreed that, yes, that’s what he had to do. The other commuters gazed in astonishment, awaiting the inevitable fracas. Since the boy’s attitude outweighed his frame, I figured I could take him, skinny ass or no. The two gargantuan girls opposite beckoned him over, patting the seat between them.

“Come here, baby, there’s room for you over here.”

Room for him, but not for me, it seemed.

I got my seat. My fellow passengers regarded me with awe (probably the same look one gives to anyone doing remarkably foolish with little regard for their own personal safety, like chain-saw juggling or sword-swallowing).

How much do I want to carry a cattle-prod and swagger through the cars, with dark glasses and a combat jacket, poking decent manners into those that would scorn the unspoken rules of etiquette.

“Hey, you! Sit up straight and stop leaning over the woman next to you! Young lady! Remove that wet umbrella from the seat! Mother: did you pay for your two-year old? No? So make him sit on your lap: it’s rush hour here!”

July 2002

## The Careless Prince

Once upon a time, there was a young prince, who lived on the East Side of a magic island called Manhattan and he had everything he could wish for.

His parents sent him to Dalton, and he made it into Harvard, avoiding all collegiate activities that required physical effort on his part, and most that involved intellectual pursuits. Blessed with extraordinary looks and a good family reputation, Prince Luca, for that was his name, even possessed the ability to dance without looking like a thousand volts were pumping through his body.

He graduated (barely) and returned to the magic island, immediately finding a reasonable two-bedroom apartment through his father's real estate contacts, which he shared with his best friend, who matched his standards of hygiene and tidiness completely, thereby causing no conflict whatsoever.

Luca found a job in a tall building and commuted each day deep in the belly of the island, gently holding a soft leather briefcase, and sporting an expensive tie. He loved his job and, although he was never really able to describe to people exactly what it was he did, it made his bank account and

stock portfolio swell.

However, he didn't know how very charmed his life was.

Amelia came to the tall building one day as an indentured servant, known as a temp. She sat outside Luca's office and answered his phones. She brought him coffee, and typed his reports. She was pure of heart and strong of character, but the relentless boredom and insignificance of her tasks wore her down.

One day, she plucked up courage and entered the inner sanctum of Luca's office.

"Begging your pardon, sir," she said, bowing her head in respect, "But don't you have something more for me to do?"

He waved her away with a brushstroke of a gesture with his hand. She retreated to her cube, but the next day, she braved his office again.

"Sir," she asked, "Are you sure there is nothing I can do for you?"

Luca stared at her as though she were an annoying insect that had gnawed its way through his protective netting.

On the third afternoon, she was exhausted by the tedium of her day and once more knocked on Luca's door.

"Sir," she trembled. "There must be some way I can help you."

But the Prince looked up from his desk and laughed in her face.

"Help?" he responded heartlessly. "What 'help' could you possibly be to me?"

Shunned and embarrassed, the girl slunk out of the inner sanctum and the building altogether. She sat on the steps of a nearby building and cried. As her sobbing slowed to a steadier beat, she became aware of an old woman sitting close by. Wrinkled with age, her feet wrapped in plastic, and clutching assorted bags tied with string, the woman gave off a foul odor, but a warmth that had hitherto eluded the girl at the bottom of the magic island.

"Why are you crying," asked the old woman.

"Old woman, I have been shamed. For months I have sat outside the inner sanctum of a careless man and tried to do

no wrong. When I offer him help, however, he mocks me cruelly.”

“Careless?” asked the woman. “You mean untidy? Clumsy? Prone to nasty accidents?”

“Well, no,” explained the girl. “I mean that he has never had a care in the world and, although I would wish none of my cares on him, I feel he would benefit from knowing the suffering of others.”

The old woman smiled.

“Return here one week hence, and you will see a changed man,” she croaked.

Thanking her, Amelia pulled herself together, and went home, wiping her tear-stained face with the back of her toner-stained hands.

One week to the day, Amelia ventured back to the magic island to meet the old woman, but she was nowhere to be found.

As she turned the corner, however, she noticed a giant bird flying low over the island, and watched in horror as it flew

directly into the building where Prince Luca reigned.

Glass and metal and people fell from the tower, as a fireball grew, and the girl knew that the one thing she must do was find the Prince and save him. She ran up the spiraling stairs that encased the shuddering tower as every other person ran down. She coughed and her eyes stung, but she persevered until she reached his floor.

Prince Luca sat, stoically, in his throne, not moving.

“You?” he asked, surprised. “What are you doing here?”

“We have to leave this place now!” cried Amelia, and with a strength she had never before known, she grabbed his arm and pulled him to the stairs.

He weighed more than lead and his feet were as clumsy as a newborn deer’s. For he had never faced fear or danger, and did not know how to react.

They got out of the tower just as the rumbling started, and ran together hand in hand as fast as they could. He sprang into life as a boom louder than either had ever heard crushed their ears, and the smoke and the dust engulfed them.

Then there was blackness.

When she came to, Amelia found herself alone with the old woman who smiled, conspiratorially.

“Do you think he knows troubles enough now?” she inquired.

“You made this happen?” asked Amelia.

The old woman shrugged, as if to accept a compliment.

“Can you make it go away?”

A look of confusion ran across the old woman’s face.

“But then Prince Luca will never know pain or suffering. He will go on in life being a heartless and cruel ruler. He will never thank you for your troubles, fall in love with you, marry you and lift you out of your life of poverty.”

“I don’t care,” replied Amelia softly. “Just build the tower, stop the bird, save the Prince. Put things back the way they were.”

The old woman did exactly that. And the people of the magic island of Manhattan continued about their heartless and cruel



ways, never knowing how close they had come to awareness, accompanied by death and devastation.

No one ever saw the old woman again, but Amelia is still an indentured servant in mid-town, and as you read this story, she is un-jamming a fax machine in your office.

As for Prince Luca, he married a Wharton MBA who transformed from a gorgeous princess into a frigid bitch a week after the wedding. So he learnt suffering after all.

October 2001

*This story originally ran in the July 2002 issue of Big News.*

### *About the Author*

Born and educated (to a fashion) in England, Ruth moved to New York in 1988, and misses the crack and the hookers. She bounced between Manhattan, Los Angeles and Chicago, until returning to Southern California in 2007 to marry.

She lives in Eagle Rock with her husband, his feisty cat, and her bratty Border Collie.



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