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## Tell Me What You Really Think (A Novel)

Marriya Schwarz

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*Tell Me What You Really Think: A Novel*

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement  
for the degree of Bachelor of Arts in the Department of English/Creative Writing from  
The College of William and Mary

by

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# ***Tell Me What You Really Think:***

A Creative Writing Honors Thesis

By Marriya Schwarz

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## Chapter 1

# WASTED

**By Brooke Dixon**

Once upon a time in a foul-smelling land a couple blocks away, there was an intersection between Macdougall and Washington Square South. Diverse characters frequented this area: NYU students dressed in royal purple juggling books in one hand and a tall bubble tea in the other, the excess condensation dripping into the hexagon-shaped stone pattern of the sidewalk; tourists focusing on documenting their trip with gaudy cameras that will store the footage on an SD card that will be forgotten and eventually sold in a yard sale; and businessmen with their shiny shoes and swinging leather briefcases, ready to take out a fry-eating pigeon if need be. It was hectic, to say the least. Through loud footsteps and crisp white takeout containers, any passerby could tell that the lunch hour was upon us.

On this corner, positioned behind a hot dog stand and below two checkered umbrellas, one blue and yellow and one red and yellow, was a man, who continued to wipe the moisture dripping from the top of his forehead to the slender dip of his neck with an off-white towel. The towel would rest on a metal stand decorated by an impressive display of Coca Cola products and Snapple varieties. These beverages were all organized by type and color, labels turned out and easy-to read, seeing as the man running this particular hot dog stand was a man of taste, of values. Every morning, without fail, he would brush his teeth and groom his mustache to meet passerby on the outskirts of

Washington Square Park. Every day, he would station himself as a familiar haunt of the locale, hiding between posters that advertised “hot dogs,” “hot sausages” and “all beef sausages,” even though they were just reiterations of the same thing. The man’s resentment for this particular position was evident in how his greased-up fingers would grip the metal trolley as he prepared himself to convince customers to upgrade their order to a chili dog for only 50 cents extra. They wouldn’t regret it. That was “Sal’s promise.”

His name was not Sal. No, his name was Peter.

Peter was not just my local hot dog seller; my frankfurter connoisseur to give credit where credit is due.

No, Peter was much more than that.

Peter was the one who informed me that my boyfriend of three years was cheating on me.

~~An employee at the Strand Bookstore~~ People has have asked me about what it was like to have a piece published in *THE New Yorker*. And I will tell you exactly what I told ~~him~~ them verbatim:

“Well, I didn’t expect it. Of course, I didn’t expect it. Especially when I’m New York’s own friendly neighborhood nobody. [Pause for laughs] I’m kidding, I’m kidding. Would a nobody now have Tina Fey’s email address? ([realtinafey@hotmail.gov](mailto:realtinafey@hotmail.gov)) [I don’t give this out, of course. Tina is a dear ~~stranger~~ friend.] In fact, I didn’t even send in my own piece to *The New Yorker*. My best friend sent it in for me. [Pause for gasps] I know, I know – it’s crazy to think about. I wrote this thing in... a moment of pure desperation, of depression, of loss of hope in humanity. [Pause for shuddering breaths] And Denise told me that it was too entertaining to

gather e-dust in a writing folder on my laptop, so she asked me to send her a copy and she forwarded that on to the New Yorker email address. Cut to four months later and I get this email labeled as TNY Fiction (which always makes me think of “tiny fiction,” like I’m just imagining little ants in suits with librarian-style glasses perched over their noses.) [Pause for mutterings of “huh, I hadn’t thought of that.”] And I’m like [tasteful sound effect that sounds like a cross between a “Wahhh,” an “OMG,” and a Sims character]. This email says that they want to publish my piece – one that, let me remind you, I didn’t even know I sent in! I wanted to pinch myself, but I didn’t because life already inflicts enough pain on me, so I shouldn’t add more that is self-inflicted. I knew that there were going to be setbacks of people reading my work, but it felt like I finally made it, y’know?”

~~The Strand Bookstore employee fidgets with his red lanyard.~~

~~“Um, I was just dared by my coworker to come check on you because you have been lying motionless in the erotica aisle for a good 45 minutes. My store manager was worried you were dead.”~~

~~“I’m more alive than ever,” I say, not knowing if he wants me to recount my tale of unlikely success all over again. I’m the Forrest Gump of short story writers right now. No one expected me to be much of anything, but now I’m a star; I’m at the Olympics... sized pool at the YMCA off of 135<sup>th</sup> street occasionally. *Forrest Gump* won six Oscars and three Golden Globes, but I only get asked if I’m “okay,” “if they should call someone” and “did you know we can have you moved by force?”~~

~~“Well, can I help you find something? The self help section possibly?” the employee asks.~~

~~“It’s okay if you want a picture. My piece has been out for a week, so you’ve probably seen the buzz,” I say. “I think my parents have even seen it. My dad’s a subscriber, so that’s how I became a fan. Are your parents still together?”~~

~~He doesn’t respond. Clearly not a conversationalist; there’s a reason this one works with books.~~

~~“Mine are divorced.” I clearly have to do all of the heavy lifting here.~~

~~When he doesn’t respond, I take it upon myself to run to the stairs. On the wall are stickers portraying stacked up books. Authors like Amber Tamblyn and Rachel Cusk have added their John Hancock to the wall, and now so will I.~~

~~“Can I make it out to Matt?” I ask, pulling out a Sharpie that I always carry in an old Subway to-go bag.~~

~~“My name’s Ryan,” the employee says.~~

~~“No worries,” I say.~~

~~To this day, if you look closely, you’ll see, among Naomi Wolf and Steve Israel is “To Matt: Eat Fresh! Love, Brooke ‘The Falcon’ Dixon.”~~

~~It’s always nice to give fans what they want.~~

The short story was published on a Subway Sweet Onion Chicken Teriyaki Sub of the Day – or Monday for those who do not measure their time in discounted fast food. As soon as I held the printed copy, I called my best friend and co-conspirator, Denise, to set up a lunch where I could officially reveal “Wasted” in all its glory in Adobe Caslon typeface. Everyone thought that the title was so profound, since my “character” wastes three years of her life with the same loser. But it also describes my serious inebriation while I wrote it – after all, I am my mother’s

daughter. After Dad left, it wasn't rare to find her with boxed wine while she ranted and cried into his voicemail inbox. She would sober up once the mailbox had filled up, and she would wipe her eyes and try to help me with my math homework. By the next night, the inbox would be empty again, and the cycle would start all over. I don't think he ever listened to the messages. It took three months before he blocked her. And me as a precaution.

Since Denise has an actual working human job, we had to wait until Friday (Subway Tuna Sub of the Day) to meet. I thought it was important to share it with her; after all, she was the one who sent it in on my behalf. She deserves a byline in my heart.

I was excited to give the printed copy to her, instead of my mother who called three times. Each call went to voicemail because I was worried that my mother somehow got the idea that the piece was about her, instead of being based in my own wretched reality. No part of me wanted to face her, even if it was her just being happy for me. I put my words out into the world for the public, and for now, that would just have to do before she got private ones directly from me. I assumed she already read it, but I didn't want to exactly open up that can of worms. Over and over again, my phone would light up on the coffee table, illuminating a picture of her and Dad. I hadn't had the heart to change it. Taking a deep breath, I would pause whatever show I was watching (I'm not sure which) (*New Girl* Season 3) and hold down on the lock button until her face would fade away. Turning the phone upside down, I would continue to hear the buzzes of the phone against the table. I didn't want to turn it to silent. But at least I didn't block her. Dad, a contact I can never use, was now changed to the default profile picture, and he didn't call at all. I wasn't sure if he even knew about it.

At 11:59 AM on Friday, I was waiting for Denise under the wooden awning of Pommes Frites, which *technically* only serves French fries with a multitude of sauces so it's not the best



choice for a well-balanced meal. But in our defense, for Denise, this was her cheat day meal since she had been working with her trainer every single morning. And for me? Well, I sprained my ankle in a Dance Dance Revolution battle when I was ten, and I haven't pursued athletics since, just in case I'm still on the mend.

To my right, there was a cone of plastic French fries and I couldn't help but wonder if a drunk person ever tried to take a bite out of the display. I fidgeted with my blazer sleeves that draped over my narrow wrists – I had yet to get it tailored, but I had this big interview with *Let's Chat Mag*, some entertainment and literary magazine I had never heard of, later that day about my 'process', and there was just never enough time in the day to find a tailor that wasn't all hands. A rapid clicking of heels on the sidewalk took me out of these thoughts and Denise appeared, red-faced. The short little wisps of hair framing her head stuck to her tan cheeks, and her chest heaved beneath her actually well-fitted blazer. "Sorry I'm late, my famous writer best friend," she said with a grin.

"You're right on time," I said. It was always this way with Denise.

"Well, you should have told me that three blocks ago." Then, her eyebrows furrowed as she looked from me to the shop. "Why didn't you go in and save us a table? It's lunch rush hour."

"The dim lighting gives me the creeps," I said.

Pushing open the door, she set her sights on trying to find an empty table in this closet of a venue. There were only two high tables to begin with, so the chances weren't great. And Denise was not a bench-person, so that was not an option. As soon as she saw someone start to move, she ran over with the energy of a soccer mom at a PTA meeting when someone in the

back mutters that their kids don't eat organic – "I guess you're fine with your daughter *dying* of pesticides, Karen."

I liked to call this place Shakespeare's Globe Theatre-chic. The stained-glass windows, wooden paneling, and torch lights created a medieval atmosphere that was utterly ruined by "Give Up the Funk" playing over the speaker system. It was a strange décor for a place that only served French fries, but I guess everyone needed their gimmick. The place even had their own wooden coat of arms nailed to the outside of the shop that featured a metal cone of fries in the very center.

Denise sat me down while she went to get our standard order, telling me that if anyone tried to steal our table, I should just bite them.

Looking around the small darkened establishment, I couldn't help but wonder how many people had read my story. I tried to ground myself in the moment, just in case there were any light taps on my shoulder, followed by a copy of this week's *New Yorker* and a pen.

"Could I have your autograph, Miss?" they would ask, their voice fearful yet awed.

"Of course; I do this all the time, dah-ling," I would say. Oh yeah, I'm British now because why not? They don't know the author behind the piece. I could be British, a man who lived in the jungle for years and recently got acclimated to human life, or a donkey with a typewriter. Gotta keep 'em guessing.

"I'm so proud of you, Brooke," Denise said when she came back to the table with the goods.

"Don't go all sappy on me." I waved her off and reached at one of the white paper cones that became less and less white as the grease of the French fries sunk in. For a moment, I wondered if she got the order right. But of course she would; she's Denise. Little Miss business

casual and always holding a color-coded planner. Blue cheese sauce for her and wasabi for me – because wasabi is the most low-level fear factor I can think of.

“Before I praise my beautifully literate best friend, I have to ask: how are your taxes?” she asked, setting her manicured acrylic nails on the wooden table.

“I was supposed to pay taxes?” I asked. I deserved her glare. “They’re fine.”

“Are you sure you don’t want my help?”

“I don’t know. I’ll think about it.” I was used to where this conversation was going.

“Cool,” Denise said, “This is officially a business lunch – fully paid by Squared Tax Preparation.” She pushed out her chest in pride and placed her cone of fries in the designated hole on the table. There is no way to describe this while coming off as the good guy; we do this little song and dance every once in a while, in which I play a customer who is considering hiring Denise as my primary tax consultant. The only problem is that my ‘character’ can’t really decide on anything until she has more French fries in her stomach. ‘Scam’ is a strong word for it. I like to call it interpretive stealing back from corporate America. It’s a classic Robin Hood, stealing from the rich and giving to the poor; what’s the problem if the poor just also happens to be us? Besides, Squared Tax Preparation straight up sucks. This high up CEO guy came into work the other day and told Denise that she might benefit from “smiling a bit more.” The higher ups are all men and the women are all sent to grab coffee and provide a “soothing feminine presence” in the workplace. It’s a place that attracts male pricks; I should know – my ex-boyfriend currently is employed at this exact establishment.

“Alright, let me see it. I’ve only read it online!” Denise said, holding out her hand and making a ‘grabby’ movement, opening and closing her palm.

“Sanitize first,” I said. If we were going to do this, we were going to do this right. Pulling out a Bath & Body Works cherry blossom hand sanitizer, I squeezed a considerable blob onto Denise’s hand.

“I think you’re being a little dramatic.”

“A little dramatic or a little too relaxed?” I asked.

“A little dramatic,” she said. Taking the magazine from me, she flipped through it.

“Boring, boring, boring,” Denise said, skipping past the other stories. Finally, she stopped and held it up in the air with a squeal.

“There’s your name!” she said, reading through it again.

Closing the magazine, she tucked it into her bag before turning back to me.

“So, do you feel accomplished yet?” Denise asked.

“I guess so. The story has been pretty successful so far.”

“*Pretty* successful? It’s trending, Brooke! My aunt shared it on Facebook and she only ever shares her results on BuzzFeed quizzes and long-winded paragraphs on when Judgment Day will be and how it will go down.”

“2023 is going to be a big year,” I said, having seen Denise’s aunt’s Facebook posts.

“Jackie also loved it; she won’t stop talking about how we know who Peter, the hot dog man, really is.” Jackie is Denise’s girlfriend. They were college sweethearts from back at Notre Dame. They keep the PDA at a minimum.

“That’s nice of her.”

“Oh, did I not mention that I saw your old roommate at Joe’s?” Denise said. I grabbed her forearm. “She was holding a copy of the magazine.”

“What?” I asked, slamming my hand down on the table and annoying the six other customers and the three in line for the medieval bathroom. “She read it?”

“I guess so.”

“How did she seem? Give me details.”

“I don’t know. She was frowning,” Denise said.

Fuck. Sonia wasn’t an idiot. If she was frowning, she probably put two and two together and realized that this whole thing was about her. No one was supposed to get hurt. Enough people had *already* gotten hurt. And it’s not like seeing my roommate and my boyfriend together erased years of happiness – I was supposed to be the bigger person here, who, years later, would be walking down the cement sidewalk in high heels, somehow dodging all chewing gum and dog poop because life was perfect. I would stop at this little café and look in.

*“Mike?” I would ask, lowering down my colored shades that didn’t do much to block the sun, but I have a non-profit in my name that focuses on eye protection, eye safety, and shoplifting.*

*“Brooke?” he would ask, standing up.*

*“Sonia?” I would ask to finish the cycle. She would stand up as well. Then, we would all laugh and they would tell their children just how I was the one who got away.*

But now they know I care. And I sound like my mother – I mean, it was her retaliation for my father’s affair that made him drift away from me, too.

“This – *this* - is why it was supposed to go unread on my computer for eternity!” I said.

“Honey, did you really think that she wouldn’t hear about it?” Denise asked.

“I don’t know – I mean, I figured–”

Crisis mode. Denise grabbed my greasy hand with her own. Love.

With her other hand, she held a fry in her right hand and used it to conduct her speech while her blue eyes lit up. “I don’t know. I thought that it was pretty-” she took a bite of my wasabi sauce and couldn’t handle it, “epic how you just dragged your ex like that.”

“It wasn’t my fault.” I said, pointing an accusatory fry in her direction.

“Oh, come on, dude, it’s me,” she said. “Aren’t you a *little* happy that your ex and your ex-roommate are miserable and you just made like a bunch of money?”

“Would you be happy if you were in my position?” I asked.

Denise picked up a fry, squinting her eyes as she thought about the question.

“Oh, hell yeah, I would. They 100% had it coming,” she said. Then, she gave me that look. You know, the look that a best friend gives you when they can see right through your bullshit.

“Okay, yes. I guess, there is some kind of... satisfaction that she’s probably miserable, but I also feel bad. I mean, these were important people in my life once. Who I’m still *mad* at,” I said.

Seeing me freaking out, she decided to change the topic.

“Okay, okay, redirect. Redirect.” This was kind of a thing with us. When one of us was clearly uncomfortable with whatever was being discussed, we could say ‘redirect’ and change the topic entirely to Chris Hemsworth’s abs or Chris Hemsworth’s accent or even un-Chris Hemsworth affiliated topics, like Liam. “You said that you have an interview with the *Let’s Chat Mag* staff about the piece later today. Tell me about that. Don’t think about your ex,” Denise said.

“Right,” I said, trying to distract myself the best I could. I didn’t want to think about this. I wasn’t ready.

I don't remember much about the interview. I couldn't help but think about what Denise had brought up. She brought in very little information into the case, but just the frowning was enough to make my mind wander. Had I made everyone mad by writing this story? Did they hate me? I had never done well with people not liking me. But in my defense, I didn't want this thing published in the first place. I only wrote it because my therapist moved out to the Bronx, and I needed a way to deal with my feelings. And then when I got the offer, I was desperate. I had been looking for my big break, and how could I turn it down when I finally got it? Besides, I needed the money. *The New Yorker* pays over \$7,000 for fiction pieces, and I needed all of that. It was like a therapy session where they pay you! The agreement was that my ex-roommate was only going to cover the next few months of rent out of pity, and then I was on my own. After the piece came out and went 'viral,' a well-paying magazine, *Let's Chat Mag*, contacted me about setting up a longer interview for my fanbase, which I called my Beliebers.

I would read about the interview the next week when it was officially published. The person portrayed there was a distant memory – a mere character that seemed unrealistic, like a female character in a male-written novel who is very conscious of the hardness of her nipples.

Denise called me as soon as it was out.

"Brooke, what is this?" she asked over the phone. Yeah, we were using the phone – it was *that* serious.

"What is what?"

"The interview! The end! Why didn't you tell me about a new project?"

"What new project?" I asked.

I put her on speaker while I looked up the article. There in serif black font behind my grimy computer screen was the interview that would change everything:

IT'S JUST THE BEGINNING WITH BROOKE DIXON

*The break-through short story writer of "Wasted" on her frozen yogurt past, real-world interviewing processes, and bizarre muses. A closer look at a writer turned into a viral success story.*

By Camila Fisher

**CAMILA FISHER: Brooke, first off, I just have to congratulate you on the success of "Wasted."**

**BROOKE DIXON:** Thank you. I appreciate it.

**This must have been a whole new experience for you. What was it like having your story become viral?**

It was great. I had a lot of people posting on my Facebook wall, which was a shocker – also because I didn't realize I still had a Facebook. But mainly, it was a shocker because so many people had read it. My swim coach from middle school had read it, my swim coach from elementary school had read it, a lot of swim coaches.

**I think, especially in the society we live in today where there is new content coming out all the time, there is a pressure to not become what one might describe a 'one hit wonder.' With the success of the story, do you feel like there are any added pressures to create more content like with what we saw with "Wasted"?**



I mean, obviously, I don't want this to be my only success. But yes, there are a lot of things to consider: Am I going to be called the "Wasted" Girl all the time? (Which happens to be also what they called me in college). (I'm kidding. I didn't go to any parties in college. I once got a fortune cookie that said I was going to die through suffocation in large crowds. It was oddly specific. My best friend got "you have a smile that brightens people's days." I called the manufacturer and they never got back to me. A response just "wasn't in my future" y'know?) But I also feel like I now have to pick who is going to play me in the movie biopic of this whole experience.

**Wow. Okay. You certainly have quite the talent for fiction. We can see that on the page and see it here! Moving on, this is your first major short story. What have you been up to in the mean time?**

Well, I used to work at this frozen yogurt shop called [redacted] which was really a rip-off because I'm like 70% sure it was just soft serve. Then, I started doing some freelance work by writing some short stories and other articles for random magazines. I was also ghostwriting for a while. And now, I'm working remotely at this publishing company called [redacted] where I review manuscripts and query letters. I also run their social media pages. But it's not a very good company, so I'm not busy often.

**Brooke, if you would please refrain from mentioning any names of companies, that would be fantastic. It just saves us from getting into some legal situations.**

Oh, of course. I am so sorry about that. I am totally all about being discrete. When I worked at [redacted], Mr. [redacted] would always tell us mum's the word when we were putting out [redacted] into the [redacted] when we should have been using [redacted] as dictated by Congress.

**I am so sorry, Brooke, but I really have to remind you to not mention any identifying information that could get us into legal trouble. Let's just move on: Your best friend sent in the short story for you. What was that like? Was there a reason why you did not submit it yourself earlier?**

Well, it was more of a stream of consciousness kind of piece. I didn't really plan anything out or outline anything. I just didn't think it was good enough.

**But it was great! I hope this gives you a little more confidence in yourself to submit more of your great writing! I think we often undersell ourselves day to day, especially with the emergence of social media which makes it so much easier to compare ourselves with others.**

I still have the self-confidence of an undergrown bean sprout.

**Wow. Okay. Well, when did you know that writing was for you? Was there some kind of spark or book that got you involved?**

Well, I have always been writing. My father was a big writer; he was an advice column writer at a big magazine in Georgia. I won't say the name because of legal reasons, but it rhymes with [redacted].

**I'm still not quite sure you're getting it, Brooke. Your father got you into writing?**

**Does he still work at the same magazine?**

No. He quit when I was in high school. I actually haven't talked to him in a while. I'm not really sure what he's doing. He doesn't even have LinkedIn.

**Right. I don't want to pry too much, so let's move on. What I really loved – and what I think *America* loved about this short story is just the way that it goes so in-depth into the process of pain and failed relationships. I mean, I personally felt like I**

**was standing right with that main character. I myself was angry at this cheating boyfriend character. It was just so vivid. I have to ask – was this story at all based on real-life?**

It is. I mean, it isn't. I mean, it *kind* of is. Redacted.

**Brooke, you cannot just say “redacted.” Is the story based on your life?**

No! No of course not! Nothing like this has ever happened to me or will ever happen to me. I mean, I can't say that for sure. I'm not a psychic or anything. I mean, I watched *That's So Raven* as a kid, but that's my only experience with psychics. Well, and one time a psychic told me that I would die alone, but it was after I jaywalked and they almost hit me with their car, so I'm not totally sure if it was a psychic or just an angry person. So, in conclusion, no. It is not based on my life.

**Wait what? Okay, let's just unpack that for a moment.**

I'm sorry. I'm not very good at interviews honestly. I have trouble with figuring out what to say or, more importantly, what not to say. It all just comes out.

**It's totally fine. But, so is the story based on someone's life?**

Yeah. Someone who isn't me. Someone... else.

**Could you explain a bit about the process of developing this concept based on someone's life?**

Yeah. I do interviews! Yeah interviews! I interview people and then I write stories based on their lives. It's how I get inspiration.

**Wait that's interesting. Could you explain that process a bit more?**

Right, so I have specific questions that I start out with and then I just kind of... ask them?

**But where do you get your subjects?**

I mainly ask strangers. In public places. I'll just kind of go up to people that I find interesting and interview them.

**Do you use any kind of technology or anything? What are your methods?**

So, I usually record the whole interview on my phone and then I will take it home and take around 3-4 hours just transcribing the whole thing. Then, I'll read through it all a few more times so that I feel like I have a good idea of what this character is like before I put them into a more fictional kind of setting. Usually, that spurs something in me creatively.

**I would imagine it's hard to get people to open up. Do people usually feel comfortable with sharing this kind of level of information?**

I think so. I mean, people have been really open to talking about themselves. I think that it's easy to get people to open up when you give them the platform to talk about what they are truly passionate about.

**And how many of these kinds of interviews do you have?**

I don't know. I have so many that I have definitely lost track. I have a whole collection of them on my computer. I have like maybe a hundred. That's too many. I mean around twenty. Yeah, let's go with around twenty.

**Can you give us any sneak peeks of what these pieces based on interviews might be about?**

Well, there's one about a demon cat. There's another one about student debt. And there's one about these two twins that were separated at birth and then they meet at this summer camp, and they have to get their parents back together. I'm still workshopping that one though.

**Now, Brooke, you have a considerable fanbase. You are very active on Twitter and your brand has grown by a couple thousand followers.**

The name's @Dixon. @BrookeDixon91.

**Right. Well, I'm sure that your followers would be interested in more short stories like this – ones where we go super in-depth with our characters. Would you ever release more stories like this one, maybe like in a collection?**

Oh wow. Yeah of course. Whatever the fans want. Let's hashtag do it.

**I want to talk a little more about your process – are you the type to have thousands of index cards or Post-it notes? Do you outline? Is writing something you do every single day? I know that there is definitely a part of writing that needs to be habitual.**

I stop reading after that, and I call Denise back.

“Oh god. Why did I say that?” I ask over the phone.

“Do you actually have twenty interviews?” Denise asks.

“What? No, of course not!”

“Well, what if people find out you lied?”

“C'mon, Denise,” I say. “I'm sure no one has heard of *Let's Chat Mag.*”

People have heard of *Let's Chat Mag.*

The walls were black. The hardwood floors were black. The plush chairs were black. My eyes were closed. When I opened them after a brief meditation, I saw a large white waiting room with a gold trim. Adding a bit of color to the room were three framed larger-than-life book covers positioned on the walls. Someone had clearly majored in name-dropping. Parable

Publishing was the publisher of the famed mystery author, [redacted], and they weren't exactly subtle about it. The author's last book had centered around a murder in a publishing house. Parable Publishing had put up their own little fake blood patch on the carpet, along with a colorful sign you could take a picture with that read "Captain Weatherly died here!" It was a bit in bad taste, but it was a publishing house interested in my writing, so I didn't even care.

At the reception desk was a summer intern with a soft smile, who kept reassuring me every minute that "Georgina Price will be with you in just a moment." She sat in front of a branded wall that was labeled with "PARABLE PUBLISHING" in bright bold lettering.

At the sound of high heels, I looked up. The woman walking towards me in the polished waiting area looked so refined and perfect that she could have arrived in plastic packaging. Not a blonde hair was out of place, and her high heels were free of scuff marks.

"Thank you for meeting with me, Ms. Dixon."

And she was British. I could not imagine that this woman was talking to me. Instead of responding, I took a sharp inhale and held my complimentary cup of coffee with a tighter grip.

"Ms. Dixon," the woman said again.

Again, I didn't respond. This woman was a grown adult who clearly had her shit together – something that terrified me to no end.

"Ms. Dixon," I said in a stupor, looking around, wondering who was refusing to answer this woman. "Ms. Dixon... *I'm* Ms. Dixon."

"Yes, Ms. Dixon." If she was annoyed, she didn't show it. There was no inkling of a frown or a furrowed brow or even a freaking wrinkle. It was clear that the woman was an android of some sort. "My name is Georgina Price." What a name. "We talked over email."

“Yes. I have email,” I said. (Oh, hi. Didn’t see you there. If you know anything about anything, you know that a lady’s true weapon is her power of conversation. If you’ve noticed anything about me, you’ll notice that I can carry on quite the conversation. How do I do it, you ask? I’ll tell you: I use *Little Biggy’s Lessons in Small Talk: The Art of Saying the Least*. Get your copy today. Coupon Code: BROOKESUX123 #ad)

“Right. Well, let me be the first to welcome you to Parable Publishing. As the proud publisher of [redacted]’s 17 novels and 1 children’s picture book, we are absolutely honored to have you with us today.”

“I’m honored to be here,” I said. I really was. This was a big deal. It wasn’t just every day that you get an email from an actual publisher with an inquiry to see your other work.

“Let me show you around the office before we start,” Georgina said. I rose from the chair and only came up to her chin. My god, she was tall too. Who was this woman?

Right off the bat, I could see that this was an open floor plan aka hell. Looking at the line of big desktop computers, I could tell that it would be hard to watch *Gilmore Girls* while holding the phone to your ear or to look up a bad back rash “for a friend.” There were even more book cover posters here, but this was clearly the B-list books: a subtle reminder to anyone working production or marketing that they did not want their books featured in the main production area. The prime real estate was out in the lobby.

“It is a shame that Mr. Bond couldn’t join us today,” Georgina said.

“It is. He had business to attend to in Morocco,” I said.

Mr. Bond is a long story. A long story that doesn’t make me look great. You see, writers don’t necessarily need agents to publish with *The New Yorker*, but an agent is a great thing to have in every other circumstance.

After my interview with *Let's Chat Mag* gained some following, Camila Fisher sent me an email that an editor in the Acquisitions department at Parable Publishing (who is, of course, the publisher of the famous [redacted]'s gruesome novels and one kid's book about a blackmailed duck, but they are trying to branch out to less murder-focused plots) had wanted to get in touch with my 'team.' Camila said that she would be happy to send things over to my agent. Except I don't have an agent. Denise joked that I should just... invent an agent, which is exactly what I did. Fake name. Fake email. Fake photo (It's a picture of a guy that I went to high school with, but he did high school improv, so I think it's excusable). I don't feel great about it, but I'm apparently represented by Jim Bond of Shaken & Stirred Associates. I am trash. Extreme trash.

And it worked – I mean, I got an interview, didn't I? Of course, I hadn't written since the story came out, but no one needed to know that. And I also hadn't talked to Mike or Sonia, my ex and former best friend, but no one needed to know that.

"Let me take you out to our terrace. The view is terrific," Georgina said.

I didn't want to say that I was allergic to fresh air, since she was being so nice. Plus, my whole kind of livelihood depended on this meeting going well.

It turned out that the view was terrific. Green shrubbery and trendy stools lined the brick fence of the terrace. I could easily tell that this was a place of class and wealth, since brick is the best building material.<sup>1</sup> Even from this height, the Empire State Building was towering over us. Although it is much more impressive all lit up at night, this was still quite the picturesque shot that I could imagine printed on a 4 x 6 in. postcard. The buildings were all clustered together, close enough in proximity that they all appeared to be hugging each other. Of course, the Empire

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<sup>1</sup> Source: *The Three Little Pigs* originally told by James Halliwell-Phillipps in 1886.



State Building was most impressive, but I could see other office buildings with all glass windows – the only thing worse than an open office workspace. (“Mom, why is that lady on the 10<sup>th</sup> floor eating her third Taco Bell Crunchwrap Supreme of the day?” asks a child passerby).

“We all enjoyed your interview with *Let’s Chat Mag* the other day,” Georgina said, leading us to a pair of stools that we could continue our conversation on.

“Thank you. I appreciate your enjoyment.”

I’m a writer. I’m good with words.

“I thought that your comment about your creative process was intriguing. The combination of fiction and oral history is something innovative, and we believe it is worth a thorough exploration.”

“Thank you. I appreciate you saying that.” I hate myself.

“I also appreciate you taking time out of your busy day to meet with me. Your agent said that you are very busy as of late,” Georgina said. It’s important to play hard to get. My only real task for the day was eating trail mix in a bath robe, but what ‘Jim Bond’ of ‘Shaken & Stirred Associates’ doesn’t know won’t hurt him. Of course, he’s me, so he does know, but this is getting too metaphysical.

“It’s no trouble at all. I am very honored that you would take the time out of *your* day to show me around the office.”

“I just want you to understand that we rarely do this, but your recent short story, ‘Wasted’ has achieved optimal success and a fanbase.”

“Yeah, that’s the power of fellow angry women.”

Her mouth did not move into a smile or a grimace, and I didn’t know what to make of it. Instead of overthinking this, I looked out over the New York architecture, feigning nonchalance.

“Like I said, we rarely do this, but we are willing to offer you a book deal.”

That got my attention. I thought I was just coming into an interview that had the potential of growing into something more, but Georgina just got to it right out of the gate.

“A book?” I asked, as if I had never heard of such a thing.

“Yes. We are willing to offer you a book deal on this collection of short stories.

Normally, we would not be as interested in the genre, but with your growing fanbase, we think that this could be a big success. For both of us. We just need to see a little more material before we officially make an offer. We really want to get this book out as soon as possible, while your short story is still trending. We are talking a six-figure book here.”

“And the money? Is there an advance on that?” I asked. “Y’know because my agent couldn’t make it, I just want to ask the questions he would ask.”

“Oh yes. We’re looking at a \$40,000 advance, but we do need to see some work of promise here, just to make sure that we are investing in the right person for the job,” she said. “Is that sufficient?”

In that moment, my soul lifted out of my body and I watched the scene unfold like a movie at a midnight premiere. Through no will of my own, I watched as my chapped lips moved on their own:

“Yes. That is very sufficient. I’ll get you a draft right away.”

I threw popcorn at the screen.

## **Chapter 2**

Cut to today:

INT. BROOKE'S MESSY GREENWICH VILLAGE APARTMENT – DAY PROBABLY BUT I HAVEN'T OPENED MY WINDOW BLINDS IN A WEEK SO IT'S UNCLEAR

I sit, typing at my keyboard. EDM music is blasting in the background. There isn't any desk or anything in my small apartment space so I just sit on my bed with my Target-issued lap desk that props my laptop up at a precarious angle. But hey, that's show biz, baby.

I'm also confined to my bed because the wooden floors are so slippery – like I don't know what makes them so slippery – to my knowledge, we haven't washed them even once. But it's important to note that this isn't fuzzy sock country; proceed with caution. To make up for this fact, I'm surrounded in fuzzy blankets and I'm almost sinking in the weight of comfort. It feels like I could just fall right through this ball of fluff, but if this is an entrance to hell, sign me the fuck up. It's the type of comfort where, if the fire alarm were to go off, I'm not sure if I would get up or just choose to die happy. In this economy, how likely is it that I'm going to die happy any other way? Between student loans and just the general cost of living, I'm going to have such little money when I die that the chances are slim of getting all of my heirs to my death bed, only to be surprised that I have left everything in my will to my nurse. For the sake of drama, I'm going to have to make a major life change. The fact that I have spent literal days on just rice and beans is not okay, and the fact that people are literally out living on the street is a complete sign that the American Dream is a figment of the past.

My apartment is beautiful for New York standards, but it's also really fucking expensive, like I don't have enough kidneys to fund this thing all by myself. It's right on Fifth Avenue, which is a pretty expensive location. But it's the one that my ex-roommate, Sonia, wanted. She

wanted to live this big upper-class New York life with briefcases and businessmen and bagels. We both had an agreement - we were going to burst out of Augusta, Georgia together kicking and screaming. Well, me kicking and screaming - she's much more composed. I just wanted to get away from my mom and all of this tension surrounding my parents' divorce, but Sonia wanted a change of scenery and decided to bring me along, so that she wouldn't get lonely. In such a big city, it's nice to have someone who knows the grocery store your mom shops at or the name of your third grade English teacher. Besides, what was I supposed to do in Georgia? The options are mainly A) Grow peaches or B) Work at Time Warner Cable. Very little in between. Sonia did all the planning and all the researching for the apartment; I just kind of brought my shit. Well, that's a lie: for the first month after Sonia and I moved into the apartment, I kept a decorative bowl of Fifth Avenue candy bars on the kitchen counter until the joke got old. Well, Sonia thought it got old; I still think it's funny.

While I am stone-cold broke, Sonia comes from money. She's very much a trust fund baby. Starting next month, I'll be paying for all of this all by my broke self, since she offered to pay for only the first few months. But whether that will be changing with the publication of this piece and her inevitable anger, who knows? Maybe I should have thought about that before accepting *The New Yorker* publication, but hey, I think on my feet, not necessarily land on them.

The smell of microwaved fish hangs in the air because I'm an adult and I no longer share this microwave with anyone. I am waiting until creativity strikes me, which is the type of waiting where you realize that you didn't know minutes could last that long. There are nine whole freaking muses and all I'm asking for is one; I'll even settle for the astronomy one, Urania. Maybe then, I could make a bunch of money on a *Star Wars* spin-off: *Ball of Gas Battles*, now coming to a theatre near you and starring acclaimed actor, Nicolas Cage.

But yet, Urania appears to be playing hard to get, so it's all up to me. Accenting this point of thought with a crack of my knuckles, I get started.

ADVERB She looked at him, her eyelashes fluttering ~~rhythmically~~ to the beat of the ever-present Beatles classics playing in the store. It was the type of store that her father would frequent, adding to his array of rock and roll memorabilia and nostalgic crap. There were rows and rows of leather jackets and denim: the most expensive of which had been signed by Bruce Springsteen himself, the least expensive was standard with a little tassel detail - yet Bridget could not help but think the jacket could be bumped up in price if they just said that **John Lennon** ('s **we are pro-female health care** first girlfriend's gynecologist) wore the jacket. Who wouldn't want to buy a "Six Degrees of Kevin Bacon" jacket? <sup>7 1 7</sup> Bridget should really apply within to be the head of marketing.

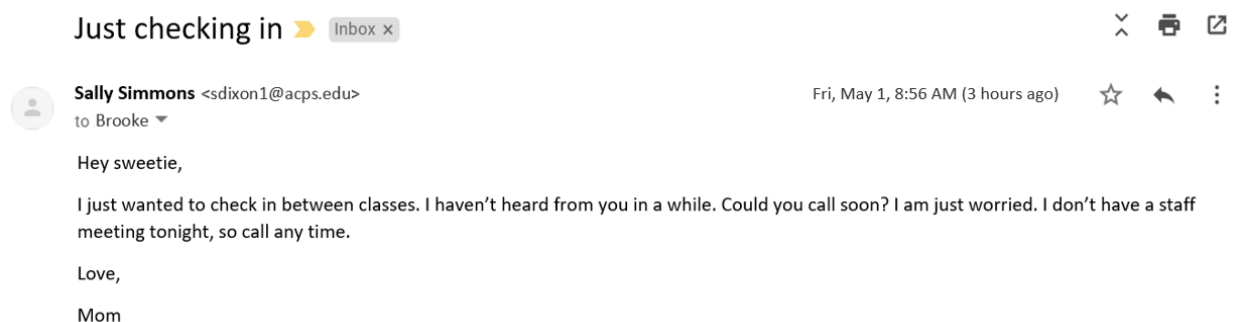
VERVAH+??

I sigh. It isn't Tolstoy or Hemingway - not even close to Shakespeare, but that's lunch. Plus, this story is getting dangerously close to my actual life, and I don't want to explore that again. Real-life is a good source of creativity (i.e. the employee who said I would "never be able to pull off" a full-denim romper will be dying at the end of my next book) (spoiler). But also, it's not great for when you want to suppress memories. Especially when you have to do weeks and months of press all on a 'fictional' piece about your real dog dying, your real boyfriend cheating on you, or the real time you made eye contact with Miles Teller, and you're pretty sure he's the one who got away.

I look to the kitchen and sigh at all the new appliances. I've already spent some of the \$40,000 advance before I even have the money. But it's not my fault – my toaster was broken, my microwave was broken, *most things* were broken! It was a comfort knowing that I had money coming, even if I haven't kept up my end of the bargain for two months.

It seems like every character I write is just me. It's just a me talking to another me. It's a bit too metaphysical to feel literary. It just feels more like the inside of my head than a novel. The people at Parable Publishing are expecting art, not an 80,000 word ramble, neatly composed in 12-point Times New Roman. Even my character name is bad – Bridget? Wow, what a jump from Brooke! It's a little too trippy and not in a fun “power to the people” Woodstock kind of way.

Just then, DING!s start blowing up my phone. Usually, I try to restrain myself from using the Internet while I write because it really is just a downward spiral. I will be researching the “Paul McCartney is dead” conspiracy theory by noon. But, alas, Gmail calls.



I don't know how to feel  Inbox x

**Sonia Bhatt** <soniabhatt@gmail.com>  
to Brooke ▾

Fri, May 1, 10:36 (39 minutes ago)



Hey Brooke,

I think I have a right to know why you did what you did. Why is my personal life allowed to be used in your writing? I didn't sign up for any of this and I think it's really unfair that people only get to see your side of the story. I get it – you hate me. I know what I did was really shitty, but I have really tried my best to make things easier for you on my end. I am still paying rent, I try not to frequent any of our old spots because I'm letting you have that whole side of Manhattan, but you aren't trying at all to let us move past this.

I think I'm just mad. I don't know why you did what you did and I feel really violated and hurt. It's like our whole friendship didn't mean anything.

Sorry you think I'm a monster or something, but that wasn't a free pass to completely violate my privacy. And what's more, you won't even talk to me or Mike about it. Instead, you just bottle it up and then we read about it in a magazine. It isn't fair and I think you know that.

-Sonia

Help  Inbox x

**Colin Branson** <colinbranson@yahoo.com>  
to Brooke ▾

Fri, May 1, 11:14 (1 minute ago)



hi Dixon,

This is Colin. My family & I took an unannounced trip to Salvador. Yesterday we were, walking and I got robbed from my pants. The robbers took my PASSPORT and CREDIT CARD. The officials from the government say I can get new PASSPORT but I do n't have the money. Our plan leaves tomorrow and I am FRIHGHTENED!

Can you wire me \$200? There is a \$50 fee but I will pay you back. I PROMICE!!!

From,

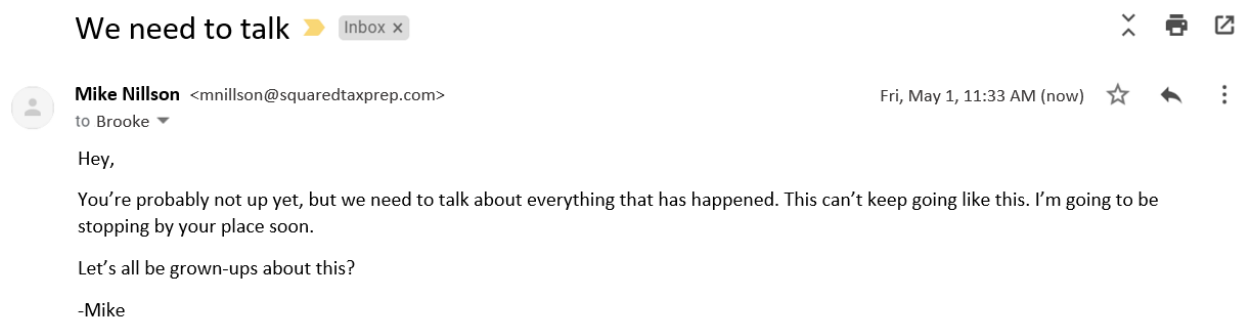
Colin

P.S. Hope you are good.

The only one that I am even considering responding to is Colin; the guy seems like he's in a bit of a fix. My mom - how do I even start on my mom? She seems to be chasing this fantasy relationship between us that will never happen. I mean, what am I supposed to say? "Hey, Mom! It's good to hear from you! Hope your students are doing well. Hey, by the way, I'm going to be homeless if I can't write a book. Sorry if you think the short story is about your own fucked-up romance, but it's about mine. The apple doesn't fall far from the tree. Speaking of which, no, I haven't tried the new recipe for low-calorie apple fritters, but thank you for sending it. Bye!"

And why should I be concerned with Sonia's feelings when she clearly was not concerned with mine? Just a free little tip: if you want to be a good friend, don't sleep with your best friend's boyfriend. I mean, I get trying to understand your friends' passions. Let me explain: When Sonia got weirdly into bird sighting, I tried to read up on it, even though I think birds are creepy and inherently evil - all because I wanted to understand her better. Sonia seemed to have the same idea: I was passionate about my boyfriend, so she tried to understand that passion better by sleeping with him. So now I know that the state bird of Kansas is a fucking Western Meadowlark, but I have no boyfriend. Where's the justice in that?

I'm just about to close my laptop when I see there's a new message.



I close my laptop. I need to leave and I need to leave now. It will demonstrate to my neighbors that *yes*, I *am* still alive as a matter of fact. That smell you've been picking up on is *not* my rotting corpse but just a moldy bag of grapes because I can never finish a whole bag of fruit when I am one single person. But also going outside will mean avoiding my ex, which is a major success. And of course, he would pull this shit on what would have been our 4<sup>th</sup> anniversary.

Now, I just need to find clothes.

I wish some fashion icon would make wearing pajama pants outside a socially acceptable thing? And these aren't just your average sweatpants. I'm wearing fuzzy-patterned-featured-in-a-hot-chocolate-Christmas-advertisement pajama pants. People would notice. My parents used to



get matching sets every year to open on Christmas Eve, back when we did that sort of thing. Of course, a divorce changes all of that. When my dad walked out on us, I hardly think he was thinking of the Christmas onesies. I think he was hardly even thinking about me or Mom. It's just always been about him. When I think about my life and where I've come from, he's always been center stage. We moved to Augusta for him; he missed every single school play for business trips; and then he just takes most of our savings and moves in with his weird hippie woman. But this is comedy; that's what I'm good at; that's the tone of the story I'm currently writing. If I think about my 'trauma' or whatever too much, I worry I won't be funny anymore.

Before I leave the safety of Internet connection, I refresh my Mail app on my iPhone 5C. Still nothing from this one magazine I've been trying to get in touch with for the last two weeks. I don't care if they went out of business; that doesn't mean that they can cheat me out of a \$600 piece I wrote for them on the dangers of reckless money management of people in a New York state of mind, moving to our Northern city for the first time. It was practically an autobiography of myself where I cursed out Billy Joel. An autobiography worthy of \$600. We've been playing a one-sided game of email tag where I email them every day and they just don't respond ever. It's a fun little inside joke. I went by their office just last week to find a deserted "For Rent" sign, which I took to mean that they pulled an ol' Harold Hill from *The Music Man* and flew the coop once they realized they couldn't afford to keep this up anymore. Instead of getting my \$600, I lost \$5.50 in subway fares, and a creepy old man with some kind of paper bagged alcohol told me I looked "cute, sweet cheeks." So now I'm losing even more money in therapy. I made a name for myself with this short story, but none of it seems to matter; I'm still screwed over by small magazines.

I make sure to turn off all the lights before I leave. I can imagine some old money families can leave all the lights on – bathroom, too – an electric fan going, the oven on preheat, and the television blasting *Modern Family* just for the hell of it as some kind of power move. I'm not even close to financially equipped for that kind of lifestyle that I hoped to have from the success of this short story. But I don't want "Wasted" to be my only feat of literary success. I don't want to turn on the television a couple years from now and see Alex Trebek asking contestants on *Jeopardy!* "She was the author who produced the trending story "Wasted" and then did nothing else worth mentioning." And then a contestant shrinks down to the microphone, "Umm who is Brooke Dixon?" Or even worse, they have absolutely no idea who I am and they lose all of their money, and I feel even worse about myself because my name kept Shayna from Burley, Idaho from winning \$3,000 to go to her daughter's college fund. Just a hypothetical.

If I don't create something new, I'm screwed. I need this money or I'll have to go back to Georgia to live with my mom, who would be even harder to avoid if I'm living in her basement. It's not her fault that I'm avoiding her, but she's just a reminder of the past that I don't want. Plus, I like having my own space and my own freedom here in New York.

Along with a multipurpose room – code for a room that is a dining room, living room, and bedroom all in one – my apartment comes with a set of three brass locks that I need to remember to lock every time. As my landlord explained, this is to keep me safe from drug addicts who are looking to rob me to get their next hit. Me. Who custom bought a designed hole puncher so I could always come into my local coffee shop with a full punch card. It's a lasting investment, since the baristas are always too focused on their acting careers to notice. And hey, don't look at me like that (if you were looking at me like that. I don't know your life story; you

only know mangled bits of mine). This isn't a small coffee shop; it's a franchise. Modern laws might not support me, but a small and dying network of hippies does.

Technically, I could rent out the other bed in the studio apartment to someone else, but I don't really like people. So, I just talk to the old Brendan Fraser poster on my wall. It can't disappoint me – except for one time when the adhesive wore off and it fell on my face in the middle of the night, and I was convinced I was being murdered. All I have to do is write my ass off to cover rent; easy, right? But I also haven't written a complete thought down in my Word document in nine months – a whole pregnancy worth of inactivity, which isn't great when Parable Publishing is expecting a draft in three months. Because of my dumb big mouth, I have to pretend like I conducted all these interviews with people and wrote stories about them or it's bye-bye financial stability.

As I leave my apartment, I check for Mike. He used to be able to get to my apartment in 10 – 15 minutes tops. Nothing. Walking out, I glare at the 'out of order' sign on the shiny brass elevator that has been there for a month. It wouldn't be so bad if I didn't live on the ninth floor. Until the elevator stopped working, I didn't even realize that they built stairs up past the third floor.

It's probably a good thing that we all stay away from the elevator. The thing is definitely haunted. I'm 99.96% sure that someone pissed off the ghost. And it *was not me*.

Let me explain: When I moved in, the landlord went over all the basics – which just happened to include that there was a ghost haunting the building – you know, one of *those* talks: “When a dead person still loves the location where they lived very much...”, etc. I still remember when she talked to me about it for the first time.

Once everything was settled with our contract, we met one more time in the lobby.

“Here’s your key.” The landlord handed me my apartment key, which fit neatly in my palm. I studied its edges and its dips and bends, staring at it with brimming resolution that this was my life now. I had finally made it to the sparkling city life of New York. Looking out of the big hallway window, the night view of the city looked like an elaborate campaign advertisement for LED fairy lights. The landlord grunted to bring my focus back towards her. The skin hung around her eyes, and it was clear that she didn’t want to be here longer than she had to.

“Anyway, as I was saying, laundry’s in the basement, laundromat down the street, there’s a ghost, the mail room is in the lobby, and you can use this separate key for that.” She held up a smaller key before sliding it into my hand. I nodded, trying to process everything. Laundry in the basement or down the street, there’s a ghost, the mail room-

“Wait, I’m sorry, did you say ghost?”

“Yeah,” she shrugged her thin shoulders, as if this was just an everyday occurrence, which I figured was actually the case for her. She combed her hand through her gray hair as she gauged my reaction.

Apparently, along with an in-suite bathroom and an almost working oven, my building was also equipped with the ghost of a little eight-year-old girl, named Shirley, looking for a playmate. And Sonia and I didn’t even have to pay extra for that! I sighed; clearly, this was something they could have included on the website. Don’t get me wrong; I loved *Ghostbusters* just as much as the next person, but I never wanted to live it. At first, I didn’t believe it, but then Sonia began noticing that things weren’t where she left them. And Sonia was really the put-together type, you have to understand.

I started questioning everything: Did the apartment really have air conditioning or was it just the chill that came with supernatural energy? At least a ghost was helpful in lowering internal cooling costs.

Ever since we met and I informed her of the situation, Denise has suggested I burn some sage around my shoebox apartment as a precaution, but I can't risk setting off the fire alarm. I live on the *ninth floor*. If there's a fire, I'm prepared to just die. The building already has a ghost. Why not add another? Two for the price of one and all that. At least I wouldn't be lonely.

It just creates a weird position; outside, I'm dealing with creeps and weirdos, and I'm not just talking about the drunk guys who dress up in full-body costumes and pose for pictures with children in Times Square. I'm talking about murderers, muggers, and that one guy who always pees in a water bottle on the Subway while maintaining full eye contact with you. Inside, I'm dealing with a ghost. My ex never believed in her, but then again, I don't think he believed in me either.

The ninth-floor landing is guarded by my neighbor's demon cat. I'm betting she's in cahoots with the ghost. At least, I'm sure the ginger cat hates me. I have come to this conclusion by the fact that she hisses at me whenever I come into her stupid cat line of vision. She has jumped on me numerous times, digging her nails into my skin. Just last week, she started attacking me and I had to sacrifice my almost completely uneaten Crunchwrap Supreme. Well, guess what? I hate you too, Meowly Ringwald – I wish I was kidding.

“Stupid cat,” I grumble as I move past her to walk downstairs. She hisses at me, but *I’m not afraid*. I just start quickening my pace because... I’m *hungry*. Not because I fear all nine of her stupid cat lives. I can imagine an email from her.



Still nicer than my ex.

I’m not sure why Meowly sits outside. I hardly see her owner anymore. I sometimes catch glimpses of her gray curls, but that’s it. I don’t know. It’s none of my business.

By the time I make it down to the bottom of the stairs, it feels like my ribs are caving in on my lungs. I am so out of shape, but in no mood to start working out now. I know I’m not the only one who is hating this whole arrangement.

I ran into another resident the other day who lives on the sixth floor.

“They should just put a trampoline or a bouncy castle at the bottom and we can just take our chances at pitching ourselves over the ledge,” I commented as we caught our breath.

“Oh yeah, let me pass that on to the building manager,” she laughed. I was only 76% kidding.

She seemed nice enough and I considered inviting her over for a wine and cheese night, but all I have is a free sample of Trader Joe’s Concord Grape Juice and something in the back of my fridge that’s molding and I don’t think in the good way. Plus, I just know that I’m not in a good emotional state to invite people over. Too many times have I made plans and then spent the night at home in bed in my Snuggie. Plus, night life has just gotten so expensive. The comedy

club that I always go to has raised to a three-drink minimum and that typically involves me grabbing the mic from a confused Michelle Wolf and drunkenly telling the audience about the time I found out I was allergic to dogs. Everyone talks about how important it is to go to parties and ‘network’ but do they understand how much a cab costs to go into the Upper East Side? I wrote down my neighbor’s room number and I still have that stuck on my fridge, in case I change my mind about wanting to hang out.

Back when my mother was optimistic, she would say that going outside was a chance at fresh air, but I got a free bottle of air freshener last week when I participated in a weird focus group study thing (real people, not actors), so I’m all good on fresh air. Turns out it was a scam and I was not actually in a Febreze commercial. But I did get a bottle of “Fejeez” for my trouble. I’m pretty sure it’s just a spray bottle with water, though.

Glancing at the counter in the lobby, I give it a half-hearted salute as I walk past. Apparently, once upon a time, we used to have a security guard that would set up shop here. Now, we have three locks and a ghost. None of us have a super high security deal.

As soon as I’m outside of the safe confines of the apartment building, I’m confronted with the loud hustle and bustle of city life. There are sirens coming from right and left. On top of that is of course the chorus of honking that follows from said sirens because no one knows how to pull over to the side of the road when they don’t even know where the side of the road *is*. Graffiti is everywhere, complicated tags interweaving with each other on mail collection boxes that were most likely blue once upon a time. I make sure to put on shades and try to blend in, in case my ex is lurking somewhere.

A yellow newspaper distribution box stands unassuming at a corner. The front of its frame has been decked out with posters for a summer writing class. The label states that there are

‘Stories. Everywhere’ and beneath a domineering image of the Statue of Liberty, it says ‘Write’ in a looping font. It feels like a threat or worse, like my own imagination telling me what I already know. I have to write. I can’t keep putting it off. If I want to be a full-time writer, then I have to actually write. And that takes discipline that I’m not sure I have; I’m not one to wake up at 6 AM in a creative fervor, pause at 8 AM for a tasteful workout, and after a quick shower and a dark green smoothie, it’s back to work. And I know what I have to write: I keep claiming that I have no ideas and that I’m burned out, but my own childhood and teenage years have been bubbling up inside of me for a good decade, like a mixture of Mentos and Coca-Cola that makes my insides turn fizzy. But it hurts to relive it. It hurts to live in this sphere of non-fiction and put my name on something like that. I don’t want it to be my responsibility to put this to paper. Besides, who wants to read about the truth when a boy wizard is attending a British magic school fit with talking clothing and nose-less villains? I turn away from the bright yellow of the newspaper distribution box and focus on getting as far away from my apartment as possible, so I don’t run into Mike.

A buff man with a tiny Cocker Spaniel puppy passes by. He holds onto the leash with a chiseled arm decked out in tattoos of intricately inked skulls. The dog wears a bedazzled collar and keeps releasing these excited ‘yip’s. The energetic puppy pulls its red leash with all of its strength, but it’s no match to the man’s strong grip.

“Puppers, slow down,” the man barks under his breath, as if he is well aware of how embarrassing that name is.

Either the dog was named by a child or the family decided to not change his name from the name they gave him at the pound. But I pity this dog, “Puppers.” I have the name Brooke, which in of itself is not a bad name. It would actually be a great name if my middle name wasn’t



Anne. And my last name wasn't Dixon. Brooke Anne Dixon. On the day of my birth, my mother spent fourteen hours in labor. She pushed me out and they nestled me in a big blanket before placing me in my tired mother's arms. A nurse wearing scrubs asked my mother what the baby girl's name was. My mother said that my name was to be Brooke. **Brooke Anne Dixon**. At the first sight of me, she knew I was going to be B.A.D. news.

Either my mother is an untapped psychic or I just rise to expectations – or sink, rather. It makes sense. I was a mistake. I mean, not initially. I was a planned baby, but then I majored in art history and my mother was like 'oh yikes, yeah that one's on us.'

This is what I think about as I pass the unfortunate Puppies. We are one and the same.

I keep my eyes forward and my chin raised, acting like I know exactly what I'm doing. Feigning confidence has become a new party trick that works about 30% of the time. When I first got here, I acted like an absolute idiot. I was making eye contact and smiling at anyone I came in contact with on the street. I even said a bright "hello" a few times like a freak. The first time I didn't say 'I'm sorry' when someone bumped into *me*, Denise took me out for a drink to celebrate.

Now, I'm good at dodging construction workers and maneuvering through scaffolding. It's a juggling act. On one hand, I'm supposed to keep my eyes straight ahead and focus on what's in front of me. On the other hand, I have to also watch the ground for dog poop. If I wanted to deal with dog poop, I would get a dog. Instead, I have a succulent.

His name is Benedict Cactusbatch.

He's a bitch.

And then, I'm also supposed to somehow use the eyes I clearly have fastened on the back of my head to watch for danger. My friend, Sharon, was sexually assaulted just last month in

Bryant Park when this twat grabbed her ass and this police officer asked her how she didn't see he was coming. Because all women have an alert system in our bras that sound an alarm at the first sign of danger, like we're all Kia Sorentos. We should be protected. We should have collision warning systems, rear view cameras, and a flare in our back trunks. But no one seems to notice that this has little protection against a man trying to wreak havoc on us from the closed window – yes, closed – of our sun roofs. And then we ask what we did wrong. Was it our paint job that enticed them? Was our trunk left open already? Was the radio on? Did we set the mood? This overstrung car analogy has a point. If you're a woman in New York City, it sucks.

I remember when Sharon told me about it; she had summoned a bunch of us to her apartment because she didn't feel safe. I was confused and had thought that it was game night, so I had to discretely hide my game of Sorry! in a tote bag.

“I don't know what I did wrong,” Sharon said, crying into a pillow.

Denise pulled her into a hug.

“You did nothing wrong,” Denise said.

It turned out that Sharon was just going on a run when a guy catcalled her and grabbed her ass. He was long gone when the police arrived, and she was the one who was treated like the perpetrator. She was asked what she was wearing, if she talked to him, etc. She was just in a simple tank top and yoga pants, but apparently bare shoulders are a welcome sign for gross men. I didn't know what to say or how to react, hoping someone else would step up.

“I don't even want to look at the yoga pants anymore,” Sharon said.

Upon hearing this, we were all silent. Then, Jackie, Denise's girlfriend, stood up.

“Where are they?” she asked.

Sharon stood up, and we all followed her to her bedroom. (She had a real adult's apartment with different spaces kept apart by actual walls.) Sharon bent down to grab the yoga pants from her bedroom floor.

Jackie grabbed them, pulling at the fabric that had been tarnished by an unwelcome hand.

"Let's fucking burn 'em," Jackie said.

Using Jackie's lighter from certain illegal activities, we made a bonfire out of the yoga pants, each of us chanting about our feminism and our ownership over our bodies while Denise swung her red coral necklace. A while ago, she said she got it because she was told that red coral was said to be 'the woman's stone.' We said she was ripped off, but no one cared while we burnt that pair of yoga pants to ashes. Somehow, I feel like we won't make it in a Lululemon ad.

We then watched the 1939 classic none of us had heard of, *The Women*, starring Norma Shearer, Joan Crawford, and Rosalind Russell. After a couple of Google searches, I realized that this was probably the only movie that didn't have men, so that's what we settled on. And we finished the night with an exciting game of Sorry!

For a moment, I think I see Mike, and I walk faster, feeling the gaps in the sidewalk below the plastic bottoms of my flip flops.

To try to pass some time in my escape, I imagine what it would be like for Bridget, who is my main character that works as a freelance journalist with daddy issues. She would be amazed by the courage of taxi cab drivers having to swerve their yellow vehicles through oncoming traffic. Say what you want about America, but New York City is the home of the brave. My character would be urged to go grab some gelato from Amorino's down the street. The employees can even shape the frozen treat into a blooming flower and everything. But she

only has money for the essentials – and Oreos – double stuff Oreos; she's not an idiot. She would take in the smells of the flower shop on the corner. She would be tempted to buy some for her barren apartment, but she would know that she could never maintain them. Why buy something you know is going to die? Besides, she could barely remember to take care of her succulent, Spruce Springsteen.

Oh God, this character really is me. I need some new ideas or I need to at least meet some new people as soon as possible. There is no way I can pull this off if every single character I write is just a different interpretation of myself. Why did I say I conduct interviews?

I'm welcomed by the deep royal purple of the New York University flag. That means I'm close to the Washington Square Park, which feels like safety. It's so crowded that I can blend in here without Mike finding me, no problem. It's without a doubt the best park in New York City. Fight me on that. Not really though. I haven't worked out since mandatory physical education classes in middle school, and I have the same diet as a five-year-old with a Happy Meal. But I am one away from completing the *Lion King* figurine toy set, so yeah; I'm kind of a big deal around here.

I pass by dry cleaners, bakeries, more dry cleaners, and homeless people asking for me to spare any money that I can. They clutch cardboard signs that explain how they got to where they are or they just shout out that they are looking for a single penny. I give them a smile and tell them that I don't have any cash on me. It's a lie, and the wallet in my purse becomes much heavier. I shoulder the purse, dragging my guilt behind me. It's the type of guilt that gets caught in your teeth. You try to ignore it, but every time your tongue traces over it, you feel it. You wonder if everyone can see it - the dark guilt that you carry around with you in the inside of your cheek. Even though I want to, I can't be expected to save everyone. I can barely afford rent and

utilities as it is. I *can't* afford rent and utilities actually – that's where we're at now. Promising myself that I'll donate so much money to charity once I'm rich off this book does something to lessen my guilt, but it never fully dissipates. Besides, I don't even know if I can get the thing written anyway. It's always the worst when I make eye contact with them and have to lie straight through my teeth, shooting them a close-lipped smile, as if they can cash that in for a meal. There are just so many of them, and I can't help them all.

For a moment, I think I hear Mike's voice and I keep my head down before running into someone. A man. A firm man.

"Hey, Brooke." I look up. He's tall and a man, and that's all I can discern at this point.

"Hello there," I say, pulling myself away from his chest.

"It's good to see you again," he says, his smile making his eyes crinkle.

Disclaimer: I have no idea who this person is. He's not my ex-boyfriend, thank god.

"Yup. I was just about to say that," I say, trying to play a quick game of 'Guess Who' in my head. He seems a little too happy to see me to be anyone I know super well. And he's wearing a red t-shirt with the University of Georgia logo, my alma mater. Go Bulldogs!

"Have you thought about my proposition anymore?" he asked.

Fuck.

"Right. Well, I'm still thinking." I don't recall ever meeting this person before in my life. Wait. Maybe he knows my work. Maybe that's it. Maybe he wants to write something. "Sorry – I've been really distracted with the short story."

"What short story?"

Shit no. Maybe he's a mutual friend with Denise?

"And you know, Denise has been going through a hard time," I say.

“Who’s Denise?”

Fuck.

“You know, my oven is on fire. I gotta run,” I say and then bolt in the opposite direction.

Smooth. Smooth. Smooth.

With quick steps, I walk back past the homeless man once more and feel that guilt all over again. Once I reach the crosswalk, I’m in the clear. Shaking out my joints, I pride myself on a job well done. It’s only then that I realize the man who talked to me is a fellow alumnus of University of Georgia (we have a bit of a support group for those of us who have made it out of the rural middle of nowhere.) He wants me to sign up to teach a workshop down in Athens about how I’m using my art history degree. Spoiler alert: I’m not.

Leaving the reign of NYU purple, I spot a bearded man in red with an iPad. Andre. I make sure to keep my head down, acting like I’m actually someone important. *Tiger Beat* is getting nothing from me. Andre is one of those volunteers that stand out in the streets to ask for donations for various organizations. I always see people dodging him, shaking their heads, or straight up ignoring him. I decided I didn’t want to be *that* person, so about two months ago, I let Andre talk my ear off about jellyfish. It went a little too far, and before I knew it, I was filling out an intrusive form on his iPad in an attempt to raise awareness for jellyfish teenage pregnancies. I thought that this was just an email list kind of thing, but now I was expected to be a donor? When he asked for a zip code, I just gave him a random five-digit number. It happened to be a zip code for Washington.

“You from Seattle? I feel like the only city I know of in Washington is Seattle?” Andre asked me, peering over my shoulder.

“Yup, Seattle. That’s... home,” I said, typing it in.

The iPad started to ask for my street address to which I entered the first four digits of pi. They had a handy drop-down list of street names in which I just selected a random one. An alert sounded, saying that the address did not exist. Stupid little machine. This is why robots are going to kill us all. *Wall-E* was a warning, not a movie.

“Did you answer everything correctly?” Andre narrowed his eyes at me.

“Yeah, I think everything is correct,” I said. “That’s really weird.” What’s weirder is that I *lied* to a volunteer in the community, but to be fair, it did not sound like a real activism project. Still, I was most certainly on the next elevator down to hell or escalator up because hot air rises. Andre took the iPad in his hands to try to figure out what was wrong with it.

“Maybe I can just enter my info online at your website? I’m kind of in a hurry,” I said. Lie. The dosa stand was not going to run out of dosas any time soon.

“Yeah okay. Maybe you can get your info actually correct on there?” Oh, he knew. He knew. I knew. We both knew, but we exchanged pleasantries and went on our separate ways.

Now, we tend to avoid each other. Me from Andre, the jellyfish volunteer, and him from Kelly Clarkson from 3141 Pike Street, Seattle, Washington 98011. The tension between us... well... let’s just say it stings.

Once I enter the area of Washington Square Park, a couple of kids run past me, playing with a basketball. It’s nice to see that some kids are not just attached to their phones. I’m just here to hide and kill time, so I might as well observe – see if anything strikes some inspiration. Different dialects echo throughout the park, people either talking in person or into headphones that make them look like they are talking to themselves. Some rebel bikers run through the park, not giving a fuck about the ‘no biking’ signs because if dogs can run free and shit wherever, anyone can do anything. Two NYU students walk through with tall plastic cups of lilac-colored

bubble tea, taking pictures for Instagram. (I went to a bubble tea place once and found a hair in it, but then I just left because I didn't have the proper 'Mom-style' haircut to speak to the manager.)

A few adults sit alone on benches, balancing salads in their laps with one hand holding the fork and the other hand holding their phone. It's always the healthy people that I see eating out on public benches.

Before I can stop myself, I get distracted by two girls laughing. One wears a button up with a tied ribbon around her neck. Her hair is tightly wound together in a bun that even dance moms would have trouble poking fun at. Not a wisp is out of place, and I make a note to myself to stay far away from this woman in case a fire breaks out in the park. She is most certainly a walking, talking bottle of flammable hairspray. Her friend looks like she just rolled out of bed, not necessarily fire-repellant per se, but definitely safer. The two talk about their day with wild arm gestures and excited high-pitched tones of voice. I see myself in these two girls – myself and Sonia, my ex-roommate.

Obviously, I see myself in the more put-together woman – a woman I am fondly naming Gertrude.

Kidding. I am her friend, the less put together one, who we will call Roberta. Sonia is a total Gertrude.

Watching these girls – Gertrude and Roberta – I try to remember the good times with Sonia when we were at our best. We spent our free time walking through the park, eating multiple (and I mean up there in the teens) batches of nachos, and just talking. We could talk for hours, about anything really, like a well-trained Miss America contestant. (“Work sucked ass and Cassandra tried to start a rumor about me that I slept with her brother, so I told her to fuck off.



To make this world a better place. For our children.”) But the thing about memory is it’s not always selective. Whatever memory I have of Sonia morphs into something ugly.

We could be at Disney World. Multicolor balloons fly overhead in the shape of a Mickey Mouse head. If these are hidden Mickeys, they aren’t hiding them very well. Cinderella walks right past us and I get a whiff of her. She smells like sweat and less like magic, but it’s Disney World so I don’t even care. Sonia is somehow balancing both Mickey Mouse ears and a tiara on her head and she’s laughing. She turns to me and her lipstick painted lips move, forming words that look like “Isn’t this great?”, “We’re really here!” or “Is that kid puking in Mickey’s garden?”

But I only hear “I’m moving out.”

And I’m back there. In our apartment.

I’m sitting on the bed, legs pressed to my chest, trying to make myself as small as possible. She’s packing a suitcase. There are no Mickey Mouse ears on her head, just the hood of Mike’s faded pink Coney Island hoodie that I bought for him a few months ago. I can’t help but wonder if it smells like him. Or if it already smells like her.

“I – I don’t understand,” I hear myself say, even though the situation is rather simple.

“I’m moving in with Mike,” Sonia says. In any other situation, this would be responded to with a flurry of confetti. Moving in with a real-life human boy that you are pondering spending the rest of your adult-life with until you murder them for life insurance money, like in *It’s a Wonderful Life* (I’ll be honest; I did get bored with the film and switched over to *NCIS* halfway through), is a huge step. But no one’s exactly jumping out of a human cannon when it’s my real-life human boy that I didn’t super think about murdering until this point.

“I don’t know what to say,” I say to try to fill the gaps. A teddy bear Mike won for me at that same Coney Island trip sits in my lap and I hug it for comfort. Its button eyes stare up at me, and I just get this feeling that it’s no longer mine.

“I mean, what did you expect to happen? That I could just keep living here and we could just pretend that I’m not seeing your ex-boyfriend?”

Newly ex-boyfriend.

I want to stand up for myself and be angry with her and tell her to get the fuck out of my life, but I can’t. She’s been there with me for so long that I don’t even know who I am without her by her side. Sure, this sucks. This really sucks, and I’m pissed, but I’m a person who doesn’t like change. And for some reason, after *everything*, Sonia still feels safe to me. And now she’s leaving me alone with this ghost while she takes everything that should have been mine. I should be angry, and she should feel broken, but it feels like things are reversed.

Sonia throws down a pair of jeans and ties her thick brown hair up.

“Look, I don’t want to fight. Let’s not make this more than it is.” Then, she stops moving all together. “Look, I – I am sorry. I didn’t plan for this to happen.” And then she keeps packing, as if everything is forgiven. As if she isn’t leaving me.

I swallow as she takes away a framed picture of us from the bedside and shoves it into her suitcase face down with her shoes.

“You say you’re sorry,” I start, “But are you sorry it happened or are you sorry I found out?” But I know the answer. We both know the answer. She wouldn’t be moving in with him otherwise. I just want to hear it. I *need* to hear it.

“I’m sorry you found out... like this,” she says. “We just kept getting closer and closer and-”

“So?” I stand up, walking over to her, getting up in her personal space because it feels like it’s the last thing that I can steal from *her*. “You could’ve stopped it. You should’ve stopped it.” Sitting on her bed, I play with her quilted bedsheet, tracing my fingers around the coarse stitches.

“I know. I know, but I couldn’t. I *couldn’t*, Brooke! I just – I don’t know. I felt stronger for him than I thought I did. It’s not like you didn’t play a part in driving him away. We just kept getting closer than I thought we would.”

“Well, I got closer than I thought I would to Denise’s guinea pig, but you don’t see me fucking it!” I stand again, screaming at her, just screaming at her and trying to make her understand how broken she’s left me.

She shakes her head and blinks out a tear, pretending to look at something far off in the distance that’s not there.

“I’m gonna go get a coffee or something.” She trails off at the end, as if she wants to ask me if I want to go with her or if I want her to pick me up one. It’s almost second-nature at this point, a tango that the two of us have just fallen into. But she doesn’t say it. She leaves the apartment and I’m left with her suitcases, wide open and ready for Sprite or shampoo or something to be poured straight in there with her array of purses or top-of-the-line makeup. Lord knows she deserves it. But I don’t do that. I find an empty spot in her duffle and I place Mr. Coney Teddy Bear (it’s a good name) in the bag. He isn’t mine anymore, and I start to think he never was.

Even now, I think about this idea of memory. Memory is something that people work so hard to keep, locking it up in photo albums and bolted storage spaces. But the price of memory is never being allowed the privilege of forgetting.

I feel the anxiety building up inside of me, and I grip my hands together until the flesh turns white. The only thing left is to close my eyes and use a grounding technique I read about on Reddit (r/mentalhealth) in lieu of a traditional therapist. Five things I see around me: a family sharing a pizza, a tripod camera for some kind of film project, young power walkers, old people power walking *with* walkers, and a look-alike Kate McKinnon. Four things I can touch around me: the cold metal bench, my hair that hasn't been washed in a few days, the ground underneath my feet, and a middle-aged businessman who probably doesn't want me touching his hand. Three things I can hear: the growl of the dog of said businessman, the screaming of a guy through a megaphone, and the noise of my own stomach. Two things I can smell: Wet dog and sno-cones. One thing I can taste: The inside of my mouth tastes like coffee and it's kind of gross. Fuck, did I see Kate McKinnon?

And we're back. I can push things aside better than a bulldozer.

My phone buzzes as I get a text.

*Where the hell are you?* It's Mike.

*Real mature, Brooke.*

I put the phone away, smiling to myself. I have officially escaped. Leaning back in the bench, I just have to wait it out now.

An older gentleman is playing soft jazz on a saxophone a few yards down on a bench. His case is wide open and I'm glad that some people are paying what he deserves. I wish I could contribute but I have no cash on me. Lies. The jazz is my favorite part of the park. Especially at night, there's something special about sitting on the inside of the central fountain, watching the Washington Arch lit up by spotlights on either side. This is in contrast to the Empire State Building looming in the background, bathed by green and yellow that I'm sure symbolize

something but I have no idea what. Sometimes, there's a jazz pianist, too, and no one can guess how the heck he got a whole piano there. I think he assembles it on the scene or it's a Christmas miracle in July. I love sitting in the fountain, feeling the soft kisses of fountain mist on my skin, while embracing the soft tones of smooth jazz under the moonlight that make me want to share all my deepest secrets. I came here with a new coworker one time. An hour in, and we're sharing our deepest darkest fears. Everything from isolation to automatic flush toilets. They're startling, okay? Unrelated, but she never talked to me again and started avoiding eye contact.

Occasionally, we are on the same email chain, but I feel the tension even there.

There goes yet another chance for me to make friends, which I know is exactly what my mother is concerned about, that I'll end up lonely just like her. After all, we're both allergic to dogs and we hate cats – that just leaves us open to an emotional support snake or something.

A woman is poised head to toe in gold metallic body paint. Despite children cheering around her and egging her on, she stays frozen in her statue stance. A bowl awaiting money rests at her high heeled feet. It seems like a lot of trouble to through for \$1.50, but I got to hand it to her for being so dedicated and not moving at all – she's like America's Queen's Guard.

A man sweeps a giant hoop of bubbles through the air. It tangles with the mist in the air from the fountain. Big bubbles float around, obviously displeasing the ignored juggler near the bushes who has to stand in the sticky, soapy mixture left on the pavement. The kids are going wild over it though. I watch them chase after the bubbles, all trying to be the one to pop it while their parents sneak a secret huff of a cigarette.

The park is a place of misfits, which makes it such a good place to hide away from the world: There's a banged chalk artist promoting her Instagram and selling colorful prints. There's

a tarot card reader with a little tasseled stand. There's dancers, musicians, and food. Tons of food.

While I'm here, I might as well eat. I get in the short line for my two shameful hot dogs at the hot dog stand. It's become routine at this point to get hot dogs in the park. Of course, I'm never this early.

From my position, I can see children running around the small play area, a pigeon almost hitting a woman in the face, and a dog having a staring contest with a brave little squirrel. Or it's a brave little dog. (I'm no Dr. Dolittle, even though I'm pretty sure Meowly Ringwald can understand me cursing her out). I also see a man with a swirly comical mustache sitting at a table with a typewriter. There's a cardboard sign resting against his shins, but it's angled in a way that I can't read the writing. Nevertheless, I'm intrigued.

But my mind continues to wander to how this should have been my anniversary with Mike. I can feel him now, resting his chin on my shoulder as we wait in line for hot dogs before sitting on the bench in the corner that has a fastened metal tag that reads "'Every love story is beautiful but ours is my favorite' NS + JS 4.3.16". He would tell me that I was the love of his life and he couldn't wait for our lives to really pick up together. Key word: together. I just have to wait it out here for a little longer, so Mike gives up and leaves and everything can go back to this new normal.

"I don't know, Katie," a high-pitched voice sounds in my ear as the woman behind me is pushed into my distracted figure. I look behind me to graciously accept her apology, but it seems like her whole body is numb and she didn't even notice the fact that her sharp elbows were momentarily lodged in my rib cage. She just flicks back her bangs and continues her conversation. "I thought everything went well."

“We all think it goes well on the first date,” the unfortunate Katie says.

“I just wish I knew what people think of me at first glance,” the woman says.

“I don’t know if I would want to know,” Katie says.

“I would,” the woman says. “I would want to know what first impression I give so I could change something – I don’t know.”

Instead of commenting on this, I just roll my eyes and grab my two hot dogs from Patrick, who gives me a tired smile. I’m sure he doesn’t want to be known as the Hot Dog man any more than I want to be known as the Girl Who Buys Hot Dogs every other day. After a while, he started having my order ready for me. He said he could see me coming from a distance and put my two hot dogs in a bag labeled “Brooke.” That’s when I knew I hit rock bottom. I stopped getting hot dogs for like three days, but then I remembered how good hot dogs are. Patrick rejoiced. He thought I was dead and was looking out for an obituary; but really, I had only died of humiliation. Now, Patrick and I have a tolerating relationship. It’s nice. He’s like my dealer. Besides, he has a strong appreciation for me. My focus on him as ‘Peter’ in my short story is what gave him the confidence to seek prime real estate for his trolley in the “inner circle” of Washington Square Park. He never thought anyone *looked* at him before, but now that he’s the center of a whole *New Yorker* piece, he’s slowly realizing his worth. He says it’s ‘self-actualization.’ He gave me a self-help book with my hot dog once, and life hit a new low. I think he still feels bad about starting everything a couple months back with the offhand comment about how I must be single now that Mike is dating someone new.

After I grab my labeled bag, I trudge over to the mustached man. I try to not look too eager. I don’t want him thinking I’m interested in something; I’m just curious. I put my headphones in my ears and pretend I’m on some kind of conference call as I stroll over.

In block letters, his sign reads “Pay \$5 and I’ll write a poem for you.”

It’s intriguing. He writes a poem for a paying customer, makes some cash, and maybe he gets some inspiration out of it; maybe he gets a muse. With that, I start to wonder how I can play on his technique for my own benefit. Mike is probably gone by now, and momentarily, it doesn’t even feel like he matters anymore. I need a pen and paper if I’m going to start writing this all down, and I need them now.



### Chapter 3

With my new idea of pulling off this whole interview thing, I sprint up the stairs to my apartment. Well, that's an exaggeration. It's nine floors; let's not get too crazy. I take my damn time. Once I get to the top, I spin and rip off a piece of my hot dog bun to throw on the ground for Meowly Ringwald. I'm in a charitable mood. It just growls at me and nudges away the bread with its stupid little cat nose. Instead, it paws in the direction of the actual meat in my bag. I'm not *that* charitable. Get your own, greedy cat.

I am met with an unpleasant sight in front of my door. It isn't a dead squirrel, Ms. Scales, my seventh-grade science teacher, or even a floating slice of pizza *with pineapples on it*. No. It's something much worse: It's my ex-boyfriend.

There he is, standing in front of my door, just as tall as I remember months ago when I watched him through the window help Sonia move her things (he refused to go into the apartment). Turns out he decided to wait for me. It's not like I haven't seen him wait outside of my door like this. In fact, he had done it a year ago today with expensive wine and fancy jewelry in hand. He had done it two years ago today with wine and a Keurig coffee maker. And he had done it three years ago with boxed wine and some flowers. Standing before me today, he still has his stupid sharp jawline and his stupid blonde hair and his stupid green eyes. He always looks like he's about to go to a funeral or play bridge, dressed in his stupid suit that he always complained was uncomfortable because he has to wear a tie with it. Maybe that's why he's a fucking idiot – the tie cuts off all circulation to his brain.

“Oi! I want a word with you, Dixon!” he says, popping a cap off a beer bottle with his teeth and spitting it out on the floor for Meowly Ringwald to try to eat and die on.

Okay, he didn't really say or do that.

As your humble, trustworthy, yet unreliable narrator, I have a duty to tell the truth. And what he said was a bated, yet subtle, “Hello.”

“Hey,” I say. A pretty clever comeback.

“I thought you got my email and tried to avoid me or something. I want to talk,” he says. I hear the soft meowing of the cat, and I decide to not unlock the door and just do this in the hallway instead. I want a witness. I would love to see him try to murder Meowly Ringwald to cover up the evidence; she has this somewhat youthful glow to her, but it would be just my luck if she was on her ninth and final life.

“How did you get in here?” I ask, leaning my arm against the doorway like conniving ex-boyfriends are constantly trying to get in contact with me and I’ve grown tired of the entire situation.

“There’s no guard. Did you know your elevator’s broken?” he asks.

“The elevator’s broken?” I ask, raising my eyebrows in mock surprise. “So, you mean that’s why I just stood in a 6 by 4 box for half an hour and I didn’t go anywhere? Wow, I am so glad you were here to throw this case wide open, Mike, I really-”

“See, this is the problem!” Mike shouts. “We could never have a conversation because you could never take anything seriously!”

“I have problems with communication? Which one of us cheated on the other person for two months without saying anything?” I don’t know what I saw in this guy in the first place. Sure, he was sweet at first, but he turned out sour in the end – like the opposite of a Sour Patch Kid. A Sour Patch Douchebag. Sweet, sour, banging your roommate, and then literally gone. I don’t know why I’m not asked to be part of more marketing campaigns.

“Well, it wasn’t working! You were emotionally unavailable! You can’t put all this on me,” he says, y’know, as an excuse.

“So, then you *break up* with somebody, Mike! You don’t go and ruin a perfectly good friendship! If I was so *emotionally unavailable*, you just went to the closest available person.” I snap my fingers, and look at him seriously. “I’m sorry – I don’t want to be offensive. Tell me, is there a male-version of ‘slut’ that you would prefer me to use?”

Meowly Ringwald meows and I hope she’s on my side. I am telepathically trying to tell her to attack, but she has yet to do so; I should have hidden a Taco Bell Crunchwrap Supreme somewhere on his person.

This whole relationship began when I was working in a frozen yogurt shop on the corner of Sixth Avenue and 8th street. A guy walked in, his blonde hair slicked back so he looked like a Bond villain. He tapped on the top of the counter, clearly nervous, and asked “what’s good here?” in the same way that someone would ask what the chef suggests at a restaurant with Michelin stars. He ordered one medium sized banana frozen yogurt with marshmallows in a cup every single day until he confessed that he was ridiculously lactose-intolerant and could not do this anymore. We had a dairy-free meal together four years ago today and the next few years were fantastic. He would text me ‘good night’ and ‘good morning’ and we would spend afternoons exploring the Met with our hands intertwined. I supported him; he supported me. It was perfect. Until, you know, the whole cheating thing.

Meowly Ringwald has still yet to attack and I’m really feeling a lack of fellow female support right now.

“Don’t you have someone you could be fucking right now?” I ask.

“Oh my god. Are you five?”

A door opens and my neighbor steps out; orange crumbs that I assume are remnants of a bag of Doritos decorate his beard.

“Hey, have your couple spat somewhere else. I can’t hear the TV over your bickering,” he says before stepping back into his own apartment.

“Does he still watch *The Bachelor*?” Mike asks.

“Too early. Must be *Judge Judy*.” We smile and for a brief moment, I remember when we understood each other.

“Can we talk?” he asks. He starts reaching for my hand, but then he stops himself. “I’m not going to walk back down another nine flights of stairs for nothing.”

“I have a window.”

Mike looks me in the eyes, taking a step forward. Meowly Ringwald doesn’t even hiss. Way to have my back.

“Please, Brooke.”

I can’t keep this up for too long. I’m not the one who’s a heartless bastard after all; that’s probably the problem. Fumbling with my keys, I find the one I’m looking for and unlock the door. I beckon him in and lead him down the long hallway that brings us to the core of the apartment. I wish I had time to clean the place up a bit. It looked a lot better when Sonia was here.

Since Sonia was paying more rent, she got to decorate the kitchen and bathroom areas. The kitchen was obviously farm themed. There were checkered dish towels, metal buckets that held all of the utensils, and a big ceramic rooster that sat on our small kitchen table. I never knew why he was there, but I took the liberty of naming him Glenn. Then, of course, the bathroom was decorated like the ocean. The shower curtain was a printed image of bubbles and there was a ship

in a bottle over the toilet. Framed images of seashells and crabs decorated the otherwise bland walls. There was even potpourri in an open bowl next to a seahorse toothbrush holder. My contribution was a cardboard cutout of Frank Ocean that I put in the shower to both scare Sonia and go with the theme.

Now, everything is gone. No Glenn. My toothbrush sits in an old Sprite can. The walls are empty. The only thing left is the cardboard cutout of Frank Ocean that just sits in the corner and watches you pee. It's unnerving.

"I like what you did with the place," Mike says: a nice way of saying "wow, this is trash." Just imagining the checkered kitchen towels, the framed pictures of seashells, Glenn, all at his apartment makes me want to run to the toilet and throw up. But I can't expect Frank Ocean to hold my hair back; he just sits there with his dumb smolder. Mike removes his jacket and hangs it on a nearby chair.

When I don't respond to his comment, Mike to make conversation again.

"Benedict looks like he's doing well," Mike says, gesturing to Benedict Cactusbatch.

How dare he say his name.

"Yeah, he's my only roommate now, so I would appreciate it if you tried to keep it in your pants," I say.

A flash of anger/shame/something else appears over his face before it disappears into this neutral nothing.

"Look, I get it – you're mad," he says. I lean against the kitchen table that used to house the ceramic rooster. "But that gives you no right to talk about our lives and then publish it."

"It was fiction," I say. I open the refrigerator. "You want anything to drink?"

He seems hesitant. "A beer?"

I grab a cold beer out of the fridge and a warm one from the cabinet, handing him the warm one.

“Cute,” he says.

“Just playing the part of karma,” I say, popping open my bottle. This was stubborn Mike, who wouldn’t leave until he got what he wanted, even if he had to take it out from under me.

“Look, Sonia hasn’t been able to leave our apartment in weeks.” I try not to grimace when he says ‘our.’ “She is so ashamed; she thinks that people think she’s an awful person because it’s pretty obvious to anyone who was close to us that your story was about our situation.”

“I love how you call you having sex with my roommate behind my back ‘our situation’ as if I was in on it somehow.”

“Can you be an adult about this?” he asks, slamming the beer down on the empty countertop. “I’m trying to make this right.”

“Well, one: you shouldn’t have cheated on me with my roommate. Two: I didn’t send in the story. That was Denise. I just wrote the thing. Three: What do you want me to do about it?” Taking a swig of beer, I let him compose his thoughts while he looks at my string of photo clips. Sonia had a bunch of cutesy ones with pictures of her family and friends on her side of the room. I wanted the place to look cohesive, so I bought my own photo clips and just put up the same picture of Nicolas Cage over and over again.

“I don’t know. Apologize to her? Reach out?” he suggests.

I can’t help but audibly laugh – the kind of laugh that could get me kicked out of a library, the kind of laugh that could be heard from a satellite, the kind of laugh that would awake the dead (i.e. Shirley, the building’s ghost).

“You want me to apologize to the woman who slept with my boyfriend behind my back?” I ask, “All because her feelings were hurt?”

“You can’t understand what she’s going through. She’s crying all the time; she can’t get out of bed,” he says. Again, I remember a time when Mike and I used to understand each other.

“Trust me – I do understand,” I say. “The only way I could get out of bed was writing down all my feelings in a short story, and I am not going to apologize for that.”

There’s this awkward silence between us. I hum Frank Ocean’s “Novacane” to fill the gap, but the cardboard cutout doesn’t seem want to harmonize.

Just then, Mike’s jacket falls off of the chair he had so effortlessly hung it over. We both reach for it, and for a brief moment, our hands touch.

“Your hands are cold,” Mike says.

There is this unspoken thing between us. I could remember days of relaxing, watching TV and sitting all wrapped up in my Snuggie, the as-seen-on-TV blanket with sleeves. But nothing could keep my hands warm. Call it what you will: poor circulation, a thyroid issue, a voodoo doll of me kept on ice (I’m on to you). Mike would grab my hands and rub them between his own, breathing warm air on them before pressing a kiss to my palms.

His hands hover over mine. Instead of clasping my fingers, he wipes his palms over his tailored pants.

“Well, we heard that you’re going to be working on a book. That’s really exciting.” He doesn’t sound excited.

“Yeah.” I don’t sound excited either.

“So, this book... is it... going to be about us?” There it is. He stares into my eyes, as if to dissect some kind of hidden meaning from them.

“No,” I say. “No. It has nothing to do with you.” He doesn’t stop staring.

I physically drag him back to the hallway by the arm. I don’t know if he’s done talking but I sure am. He’s not putting up a fight, so maybe he got the answer he wanted.

Pushing him out the door, I make sure to say “Have a safe trip down nine flights of stairs. Make sure to send a postcard.” For the first time in this miserable practically medieval month, I am quite glad that the elevator is broken.

As he leaves, I don’t exactly wish for him to stay, but I wish that he had some kind of recognition – some kind of look on his face to show me that it wasn’t all for nothing – some kind of gesture that would make me feel like I can breathe. I wish he had remembered that today would have been our anniversary. I can’t help but cross out dates in my head while it seems like he’s gone out and bought a new calendar.



## Chapter 4

Waking up the next morning, I feel this soreness in my soul from my talk with Mike. It's not like I tried to cause Mike and Sonia pain; *they* tried to cause me pain. If anything, they're the hunters and I'm Bambi's goddamn mom.

I mean, what would have happened if I never walked in on Mike and Sonia? Would I have just been oblivious for the rest of my life? We would do the whole kit and caboodle: living together, marriage, eventually I guess I would push out a miniature human if I was up for that. And then this miniature human would walk around, asking if Sonia was also Mommy because they saw that Daddy was kissing Sonia. And then, it would just be a whole thing and oh my god, I'm now realizing that "I Saw Mommy Kissing Santa Claus" is not about infidelity.

Taking a deep breath, I refuse to think like this. I close my mind and I think about my happy place: an abandoned castle in far-off Scotland where the walls and ceilings are made of hot dogs and there's a shirtless Chris Hemsworth, saying "G'day, mate. Fancy a cold one?" And when he gets closer, I realize he's just an Aussie made out of hot dogs. Sigh. Yet another unrealistic expectation for men. He lifts one sausaged hand and tucks a piece of hair behind my ear.

"I wish I could pay someone to tell me the first impression they get of me so I could fix it or something," he says, tracing the bottom of my lip with his finger. He tastes of mustard.

Opening my eyes, I remember the conversation I overheard at the hot dog stand. I snap my fingers. Mike was so worried that my newest project would be about him – as if I would give him the satisfaction. No. This project is going to be about *other* people, and I know just how to make it happen.

Okay, this girl told Katie that she wants someone to tell her their first impression of her. I think we could all use some honesty in our lives. There have been way too many people in my life who have told me that “No, you don’t look fat in those jeans. Your body is a temple” – I’m paraphrasing of course. If my body is a temple, it’s buried deep in sand and the federal government has pulled all money for excavation. I just wish people could be upfront, no sugarcoating. Then, I think about the guy in the park, offering to write poems.

There has been no ‘first impression’ service before, but any idiot with a cardboard sign can run a ‘business.’ All I need is a poster to grab people’s attention and maybe an open violin case that confuses people.

Cutting off one side of a cardboard box, I use a faded sharpie to write “Pay \$1 and I’ll Tell You What I Think of You.” \$5 seems a bit steep and I’m not doing this for the money - I’m only kind of doing this for the money.

This is both part of a “get rich quick” scheme, and it will allow me to get to know some new people that I can use as characters. Everyone wins. I just have to hope I don’t piss anyone off. I tend to have that effect on people. Just ask Meowly Ringwald.

There’s very little of this plan that I’ve actually figured out. All I know is that if you have the right attitude and friendly eyes, you can get anyone to talk to you, especially if they think that they’re getting something out of it. I am going to offer people gut reactions of what I think of them, so that they can change and be the person that they want to be. And in turn, they’ll *ideally* open up to me and tell me where I went wrong or where I went right. I don’t need to create stories when there’s a whole city of stories waiting out there.

After this brainstorming, I turn to Netflix, but at some point in the day, Netflix is no longer perfect company. Whenever I get lonely like this, I pull out my phone and hold down the

home button. Siri comes online, asking how she can help me. Unless she happens to know an eligible millionaire bachelor, she can't really do much, since so much of my life is riding on the fact that I want to marry rich. I asked her once if she could find me a rich bachelor, hoping that she could put me in contact with someone who owns a lot of stock at Apple or something. She just ended up calling my old boss, Rich, from when I used to be in the dairy industry. And by that, I mean from when I worked as a cashier at a frozen yogurt shop.

Still, I ask Siri what my name is. In her automated voice void of emotion, she says "Your name is Brooke, but I get to call you 'Brooke and I love you' because we're friends." The reason why I have this set is because whenever I ask Siri if she loves me, she says that she admires me or that I'm growing on her – which is not the same thing as love. Or she says she doesn't have the technology to love – which is probably a good thing because humans are not waking the fuck up and understanding that robots will end up killing us someday. But if I put "I love you" in my 'nickname,' then she has to say it. Sometimes, it's just nice to hear the words.

I finish my night with a personal showing of *Bridge to Teribithia* in some attempt to feel something. When the movie finishes and I've run dry of tears, I say a quick goodnight to Benedict Cactusbatch, even though he's an asshole, because he's all I've got. Looking over at my old roommate's side of the room, I can almost imagine her lounging in her leopard print pajamas. Throwing popcorn at each other from across the room, since that is about the only thing the room size was perfect for. Spreading black goo all over our faces because it was supposed to clean out pores or something, but really using it to take gross pictures of each other to post on Instagram for each other's birthdays. Sleeping with the blinds open because Sonia said that the twinkling city lights always made for the best nightlight.

“Sometimes, I get scared that I’ll never have what you and Mike have,” she once said, rolling over in her bed to face me, the light from the skyscrapers illuminating just a crescent of her face. We both stared for a moment at the spot on the wall right above my head where the light shined the brightest: right on that beautiful poster of young Brendan Fraser. I started thinking of Mike, my sweet Mike, who I never seemed to run out of things to talk about with, who would hold my hands when they were cold and breathe hot air on them, and who never judged me for my family situation. He was everything. He told me that I could accomplish anything, and I was starting to believe him. Mike was due to get a promotion, and maybe we would start living together and our lives would take off.

“Sometimes, I get scared I’ll lose what Mike and I have,” I said after a moment.

“I guess that’s the problem. Either you’re scared you’ll never have something or you’re scared you’ll lose it.”

Playing with a loose thread on my comforter, I followed my moral code to a T: Listen, digest, deflect. “Do you think perfume or cologne would affect the taste of human flesh for cannibals?”

“I’m sorry, what?” She sat up straight now, so the light from the window just trickled from the top of her shoulder to the swell of her elbow. Everything else was darkness.

“I mean, taste and smell are linked, so I’m just curious.”

Sonia fell back onto her pillow with a resounding thud, looking face up at the off-white ceiling. “I’m curious why you keep changing the subject.” After pausing for a moment, she said, “I think it’s worse to be scared you’ll never have something than always be worried you’re going to lose it. I mean, with the latter, at least you know you have something, *anything* to start out with. Don’t you agree?”

I said an intelligent, riveting, and borderline-groundbreaking “I don’t know.”

Sonia rolled over, clearly unsatisfied with my answer. And that was supposed to be the end of it. But every time the faint car alarms started to lull me to sleep, my insomnia shook me back to consciousness. Being afraid of losing someone is so much worse because then you have a taste of what life is like with them and what it might be like without. The more people that walk into your life, the more people who have the possibility of walking straight out. But why think about this when I can think about the fact that spam is rumored to taste like human flesh?

Her side of the room is empty now, minus the home gym I’m working on. It’s just a yoga mat and a lone granola bar, but it’s coming together nicely. I have the roommate notice already written up and everything:

*Looking for a roommate who can handle sarcasm, likes Oreos\*, and does not mind the occasional ghostly presence. (Would be helpful if applicant is or ever previously was a Ghostbuster, but not required) We will be sharing a bathroom, kitchen, and a studio bedroom, so we will never be out of ten feet of one another unless one of us braves the outdoors. I am fairly neat with a “good sense of how to share with others” (Mrs. Carther, Grade 3 English teacher). Friends describe me as “cool” (my friend, Denise) and “needs money” (my mother). Hope to hear from you soon.*

*\*Oreos and studio apartment come separately (I’m out of them)*

But trying to get a new roommate feels a lot like losing. It’ll make this whole sick portion of my life feel real. So, I just look at Benedict Cactusbatch, thankful that he can never run away. Note to self: Only trust friends that are potted. Then, I pass out with my fingertips still touching the glass of an empty beer bottle.

The next day, I am greeted -- no, harassed by the sunlight. I'm sure Benedict Cactusbatch likes it, but I could do with a couple more hours of eternal darkness. I try to go back to sleep, but an asshole bird starts being an asshole. In *Snow White*, they made birds singing such a sweet and whimsical thing. I seem to be stuck with the Florence Foster Jenkins of birds. Pick a key and stick to it, dude.

My growling stomach tells me that it's time to head to the park, grab my homemade sign and start my plan. After lunch in the park, of course. I can't work on an empty stomach. Well, technically, I have trouble working on a half-full and full stomach, as well; I'm just not good at working in general.

Once I get to the park, I get my hot dogs and find a place to sit. While I was in line, Patrick told me he saw a "fire in me that he hasn't seen in a while" and his whole face lit up. I don't know what that means, but it doesn't feel good in my soul.

The spot where I'm going to sit needs to be shady - I also don't work in the sun. It turns into a waiting game. I wait until street performers leave their areas before snatching them up myself, like I'm a lurker at a casino. Finally, I find a perfectly shady area right in the center of the park. Prime real estate. There's some dried-up bird poop on the arm rest of the wooden bench, but I'm not that picky.

A man with a mustache nestled below the curve of his nostrils passes by. For a split second, I think it's my father. My back straightens so far that I think I could balance a book on the top of my head and become a princess. I watch his movements, his bow legs, the way that he walks with purpose. The man comes closer, and I notice that he does not have the pointed chin that my father and I both share. I don't know why I thought my father would be in New York. Last I heard, he was gallivanting in San Francisco with his "matching kindred spirit," a woman

who wore short-sleeved flower shirts even in the winter time and always seemed to smell like tuna. Meanwhile, my mother dresses for the weather and smells of nothing within the aquatic family, typically – we're not all perfect. But if we were judging by smell alone, America and Simon Cowell would have voted he stay with my mother.

But I try not to think of these things. Instead, I try to think of puppies and kittens and baby things that are evolutionarily born cute, so that people are more compelled to keep them alive. I wish someone needed to keep me alive; maybe then it would be a quick and easy road to attractiveness. But still, I'm just plain-faced with oval eyes the color of dark chocolate, hair the color of milk chocolate, and skin the color of white chocolate. I'm still hungry.

I've been at this for a few minutes and still no takers. It's like some people just don't want me to judge them to their face. Now, if Simon Cowell had this sign, there would be a line all the way to the Blue Note jazz club. I consider just leaving, making an internal pros and cons list in my head. Pros: Pajamas, my bed, and a brief interlude of hibernation. Cons: Stairs and upcoming deadlines.

Finally, I think I have a taker. He's staring at my sign with his head cocked to the side, like it's a Van Gogh. He reminds me of a turtle eating a strawberry; he's taking his sweet time.

"Hello," I say, letting the word linger in the summer heat. My smile is full and fake, but I need this to work. Maybe this guy has some super deep backstory that he's hiding below a sweatshirt and a faded Yankees cap. Maybe he used to be an astronaut. Or maybe he's an alien, whose language adapter is broken and *that* is why he's taking so long to read my sign. Or maybe-

He grunts and walks away. What a waste of a perfectly decent "Hello".

Then, I see him from far away. He turns his attention from the mostly ignored juggler in the corner and focuses on me. His hair is black and fuzzy. His face tan and fuzzy. His outfit blue and fuzzy - I have forgotten to put in my contacts.

He comes further into my realm of vision, and I can see him clearly. His hair is purposefully greased and styled to the side with a few rebellious tufts falling over the top of his forehead. His strides are long and confident, like he owns the place. His right hand holds a navy-blue umbrella, even though the forecast did not say it would be raining today.

I follow his hand as it slips inside the pocket of his briefcase. He's pulling out his wallet. He's giving me money – it's really happening. A crisp dollar works its way into my hands as he takes a seat next to me. I'm waiting for him to say something, *anything*, but he just waves his hands to prompt me to begin. It seems like I'm taking the reins on this one.

Discretely, I start up my pocket voice recorder, hoping this will be something good to transcribe later.

BROOKE DIXON: So, you seem very confident. You have an umbrella even though it's not supposed to rain, which makes me think you are always ready for anything – maybe even a survivalist.

[He does not give me any indications that I'm right whatsoever; it's like speaking to a brick wall.

A brick wall with no personality. A brick wall with no personality, but is wearing sunglasses.

Here it comes: the big finish.]

BD: And you care about eye protection. [Wow - I suck.]

[He nods]

MAN WITHOUT PERSONALITY: Cool. [He leans forward, beginning to get up.]

BD: Wait, did I get anything wrong?



[This is the big moment. This is when he's going to pour his heart and soul to me – he didn't want to leave Louisa at the train station; he was scared. He was scared to form an emotional connection with someone, after he had been burned in the past by Brittany in high school. His heart yearned for someone to connect with him, but yet; he pushed everyone away. It was easier that way. But still, he always thought of Louisa and-]

MWP: Kinda.

[Pause.]

BD: Well, I was wondering if you wouldn't mind telling me what I got wrong. I would love to hear about your life. [Did I go to heavy? I really need to work on my pitch. But it's hard when the elevator is broken.]

MWP: What? No. I don't know you. Fuck that.

[He walks away.]

[He returns.]

MWP: And you know, you should really warn people before you record them. That shit's fucked up.

Okay, I know that he's heartbroken about Brittany and Louisa and trying to cope with his trust issues, but he didn't need to use that kind of language. There is no reason for cursing. What a fucking asshole.

I am giving up hope. I'm \$1 richer, but I still have nothing to write about. What kind of story can I craft about an umbrella-wielding man in sunglasses? Unless it's a spin-off of the classic nanny character with a guy named Mark Poppins coming to teach children about a spoonful of sugar and how to protect their eyes. Something tells me that Parable Publishing is not looking to have a copyright case on their hands. But still, I file the idea away for later. The

problem is that I have all of these ideas, but then they turn into my own voice so fast. I need a story that is so separate from myself that I can get lost in it, and no one can accuse me of writing about them.

I consider calling Denise down and asking her to stage a fake interview just to get the ball rolling a little bit. That's how I used to sell Girl Scout cookies back in the day. One girl would act as the plant, which tended to get everyone in the Kroger parking lot fairly interested. Even if it didn't work, you still got a free box of Thin Mints out of it.

"Oh fucking hell," I say, watching a crowd circle around two guys break dancing. How was anyone supposed to get any customers with Mr. Pop and Mr. Lock over there? I consider busting out my own moves, which is a memorized routine to California Girls by Katy Perry that was featured on Just Dance. But then I notice a bald-headed man a bit separate from the pack. Instead, he's watching two kids run around with a basketball. Not in a creepy way, but in a sweet way. Okay, let me try that again. He's watching two kids run around, while he has a wistful smile on his face. Wait, I'm making it sound creepy again. He's watching two children, and it's clear to everyone in the park that he loves kids. This just keeps getting worse.

Then, he turns away from them and his smile drops. Pulling out his wallet, he pulls out a piece of paper and looks at it. He seems nice – contemplative, even. Oh yeah, this guy will be a talker. This guy looks like he was just made for a therapist's couch.

Angling the sign slightly in his direction, I try to not make eye contact. I don't want to freak him out right off the bat. I was a bit too 'in-your-face' last time. My mom always said that we make mistakes so that we can learn from them. I thought it was just because I'm relentlessly incompetent. He's coming closer. Keep it cool, keep it cool, keep it cool, keep it cool.

"Pretty cool sign, huh?" I say. "I made it." Nailed it.

“Uh yeah,” he says. His voice sounds tired and in fact, his eyes look tired, as well. He has deep bags sinking below his blue eyes and he seems to be swaying just a tad bit. “But like what does it mean?”

“I’ll just tell you what I think of you,” I say. Then, I realize that I just stated exactly what my sign says, and he probably wants more of an explanation. “I’ll tell you my first impression of you – who I think you are by how you carry yourself.”

He sits down next to me, keeping his body to himself. Not a manspreader – he gets points for that.

“Okay, I’ll bite,” he says, pulling out a dollar bill. I catch a glimpse of just the outlines of a photo in his wallet as he wriggles out the money.

I have to do better this time. He has on a blue polo shirt that seems like it has never been properly acquainted with an iron. His purple tie does not exactly match any part of the ensemble, and it’s a bit skewed. Now that I look closer, there seems to be a small stain that resembles the state of Alaska on the shoulder of his shirt. He seems too casual to be a lawyer but too well dressed to have a low-level job. He’s holding the remnants of a Subway sandwich.

“You love kids. You look tired. You have the essence of a businessman, maybe. And it seems like you spilled coffee on your shirt this morning or someone spilled coffee on you. One or the other.”

He glances down at the stain, smiling to himself. “That all?”

“And it’s sweet that you keep a picture of someone in your wallet.”

“You’re a tad bit frightening, you know that?” he says, furrowing his brows.

“I prefer observant,” I say. “I’m a writer.” As if that will throw this case wide open. As if that’s a perfect “get out of jail free” card. Like I could commit a murder and then be like, “Sorry!

I'm a writer!" And the guy I just killed would sit up and be like "Oh okay! No worries! What are you working on? This a Shakespeare type deal?" And then we would laugh about it.

"Ah, a side effect of the trade," the man says, bringing me away from my internal dialogue as he takes a bite of his sandwich.

"So, did I get anything right?" I ask.

He smiles. He looks like he wants to talk just as much as I want to listen.

"Some things. I do love kids; I have two of my own at home. And I am tired. I'm not a businessman; I teach classics at NYU-"

"The purple tie!" I say, like I've cracked this case wide open and I'm wearing a deerstalker hat with a pipe between my lips. NYU's colors are purple.

"School spirit," he says, pointing to the purple tie. "I'm teaching a summer course on Greek mythology." He looks at the stain on his shirt, laughing. "And I wish this was coffee. It's spit-up."

He pulls out his wallet one more time to show me the picture. There is a woman with curly hair and a tired smile on her face, wearing a blue hospital gown. Clutched to her chest is a tiny little baby. Another girl who can't be any more than three years old proudly stands next to them.

"That's my wife, Amanda. And the trouble-maker there is Vanessa. And then that new one there is little Sammy." He looks at the photograph with pride. Buds of tears sprout at his eyes. "He has yet to get on a regular sleep schedule, but it's worth it."

"You have a beautiful family," I say. I feel like he has shown me something intimate and I feel like this strange intruder to this perfect intact unit.

He tucks his wallet away, keeping a quiet smile on his face.

“I do,” he says. “Today is my first day back at work. I wanted to take off the whole summer, but we need the money.”

“That must be hard,” I say.

“It is. It’s difficult to focus on anything else than my family. I think my whole class thinks I’m terribly unqualified.”

“How long have you and your wife been together?” I ask.

“10 years. Married for 5.”

“Do you mind if I record this?” I ask, hoping to not completely sever the fragile connection we just made.

“Eh. I don’t mind. This writing research or something?”

“Just looking for some inspiration,” I say.

I start up the voice recorder. Boys, we got a hot one!

BROOKE DIXON: How did you meet?

[Trevor Campbell laughs, wiping his hands on his khaki pants.]

TREVOR CAMPBELL: It was my first year of grad school. I was studying at the University of Athens in Greece because after four years of a traditional undergraduate program, I was tired of plain classrooms. What better place to study ancient Greek mythology than Greece itself?”

BD: Makes perfect sense to me

TC: Well, at least someone agrees. My parents thought I had gone insane. They wished I had chosen to study business or law or something normal. I packed probably about two weeks-worth of clothes, a toothbrush, and my passport and just left.

BD: So, did you live on a campus?

TC: I did! I lived right on campus. My roommate was this guy, Giorgos. A real smart guy. Went on to get a PhD in Economics. He had grown up in a little town in Greece but studied at Yale for undergrad, so he completely understood the whole wanting to experience the world idea. He taught me everything. How to say “gyro” correctly-

BD: How do you say that because I feel like I always say it wrong and get the stink eye? Or it has something to do with my personality and not my pronunciation.

TC: [laughing] [at least someone thinks I’m funny] It’s “yee-roh”

BD: [Bad Greek accent] I want a gyro! Side of Greek yogurt! Opa!

TC: Well that was just offensive. [He’s serious for a moment before he starts laughing.]

BD: So what else did your roommate teach you?

TC: Well, in Greece, they throw toilet paper in a separate bin, rather than the toilet itself. And they eat dinner at 9 PM. Giorgos and I – we were fast friends. We would spend nights with the window open, looking at the stars and drinking Alfa beer. We would smoke cigarettes while he taught me Greek curse words that I could never learn in a standard classroom setting.

[Trevor looks around the park again, noticing families milling about. He turns back to me.]

TC: Anyway, you were asking about how I met Amanda. [Pause] Well, one night, he came bursting into our room while I was working on reading something. Icarus maybe. He told me he got a date.

BD: Ooh!

TC: I asked who the guy was.

BD: Right on.

TC: This was pretty typical. Giorgos was quite the charmer. He told me that this guy was named Kevin and of course, I had to comment on the fact that Giorgos had fallen for an American of all things. I guess they had met at Lexikopoleio.

BD: What's that?

TC: It's this bookstore in Athens, a pretty nice store, like a Greek Strand Bookstore.

And then his face changed and I knew exactly what was going on. He had done this before – trying to get me to sign on to play some kind of minor role in his love affairs. First, it was Eleni, a nice Greek girl who was the sister of Giorgos' romantic escapade. Then, it was Sophie who dropped coffee on my feet. The latest was Chrisa, who referred to me as a “dumb American.” Giorgos said I would like this one because she was American. As if we all automatically like each other. Apparently, they were both studying here from Cleveland and this Kevin guy had a friend looking for a Greek boy and Giorgos suggested a double date.

BD: But you're not Greek?

TC: Exactly. And my name is Trevor. It would be pretty obvious. [Pause] Eventually, I promised to go, but I refused to pretend I was Greek.

BD: So was it a storybook first meeting where she didn't end up caring that you weren't Greek?”  
[The crowd around the break dancers had thinned considerably since he started talking.]

TC: Not exactly. I remember everything about that night. [He rolls up his sleeves] I stayed quiet for our introduction, basically pretending to be mute. That way I didn't have to lie. She was cute. She was going into her senior year of undergrad and she was spending this summer studying abroad. She used her hands frequently when she spoke and she had this glint in her eye when she talked about her passions. She ordered a biral, which is kind of like a caramel cola.

BD: But you must have talked eventually?

TC: Well, it wasn't totally my fault. She started getting really excited about the stories of Hercules and Pegasus, which is literally my field of study, so I started talking to her about it. She set down her drink, looked at Kevin, looked at me, and said "You aren't Greek?"

BD: And you said?

TC: "I'm from Pittsburgh."

[Brooke and Trevor both laugh.]

BD: But you won her over eventually, didn't you?

[His face lights up]

TC: Yeah. Yeah I did. [Pause] I taught her a bunch of different vocab that she wasn't being taught, like 'άντε γαμήσου'.

BD: And what does that mean?

TC: 'Go fuck yourself.' She just had this beautiful smile and we just spent time being dumb Americans together. I remember we caused quite a scene in this one store and the shop owner chased us out, hitting me in the head with a broom repeatedly. [Pause] That's when she said 'I love you' for the first time. And I said it back.

BD: And so you stayed together after Greece.

TC: Yeah. I mean with some ups and downs. She was only in Greece for a summer program, so she did have to go back to the States eventually. I was worried it was going to be a summer fling, but we still kept in contact all the time. And when I came back to America, she was there, waiting for me. We moved in together which was crazy and amazing all at once. But we decided we loved city life, so we came here to New York.

BD: So it was a summer abroad fling turned into something before?



TC: Yeah. Yeah, I guess you could say that. Amanda Carrigan just had this way of making the entire world light up.

BD: You really love her, huh?

TC: I mean enough to have a wife and kid – kids with her.

BD: That's – well... that's really nice. I'm... happy for you. You still think she wouldn't trade you in for a real Greek?

[Trevor laughs, holding his still half intact sandwich to his chest and I've now just remembered that I've taken up his whole entire lunch break.]

TC: I think we've kind of lost our... I don't know – our adventurous side. We eat gyros and occasionally watch *Mamma Mia*. And I teach Greek mythology, but that's it. That's kind of enough for us. We're enough for us. We don't need a trip to Greece to tie us together anymore.

[Now, in this brief nickel of a moment, I see my life flash before my eyes. There I am, dying alone with a snail named Horace. Horace because Horace Slughorn. Snail because it's ironic.

There is no Amanda Carrigan at the end of my tunnel. The most I know about Greek mythology is that Zeus was a whore and Wonder Woman has something to do with something. This is not my life and there is no point in pretending it was.]

BD: And is it all smooth sailing?

TC: Oh definitely not, but I think once you find the right person, you can get through most anything. Love is not a perfect romance story. It has twists and turns, but love is being comfortable with another person. I *like* who I am around Amanda. We never run out of things to talk about, and it's just about companionship. We're there for each other.

BD: That's incredible you were able to find that kind of love.

TC: Thank you. I mean, I'm lucky. This kind of thing doesn't happen that often.

BD: And what do you mean by that?

TC: Well, my father was in the military, so we moved around a lot until he retired maybe when I was like in my early 20's. We lived in Louisiana for a while, Germany for a bit, Florida for a time, etc. My dad would be gone a lot, and so my mother had to raise my sisters and I basically as a single mom, so I didn't really see my parents in love often, just because Dad wasn't around. I didn't super know – I guess – what relationships or love really was for a long time, just because I didn't see it around the house... And then, when Dad would come home, sometimes he would get fairly distant. I don't think it was until college that I really experienced actual intimacy and relationships – I just thought that every relationship worked like that. It was a unit to serve another purpose, of raising children, of not dying alone. It wasn't love.

BD: And so now? How do you differ from your father?

TC: I try to show my children that I love them every single day. I show them that I love their mother, that relationships are more than just a system; it's love; it's *companionship*. I want to show them what a real and *healthy* relationship is, so that might mean demonstrating through my relationship with their mother how to deal with conflict-resolution, how to do little things around the house to remind someone you love them, things like that. I want them to know what love is.

BD: And what are your kids like?

TC: They're – well, they're wild. My oldest, Vanessa, has already decided that she's going to be a French chef-

BD: Why a French chef?

TC: *Ratatouille*.

BD: Ah.

TC: So, our kitchen is a mess. Tomato splatters all over the walls. Have you ever met a four-year-old who is obsessed with olive oil?

BD: I try to only converse with grown-ups.

TC: I already know that Vanessa is going to be a bad influence on Sammy.

BD: And then the angsty teenage years?

TC: Can't wait. Every parent's dream.

BD: What was it like to find out your wife was pregnant again?

TC: [laughs] Oh god, that was quite a surprise – I mean, not that Sammy wasn't planned – I mean, well – this isn't – we were excited, I'll say that much.

BD: Was your daughter excited?

TC: You kidding? She *hated* the idea. We had to explain to her that there isn't some kind of return policy. It's not a situation where you can return it back to where it came from – my wife would not like that.

BD: I don't think any female would.

TC: But I think she warmed up to him. Now, she's overly protective over him. She's always holding onto his hand, freaking out when he grabs a hold of her finger. [Pause] And I'm missing it.

BD: But you love your job, right?

TC: I do. I *do*. I love my students – I learn from them. I get to advise them... I get to bore them. My family would not listen to my rambling about Greek gods, but my students do and they take *notes*. It's the best thing I could have done with my PhD, I think. Well I-

[Trevor's watch goes off.]

TC: That's my cue to get back to class.

BD: I'm sorry that I kept you from your sandwich.

TC: Somehow, I don't mind at all.

As he leaves, I feel something hollow settle deep within me. Some people just aren't meant for a cookie cutter life. My life is like a dollar store apple cutter. Always breaking apart and always disappointing. And my own relationship starts to come into perspective. As much as I loved Mike, I always felt like I had to be enough for him, like I had something to prove. I thought we had that kind of relationship where we never ran out of things to talk about, but now I'm starting to remember that I had to always think of conversation topics that would just keep us going. It was never this companionship Trevor and Amanda have. All I can hope is that Trevor thinks of me time to time – of that insane girl who interviewed him on a Washington Square Park bench that was riddled with bird poop. Yeah; that's how I want to be remembered. Not too bad of a legacy if you ask me.