

# Seasonal Discord

by Jan Alexander

I bought marigolds on my way home Friday night, and cantaloupe and bagels, enough for three houseguests although I expected only two. The sun was beginning to rise when Bart rang my bell on Saturday morning. It rang three times slowly, followed by three fast rings and then a long, low ring that would have woken me from a coma. I was still tying my robe when I got to the door; it was way too early to move with coherence.

"I'm so sorry..." His brown face was chalky, his Armani shirttail as wilted as a hangover. He muttered some things about having gone to a party downtown, right from the airport. I made coffee and we sat at the kitchen window, me in my kimono and Yoko, my cat, curled up near my feet. We watched the sun paint the city with September gold tones. Bart buttoned his shirt even though it was warm, as if to wrap up his boy-toy muscles for a more appropriate occasion. He was six-foot-five. He had grown accustomed to the Riviera sky as his playground, to a life of morning mimosas and fleeting thoughts of the novel he had pretended to write for 10 years or so, while Simon ran his gallery until he got sick. It occurred to me that Bart might be trying to do himself in, out of grief or guilt or both or whatever.

"I killed a man."

"Whaaattt???" I'd been meditating on the sun. I figured he was trying to jolt me awake.

"I was hanging out with a new friend.... Michel, after Simon died." He looked down, not giving me a chance to disapprove. "Michel's 80-year-old father had a heart attack and we visited him at the hospital. The father seemed like just an average old straight lecher, like one day Michel said to him, the nurse is coming down the hall and he said, 'Does she have nice beeg teets?' Except in French so it wasn't really with 'ze accent."

"So what was I supposed to think? The day before I left I was in the room alone with him, and when I said I was going back to

the States, he said 'We are friends, non?' and he reached out with an arm. He was presumably going to kiss me goodbye on each cheek, then one for good measure Provencal style, right? So I bent down. But then he pulled my face to his and tried to stick his tongue in my mouth! "

Bart was always finding people he thought were either lusting after him or discriminating against him.

"The thing is, I was standing between the bed and the wall. Ask me how I got there...I'd just gone to the window to let some sun in for him. He pulled at me. He was eighty years old, but he pulled. I pushed at him. He gasped for breath. What's that?"

"Just a siren." My apartment on West End Avenue was a perpetual front row seat to a chorus of traffic. Having re-entered New York myself not quite a year ago, I remembered how the first assaults left your neurological impulses raw, like open wounds.

"He turned blue. I called the nurse and the next thing I knew.... he was dead."

"So I'm harboring a fugitive?"

"I'm serious."

I wondered if it was possible to fabricate the memory of a tongue in your mouth and decided it was.

As mid-morning heat began to shimmy through the windowpane, I was still trying to reassure Bart that an 80-year-old heart could give out at any moment, provoked or not, real or fictitious.

It was Yoko, finally, who distracted him. She made a strange mournful noise — it sounded like "wwhhhhiiirrrrr"— and Bart pulled his face out of his hands, looked down at her and cooed "kitty, kitty," suddenly intent on trying to get her to come to him. A bowl of vitamin-enriched cat food sat beside her, untouched. I speared a solitary chunk of cantaloupe and held it before her nose; I had grown hungry while nursing Bart's obsession and sliced up breakfast, which he had devoured. Yoko backed away from it.

"Something's wrong with the cat," I noted, sensing it was now safe to introduce a lesser worry.

“Cantaloupe?” He seemed relieved to talk about something else.

“Actually, I found a book that says lots of cats like cantaloupe...and you can't even blame it on clever marketing.” I went on a motor-mouth binge about how melancholy the end of melon season always made me, that to steer Bart away from the dead man long enough for me to get a word in, because I had something important to tell him.

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A mere 10 days have passed since that Saturday when I first began to realize that some of my oldest friends had, in their pursuits of the extraordinary, had lost sight of what actually made sense. And furthermore, that I had led myself to a crossroad with no looking back.

My name is Sherry Fiddler, and I am now 43, which means I've known Bart for two decades. We met shortly after college, when we sang backup together in a rock band. For day jobs we both worked on those fringes of the corporate world where disbelievers are allowed to tread, though rarely too far beyond entry level. I worked in advertising as a junior copywriter, while Bart was a fact checker for People magazine. We used to feel infinitely superior to our mortgage-bound bosses.

When the band broke up Bart met Simon on a trip to France and decided to stay. I lived in New York, the same apartment where I live now. I've since split up with my first husband, sublet my place for a while and roamed around Asia, where I got married and divorced again, taught English and published poetry which I sometimes read aloud to reasonable applause. I confess, because lately it has come back to haunt me, that I was able to sneer quite blatantly at the kind of men who made money and talked of nothing else — they are a common species all over the world — due to the fact that I had some modest backing from my father, who made his money gambling in private equity ventures and thought my traveling plans sounded suitably entrepreneurial.

Somehow my father had assumed I'd see my way into import-export. Well, maybe I alluded to that once or twice because I knew what worked with him. While initially he was disappointed that I didn't produce my own little empire, last year my father and his new wife decided they were way too privileged anyway. They gave a sizable donation to homeless shelters, then ran off to retire cheaply in the hills of central Mexico, thus drying up my bankroll. I can't afford to sneer anymore, particularly because the problems that shattered both of my marriages began with fights about not having enough money.

As the expression goes, duh-uh.

As of that Saturday I was down to \$5,000. A little over a year ago I had seen my future if I chose to stay abroad; in villages throughout Thailand and in outlying parts of Hong Kong I'd met Western women, middle-aged English teachers and NGO representatives who wore lapis jewelry and lived alone in small pastel-painted houses where the gas might explode any minute. Men they referred to as "old friends" came by occasionally, and would sit on the terrace emptying all the gin and telling slurry tales in which they would, as if it were not a pertinent detail, casually mention the Asian babes they were scheduled to marry next month, then pause as if expecting their hostess to break the bottle over their head and kick them in the balls.

I found myself suddenly longing for things I'd always imagined were beneath a person on a quest for the anti-ordinary; for example, I began to harbor a most unlikely vision of living in a dignified stone house in Connecticut that came with a vice-president-of-something husband, two soccer-playing daughters and a salon lined with books, half of them written by close friends. Wandering friends, some with book contracts, would drink excellent wine in my book-lined living room and teach my daughters a selection of words in languages that were too obscure to be taught even in their excellent school.

As it happened, that Saturday morning I was also thinking of a man I'd just met who, co-incidentally, spoke French, and had done

many things, all of them conversation-worthy and legal but none remotely vice presidential.

I was not without a few remaining resources, and neither was Bart. He had his muscles and Simon's life insurance payout. I had my rambling rent-stabilized apartment. When I first came home that past winter — and opened the door and realized I could find my way through the apartment blindfolded it hit me that this was home — I had the walls whitewashed, courtesy of the landlord's obligations, threw away the carpets and curtains and started casting about for new things.

From the traveling Bide-a-Wee van I procured a big-haired white kitten and named her Yoko for her spontaneous performances expressing something indecipherable, which right now involves sitting listless in the corner. From a few phone calls to old advertising colleagues, I wrangled a lunch with Roger Kincaide, who now ran his own shop, and yes he was about to fire a copywriter so there would be an opening.

I had some new friends now, people who rented beach houses in the summer and complained about job-stress-related back pain the rest of the year, and looked out for matchmaking possibilities and had parties, such as the recent one where I met a non-vice-president, academician without tenure, whom I had noticed right away for no good reason other than I thought he was the most attractive man I'd ever seen, not that that had any bearing on anything. He had left a phone message early in the evening yesterday — what did he think, I came home from work on Friday and had nothing to do? Thank god I'd been out buying bagels and cantaloupe and flowers when he called.

I was dying to tell Bart about the man behind the message, though I had no reason to think there was anything to tell and there was a truly important matter of accommodations at hand anyway.

My cordless phone sat provocatively on the kitchen counter, mostly in case of a call from Kelly, who was driving in from California with her BMW and a pile of bankruptcy papers and had estimated a noon-ish morning arrival. Bart was not going to be the

only possibly-long-term houseguest in my apartment. I hadn't told him about Kelly yet, partly because he couldn't stand her.

The news could wait a little longer, since Kelly was never, ever on time.

"Listen to this." I succumbed and gave Bart the phone.

A to-the-point message: "Allo? Sherry? 'Zis is Jacques Laischer. I wanted to say hi and speak to you soon, I hope." The split second I'd pressed the "2" key to save it instead of "3" to erase it I was forced to admit to myself that I wanted to drink Montepulciano with Jacques again and let his hand graze mine tentatively as he talked about Camus' falling-out with Sartre.

"Well, well...come-wiz-me-to-ze-Casbah," Bart chuckled.

"So....?"

"He's Egyptian-French— he calls it Levantine. He teaches French literature at NYU, at least for the last few years. I met him at a party two weeks ago. He was flirting with my friend Tracey and then with me and then with Tracey again. His wife left him for a man with money." That made Bart shrug as if, well of course, don't we all.

For me, though, it was a cathartic release. I could think about Jacques in spurts. I resolved not to call him back until Sunday night, after nine o'clock, so he'd think I'd been occupied all weekend. And wasn't I occupied, after all? I gathered up dishes and washed them. Bart wandered into the living room, where the stereo was. Elton John began wafting through the air. "I Guess That's Why They Call It the Blues" felt like a love affair gone stale.

"I think I've outgrown rock and roll," I confessed to Bart. I went and moved the dial left, toward jazz. It was pleasantly indifferent, a relic of someone else's hope-filled nights.

"In my own way," Bart reminded me, "I'll probably achieve eternal youth." He was scanning the paper now. "Shit. A man in a priests' robe ran through the train from Westchester Friday afternoon," he read aloud, "spraying bullets that killed nine people. He shouted, 'death to Staten Island.'"

"Could be schizophrenic interior monologue," I said. Before I was other things, I was a psych major. Sometimes I spoke in malaprops myself in an effort to amuse. I sometimes judged my compatibility with people by whether my twists on words made them laugh, in fact. "Maybe he meant death to Satan."

"Should I get a job here?" Bart wondered aloud.

"Listen." Time was running out. "You're going to have to sleep in the living room."

Kelly had sent me a litany of requests by e-mail. I must provide a strong vacuum cleaner because of her dust allergy, not to mention the cat allergy although she really loved puddy-wuddies, and please, please let her have the small and windowless spare bedroom, because the futon in the living room would destroy her back.

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Shortly after 2 pm, the buzzer from the lobby rang. I was still in my kimono.

"Mrrrk," Yoko screeched.

"Time for me to go running," Bart bolted back to the guest room where his bags were temporarily stashed.

I wanted Kelly here immediately, filling the blankness in my apartment. I hadn't seen her in five years, though we talked and e-mailed all the time. She had said brace yourself, I'm broke and morbidly obese and out of my mind.

She played "Hot Cross Buns" on the doorbell to my apartment. When we faced each other I gasped.

She really was beyond fat.

An impermeable inch of fat hung like a noose beneath her jaws, and her stomach had the solid mass of pregnancy, except I knew she was so fed up with men's power games that she hadn't slept with anyone in almost a year.

Worse than the hanging flesh, though, she had a look of capitulation. Not so much to the poverty she had spent herself into, but to the middle age I still secretly believed was a disease you could avoid catching. Her flaming copper hair cascaded to her shoulders as it always had, with no visible grey, but her eyes, green

like a cat's in college, had developed a muddiness and her makeup was too obvious. She was wearing baggy pants, a powder-blue knit with a matching tunic; fat women's clothes.

"Sherry! Sherry! You look gorgeous and fit as usual—but look, you're not even dressed yet," she trilled. Kelly's approval always made me imagine I could beat any odds.

In college, she used to perform in summer stock every year, she organized a demonstration every time some woman somewhere was wronged, and she convinced me I was special enough to go to New York with her. When she got a leading role in a soap opera, she was going to use the fact that people recognized her to speak out for various causes. When she found out the script was going to have her character get raped and fall in love with the rapist, she bought out of her contract. Seven years ago she went to L.A., but only because she figured it was a good place to buy real estate and live on the profits; she was no longer going to let the show business machine make her neurotic about every little wrinkle and pound. It was supposed to be a foolproof scheme, but Kelly made the mistake of taking out a home equity loan to buy into a small commercial property that emptied out as one tenant after another went defunct. She blamed it all on bad advice and a broker who ran off with most of her money and put the rest in his friend's crooked scheme.

She ran her fingers through my hair, exclaiming how my new chin-length cut was terribly chic. But there was an edge in her voice I'd never heard before that made me wonder if she meant I was trying too hard to deny my own march of time.

"Remember Bart?" I intercepted him on his way out of the room. He had changed into a tank shirt and tight satin shorts. He grabbed Kelly's suitcases chivalrously. Three tapestry bags, in graduated sizes, which he lined up beside the sofa.

"Oh! Oh, Bart, I'm so sorry to hear about everything. How are you?"

"I killed a man."

"I'm sure he deserved it."

Bart asked if she had other things to bring up, with no hint that he disliked her.

"Oh, I've got a trunk full of heirloom jewelry and some junk. We can get that in a few minutes—but I'm beat...I got a speeding ticket in New Jersey, a hundred dollars that I don't have... "

I went to get Kelly a seltzer with lime and when I returned to the living room she and Bart were chatting as if they were actually friends. Even Yoko had rallied. She teetered on Bart's thighs, looking annoyed that his lap wasn't softer.

"So how did you kill him and how can I do it?" Kelly was asking.

Suddenly Yoko jumped onto Bart's shoulder. He screeched. Blood ran down his arm.

"Your cat isn't normal," Kelly observed.

"I'll wash up." Bart held his arm out like a stoical soldier. A drop of blood trickled to the floor. An ink red stain, smaller than a dime, soaked my floor with a million invisible viruses...I rushed to the kitchen and came out brandishing rubber gloves and a paper towel and disinfectant, hoping I could finish the job before Bart came out of the bathroom and saw.

Kelly sunk into the futon. "Two seconds into New York and I'm dying of asthma ahead" She was deep into the consumptive Camille scene when I came back from my toxic disposal mission.

"I know, you think I'm faking a breakdown like your mother to get your father's attention." That was meant to make me laugh. One of the first lessons she taught me back in college was that you were a more interesting person if you'd had parents who made your childhood a dance upon a high-wire that had forgotten to open the net below. We used to entertain our dorm mates daily, upping each other's ante with tales of mothers in too much of a fog to make breakfast — that was mine — and fathers who lost the house in a business scheme — hers.

"Oh....Sherry....thank god you've come back and become a big success. I always said you'd conquer the world and then take care of me when I was over the hill. How's that rotten Frenchman by the

way? It's going to cost me \$6,000 to get my antiques out here from California, then I'll sell them. I figured out I need to borrow that from you... If I can stay here while I look for a job."

I felt faint.

Bart sauntered into the room with two band-aids on his arm.

"I'm going running, but why don't we get your things first?" He looked at Kelly and I caught my breath.

"Oh...do we have to now?" she twittered. "Wouldn't you rather sit down and have a glass of wine and a Gauloise?"

"I try to keep in shape to stay alive," he said pleasantly. Since Kelly gave no signs of moving, he left, and there I sat with Kelly waiting for me to sign over all I had and then some.

"Do you think you could help me a little, right away? My bank account's overdrawn and I had to put all the gas to get here on a credit card I borrowed."

I sighed. "I could lend you one thousand."

"Oh, I'll be grateful forever."

I felt naked in my kimono. I told her I must go take a shower and get dressed.

"Don't leave me...I'm going to have a nervous breakdown like your mother if you go off to school. Oh, hell, go on."

The stream of hot water on my back was my own thermal sanitorium, a steerage-class spa for the soon-to-be-bereft—of-all-funds. In the back end of my apartment where the windows overlooked the building next door, all was quiet. But inevitably, a noise burst through. Not Bart or Kelly at the edge of another cliff, but the telephone. I wrapped myself in a towel.

"Sherry Bay-ay-bee?"

"Tracey!"

"Ummmm..."

"Tell me or I'll die of the suspense." But I could tell by the tone in her voice that she was going to tell me something I didn't want to hear.

"Well," said Tracey, one of my new friends, from the beach house this summer. "The flirty French guy called me."

I had a stabbing feeling, like loss. "So...are you going out with him?"

"Well... maybe tomorrow afternoon for coffee. I think he makes it coffee because he can't afford dinner."

Of course, I wasn't interested in him anyway.

"I think he's scum," I said. "He left me a message last night, then he called you too. Do what you want."

"You're not mad at me, are you?"

"No."

"You know," Tracey said, "I promised myself I'd stop being so critical of men."

"He's not important. My friend from L.A. is here. ",

"Right. Kelly. And she wants you to support her."

"She wants me to lend her six thousand dollars."

"Are you crazy?"

Another car alarm trilled in the distance, then the doorbell.

"Shit. I've got to go." I put my kimono back on.

Kelly stood at the door, two skinny twirls twisted into her hair, mascara running down one cheek.

"I went down to my car....it's gone!"

"Are you sure?"

"Everything...my grandmother's jewelry."

She sat on the futon and sobbed noisily.

I thought about rational behavior as I dialed 911, and it made me shiver. There had to be a car, surely. Could she have come in by Greyhound bus and planned this scene to keep up her display of grandeur? Or been so truly insane that she left the key in the ignition?

"The police are coming," I reassured her, as if it mattered. "I've got to get dressed."

"Don't go away!" She shrieked. She would jump out the window or something to punish me if I left her alone. So I was still in my kimono when two police officers arrived. One was Irish and tall, with hardly any growth on his face, and a name plate on his chest that read Murphy. The other, named Messina, was beefy with no neck.

"A BMW!" Sergeant Messina whistled. "I guess it ain't been yoaw day, huh?"

A key turned in the door and Bart sauntered in, satin shorts clinging to iron buttocks.

When he saw the cop, he stopped moving and grabbed a chair to steady himself.

"Who's this?" asked Messina. Murphy glared.

"My adopted brother." I said. Good god, just as Bart always claimed, police saw him and suspected him of something.

"Kelly's car was stolen," I muttered to him while Messina made a phone call. "Well, they got the report," said Messina. "Gotta tell you, don't expect them to find it. Call us if you need anything else." When he and Murphy left we heard their boots stomping down the hallway.

"Gotta shower," Bart announced and flew out of the room.

"I can't stand this planet!" Kelly shrieked. She pulled her head up, out of her hands, and looked at me, biting her lower lip, childlike. "I need more money."

"Want a drink?" The one advantage of having an adult dependent was that I could placate her with alcohol. "Wine. How about wine? I just got some bad news too."

"That Frenchman?" The depths of his rottenness brightened Kelly's spirit a bit.

"He asked Tracey out."

"Ooooooh..." Her eyes narrowed. Her tears had left rivulets through the pink powder on her cheeks. "I wish I had my car so I could hunt him down and run him over." She made me feel almost glad to have a man to hate.

Bart strode into the room in charcoal trousers and white tee shirt, barefoot, fragrant with my wild fern soap.

"Have wine...talk to Kelly," I ordered him.

"Did she tell you about that rotten womanizing man?" Kelly asked him as I rose. "He asked a friend of hers out."

"Mon dieu!"

On the cool side of the apartment, a calming symphony played in my head as I dressed, at last, in black pants and a black silk blouse. I dabbed a dewdrop of cologne behind one ear, then remembered that Kelly wouldn't be able to breathe if anyone around her was wearing fragrance. Maybe she wouldn't notice.

In the living room, Bart and Kelly were drinking from a new bottle of wine and had Thelonius Monk playing.

"I thought you'd gone down the drain," said Bart. "I went to the liquor store across the street and splurged on Chambelle Musigny." He handed me a glass. "To your health."

The bouquet was like a musical note that has yet to be discovered. "So many nuances," I gushed. Bart hadn't bothered to remove the price tag, as it happened, or maybe he wanted us to know. "\$68" whirled before me in a St. Vitus delirium.

"A delightful play of fruitiness," said Bart, "with a hint of surrealism."

"You know, Kelly..." I tried to give the words the offhand tone of a random idea so that she wouldn't think I was trying to be an authority figure with advice to bestow. "You could sell real estate in the country, and start a theatre on the side."

"I helped women win battles just to go to work for some salesman?"

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On Monday morning, I put a towel around the doorknob and opened the guestroom door. Kelly lay motionless beneath the quilt. She claimed she couldn't get a moment's sleep with the horns and sirens outside. I had a right to know if she was exaggerating.

I padded on bare feet to the kitchen. Bart was draped over one of my chairs. He wore a charcoal suit, a Sistine Chapel of a suit, a fabric plucked from wisps of opal and gilt and alabaster.

"I'm having lunch with a friend in publishing," he told me "to pick his brain about jobs."

I nodded. The suit screamed I hate to work, I will be off to a Milanese palazzo as soon as my next sugar daddy calls, and I was

sure he'd picked it just for that purpose. Yoko was sprawled in the corner with a foreleg over her face.

"I had an awful dream," Bart said, "that somebody discovered you could cure HIV by swallowing cat eyes—and I was supposed to cut your cat's eyes out with a razor, and she was supposed to understand. Don't worry—I couldn't do it even in the dream. The first thing I did when I got up was pour food in her bowl, but she wouldn't even come and look at it."

"She's sleeping the way depressed people sleep," I noted.

"I could take her to the vet in the afternoon," Bart offered, as if in penance. I thanked him and left for work with a sense of relief, that some small slice of chaos was about to get prodded and locked away in a serene little box.

Early Monday mornings at the advertising agency were time spent anticipating panic, which reached a crescendo that Monday about 15 minutes into the 9:45 meeting. Roger said the client wasn't happy with our TV campaign for a hiply-packaged menstrual pain remedy. Sure, the client is a moron, Roger assured me, as well as the other copywriter and the art director. He always pretended he was in the trenches with us, so that we'd want to please him. All of us in creative knew that whether or not the client was happy with the next presentation, one of us was likely to get the axe soon. Periodically, Roger would make a human sacrifice to the gods. Firings were always on a Friday. On Monday after a firing he would come in looking refreshed, as if he'd spent the weekend meditating on a mountaintop. The last two months had passed with no one disappearing from our ranks, so we all knew the gods were getting itchy.

Roger is a year younger than I am. He has a receding hairline. In my first incarnation in this business, he and I worked together writing copy. He had seen my band perform once, and he had spent a year in India before I'd been much of anywhere. In the old days we used to go out drinking together after work and talk about what assholes our bosses were. For a while, before Roger got engaged to a tawny-haired pediatrician named Amanda, he was asking me to

have a drink with him so often I thought he might be angling for a date. I wasn't the least bit attracted to him. He wasn't a bad looking man, rangy with deep shadows around his brown eyes, but somehow he'd seemed way too eager, way too early in life, to be just where he was. Back then I liked men who were searching.

That Monday morning Roger was telling us we'd all done a great job but if you felt satisfied that was a sure sign that your creation wasn't good enough. He talked fast and grinned at his own turns of phrase. The creative team agreed to brainstorm into the night. At half past noon, he let us out for a bathroom break, then sent us scurrying into our glassed-in partitions to check messages and such while his assistant ordered sandwiches.

I had a few phone messages.

"Sherry, baby." Tracey had called at 10:37. "I just wanted you to know I called Jacques at three o'clock on Sunday and told him I had work to do and couldn't have coffee at five o'clock. He sounded really annoyed so I guess he won't be asking me out again!"

A little after 7:00 that night, we got a 30 minute break. My phone rang, and it was Bart. Through my glass wall I saw Roger in his glass-enclosed office, chatting on the phone with his feet on his desk. I picked up a pen and pretended to be taking notes.

"I've got the cat with me," Bart said.

Something in his voice made me lean forward.

"You were pretty much on target. The vet was a woman, kinda cute. She talked to me in French, and she said what we have here is, well, a name for the ailment isn't especially relevant, but this seems to be a particularly sensitive cat who picks up on the angst around her. Don't worry, there's a little yellow pill for everything. It's liquid actually, and you owe me \$300 for the visit and the drug, but no hurry. Anyway, you're supposed to force a couple of drops of this anti-depressant down her throat once in the morning and once in the evening. I tried it already and she's okay with it, but if it gets to be a problem you can get fish flavoring. They don't have cantaloupe flavor. Listen though, I need to borrow her for a while. What would you say if I said I found and provided solace?"

"With the vet?"

"You jest. I had a long wait. I started talking to a guy, a criminal lawyer who broke up with his boyfriend a coupla weeks ago and now, his poor old Doberman had been suffering terribly from a tumor, and the vet said it was best to put him down."

"And there you were..."

"He kinda' smiled at the sight of us together, white cat, black guy. This isn't exactly love at first sight, but he could be good for me."

I figured he meant financially good for him.

"He invited me over with my cat...can you deal with that? He did suggest I pick up some cat litter, but I started with a small bag."

"Don't..." my voice trailed. Don't what? Be such an easy pick-up? Abandon me?

I got home at 10:45 or so, feeling like a squeezed-out sponge. Kelly was in the living room watching television. She was wearing a pink sweat suit that made her whole body look like a cushion.

"I was going to greet you at the door wrapped in cellophane, but no, you had to stay late at the office," she said. She had made a simple pasta and salad, using the grocery money I gave her.

"This movie is really stupid," she mumbled, as if she had been searching a long time for stupidity. But when I sat down she turned off the TV and put a CD of her own in my stereo, one of the few things she'd managed to bring up before her car disappeared. It was a woman folk singer who made her guitar chords vibrate to emphasize the plight of coal miners' wives. It seemed like polemics, not music.

Kelly brought out chocolate ice cream, already scooped out into two of my glass bowls, and a dozen cookies arranged in a concentric circle on a plate.

"Don't make me feel like a pig and not eat dessert," she said.

"How was your day, dear?" I asked.

"I slept. I watched TV. I shopped for groceries. I mopped the kitchen and bathroom."

"When are you going to go out and organize women?"

"Don't you believe in recognizing my contributions as a homemaker?"

I watched her devour her ice cream. A droplet hit her chin and she kept on eating.

"You listen to music about brave women," I pointed out.

She shrugged. "There are crazy men stealing cars and shooting up trains out there."

I licked a mound of ice cream from my spoon. I missed Yoko sitting in my lap, and the dewy young-cat smell in her fur. We listened to a song about the freedom of wearing short skirts when you have aging legs and men no longer look.

"By the way, the French asshole called."

An involuntary thud hit my heart.

"I won't call him back."

"I wouldn't let you."

I saw before me Kelly's hair growing gray, mine following, our bodies becoming liver-spotted, and at night we'd eat two scoops of chocolate chip mocha with a praline, watching time pass with the flavors melting into sweet brown sludge.

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Tuesday night I came home early, by 9:30. Kelly had hung bamboo blinds in the kitchen.

"See what I can do with your money?" She was wearing an aqua sweat suit. She had broiled some chicken. We watched television while eating mocha chip ice cream. She said she hadn't heard from Bart all day.

"I saw a shower curtain with brown and gold stripes that would be great for you," she said. "With thick brown towels of course."

On Wednesday morning, Roger announced that the client was lukewarm about our new ideas. After the morning meeting I sat in my partition and tried to remember the time I rode on the back of a Khmer Rouge soldier's motorcycle and felt indestructible. When the phone rang I wanted to bare my teeth at whoever was bothering me in my slough of exhaustion.

"Am I calling at a bad time?"

It was 'Come Wiz Me to Ze Casbah'.

"Oh... How are you?"

"Life is tough," he said, and went on about seeing his daughter last night, but his ex-wife would let them spend only an hour together.

I rubbed my eyes and decided to be civil. "My cat's been abducted," I offered.

"Are you free some time this weekend?"

"Uhhh. I don't think it's a good idea."

I could hear a wounded silence, followed by, "Oh."

"Um...I just don't want to be part of a threesome."

"Scuse me?"

"Tracey is a good friend of mine. I don't want to get involved in this."

"Oh. We didn't go out, you know?"

"Whatever."

"I've been going out with a lot of women because I'm kind of shell-shocked."

"I suppose we can be just friends." The words spilled out without my permission.

"See you around then."

So that was that, and why did I give him a face-saving exit? Then I decided it was the right note after all; why let him think he mattered enough to make me mad?

♪♪

On Thursday afternoon in the ladies' room, I speculated with two colleagues that tomorrow there would be a sacrifice. That was exactly the word that Amy, the graphic designer with the very bee-stung looking lips, used. "Roger picks someone at random," she said, and we all laughed nervously. "Then he gives a spiel to convince them they're not cutting it."

By late morning Friday, I had not been given a task to perform. I read newspapers and magazines. I called Tracey. I called Bart at

the criminal lawyer's apartment and told him I missed my cat. He said please, just a little more time and he'd think of something.

"Sherry?"

Roger had come to my door. He beckoned me to his office. He rolled down the blinds over the glass and shut the door. I had a cold sweat on my forehead. His two tawny-haired children stared at me from picture frames on his credenza.

"Pierced tongue, fresh tattoos? Don't let cramps spoil perfection." Roger had almost a dozen wrinkles in his forehead when he pulled my copy onto his computer screen.

"You said be contemporary."

"It says we dare you to try this product. The client, how should I put this gently, said people still need an element of reassurance. I said be cynical but get in an undercurrent of warm and fuzzy."

"Pain prevention?"

He shook his head. "Tell me, what does this music make you think of?" He flicked a button on a remote control. The flat TV screen on his wall showed a couple. Though the woman's back was painted like a mural and the man had spiked hair, they were waltzing to music from before my parents' youth.

"A pill-popping housewife who fantasizes about Frank Sinatra while her husband's out boffing his giggly and somewhat pudgy secretary," I said.

"See....here's the problem," Roger told me. "You and I... our generation thought the world was still salvageable, but June moon romance was for morons. Now we're talking kids who put rings through their eyebrows to show that even when the rotten world maims them they can take it. They cherish a fantasy that true love will find them before the planet goes down. You're telling our target market to have a laugh at their own expense. Maybe you forgot it's always funnier if you slip on a banana peel and fall than if I do?"

I bit my lips.

"Is it fair for me to say you derive a certain feeling of superiority from suffering?" he asked.

"Suffering?"

"I mean as an artiste in a philistine world, as a woman with high standards in a world of selfish men?" He frowned, which produced more wrinkles in his forehead. "I don't see you as a real cynic. Quite the contrary—you're a hedonist following your boundless yearnings, literally from here to Timbuktu. I kind of envy that."

Somehow, as long as I was still in Roger's office and words flowed, I harbored visions of a minuscule chance of survival. I asked Roger if he ever had boundless yearnings.

He leaned over and stared at me intently. "The alter ego in my head is a daredevil in the traveling rodeo, and mentally undresses women of all ages as long as they smile a certain way. But if I ever have a mid-life crisis, I'm sure I'll make a complete ass of myself."

He thumbed through some papers, probably as a way to avoid looking me in the eye. "That's why I'm not worried about you. I wish I could still enjoy the struggle."

♪♪

I was shaking all over as I packed all the pens and paper I thought I could get away with.

My phone rang.

"Hallooo, Sherry?"

I hadn't actually expected to hear from Jacques again.

I told him I'd just been fired.

"If you're not already busy, can I buy you a drink tonight, as a friend?"

My new platonic friend and I went to a tiny cafe in the West Village. It was an Indian summer kind of evening, so we sat outdoors. He ordered the house red, two salads and thin-crust pizza.

"So how are you holding up?" He had huge eyes, a dark collage of green, gray and brown brushstrokes, more nuances than Chambelle Musigny. If I were married to someone like Roger I'd probably have fantasies about a man with eyes like these.

"My ex-boss called me an artiste." I figured I was allowed to whine.

"Does that imply someone who's making a show of their avant-garde-ness, while artists are busy producing art?"

Nice, I thought, to have a new friend capable of reading my implications.

"More wine?" asked the waitress.

Jacques looked at me.

"Half a giraffe of the red?"

"A half giraffe," he told the waitress, who smirked with an aspiring actress's ability to appear to be best friends with everyone.

"Did you ever ride with a rodeo?" I asked Jacques.

He scoffed. "The closest I came was a circus. Actually, it was a Lipizzaner stallion show. I wore outrageous versions of 19th century Austrian military coats, with gold braiding all over them. We went all over the country."

I let some word trigger an association, something to do with roaming. "There was a British guy I met when I was living in Bangkok. He was an adventurer-writer-photographer. There was an American architect in Hong Kong. I went back and forth." I said these things because with wine on my tongue I had regressed. I wanted the thrill of being wanted, like in a rock 'n roll song, and Jacques had begun to strike me as a womanizer who would become intrigued if he thought he'd met his match. Just a small dose tonight and then I'll give it up, I decided.

"I wondered if I could live with one guy six months of the year and the other the other six months of the year. I started thinking it was time to settle down, so I took a brief trip to Prague with an American Fulbright scholar I thought I might be able to marry, but he got weird after that."

Jacques said he'd never been to either Prague or Hong Kong, and now he wouldn't bother going because he'd never be able to top my exploits.

It was after midnight when we both began to fade. He pulled out money for the bill. "I'm cash-poor but not broke, so far," he said. He paid for a taxi, though he admitted he was splurging and had a

brief tiff with the driver, claiming he should make sure his meter was working properly because it shouldn't be that expensive, and because he thought the meter might be defective he wasn't going to leave a tip. He got out at my stop and I suspected it was because he didn't want to spend any more money. At my door, we looked at each other. I'd have to overlook scenes like that in the taxi if we got involved, I was thinking, but we were close enough that I could taste the wine on his breath, and the bouquet was playful.

"Don't run off with some adventurer," Jacques said. Then he turned away like a shy schoolboy.

♪♪

Saturday it was hot. Kelly didn't want to go to the park. I had a hangover.

"Didn't you tell that shithead man you have a dependent?" She meant Roger, and she wasn't laughing.

The phone rang. I picked it up and wandered away from Kelly.

"How is your head today?" It was my new friend Jacques. He had apparently appointed himself minister of my morale. He asked if I'd like to come to his place for brunch tomorrow. He said he'd been thinking, advertising is a business for artistes, and I could do better.

"Maybe I'll join the circus."

"Seriously, what would you like to do?"

"I'd like to cure someone of something." I didn't say I'd like to cure him of the pettiness that comes with poverty.

"Why don't you get a Masters in social work and go into private practice?"

The idea of being a shrink had occurred to me many times. On the other hand, there was the question of paying for graduate school.

When we hung up I tried to hunt down Bart again. I got an outgoing message. "Heeyyy," is what the criminal lawyer said instead of "hello" or "hi." There was a hint of meanness in his voice. "I'm looking for Bart," I said. "It's important."

Back in the living room, Kelly had made us a snack of crackers and smoked gouda. The muslin curtains and hanging plants she'd bought gave the room a pleasant sense of muted sunshine. She had arranged two Balinese woodcarvings on either side of my stereo, had hung my abacus on the wall, and arranged the tea set from Kyoto on my coffee table.

Kelly ate and rocked in my chair. She had turned on the television, to Doris Day pretending she wasn't in love with Rock Hudson. The Technicolor light gave Kelly's face a green tinge.

"Being poor," Kelly moaned, "is like being paralyzed with my mind intact. If you just found a rich husband we could set up a utopian village for all who wanted to come. I'm going crazy, crazy I tell you, feeling my great big imagination get atrophied all because I have no money. So what's my choice— die quickly of poverty or slowly in a job that dehumanizes me a little bit more each day?"

We watched Doris Day get married in a second movie. Kelly drank several beers.

♪♪

Sunday morning, strolling in the direction of Jacques' apartment, I passed a deli and tried not to see my own future in a "Help Wanted" sign. Jacques lived exactly 23 blocks up from me and three and a half across, in a brownstone walkup near Central Park West. The garbage hadn't been emptied outside and there was cracked linoleum on the staircase. He lived on the top floor.

"Allloo." He shook my hand. He was wearing khaki shorts, slightly frayed, and a tee shirt. His muscles had a hint of middle-age that I found graceful —as if they were still being formed by cerebral exertion. Must be those chivalrous sports he was into. There were two fencing swords crossed on the wall, and a few photos of him jumping on horseback.

Just about everything in Jacques' apartment, in fact, was frayed, frayed well past the standards of old money. It looked like lost money. There was a small fireplace, a mahogany secretary, and two bronze statues of knights on horseback. The walls were lined with books, all meticulously arranged by category. Camus in French

and English. More French literature. Middle Eastern history, European history, even a psychology section that segued into social theory. If we continued to be friends and I was unemployed in the winter, I might ask if I could come here in the afternoons and read beside the fire. He also had a cat. The cat was black and white, with hair that swept the floor.

"But you must see the piece de la resistance," he said. He ushered me out the French doors with the tattered curtains to a small terrace, overflowing with potted plants and flower boxes. Across from the terrace were backyards bursting with elm trees, their fat branches bumping one another in the breeze.

"It's like wilderness—right in the middle of Manhattan!" I exclaimed.

"The joys of rent control," he said. "Heard from any far-flung places?"

There was a metal table on the terrace, and a beach umbrella beside it. We smiled at each other awkwardly. He said have a seat and wait, he'd bring the food.

He had prepared platters with bagels, cream cheese, smoked salmon, black and green olives, sliced tomatoes and Bermuda onions. He poured coffee into slightly cracked cups, and uncorked a bottle of Spanish methode de champagne which I knew cost \$8 a bottle at the most. When he sat down, the cat leapt into his lap.

"I call her my four-legged daughter. Doesn't she look like me?" he said.

"Sure. Especially the white whiskers and hairy paws."

"My terrace and my cat. That's what makes life in this hell hole of New York bearable." His cat glared at me.

Later, when I went in to use the bathroom, I noticed two bookshelves that were like an altar to a little girl, with pictures of her at every age. She had big eyes, as playful yet troubled as Jacques'.

"Your human daughter is cute," I told him when I came back out.

Jacques smiled as if thinking of something a million light years out of reach. He railed about how many weeks it had been since his ex had actually honored his visitation rights and how he'd really have to put up a fight if he had to tend bar at night to pay child support and still couldn't see his daughter. He segued from his despair to mine and suggested various ways to scrape by in graduate school. Wait tables. He used to do that, and give people riding lessons. I could teach poetry workshops and English as a second language. I could rent my guestroom to a paying boarder. They were such reasonable ideas that I'd already thought of them.

"It's so easy to be rational about other people's lives," I said with a touch of irritation.

He nodded, then escaped into some comment about the chrysanthemums that had recently bloomed on his terrace. He rose from the chair and inspected his urban garden like a drill sergeant, enlisted me to help pluck out any flowers I caught drooping on the job. He did have a taste for perfect alignment. If I lived with him, I thought, we'd argue about where to place the furniture, and he might win because he'd stand his ground long after I got bored. Just a premonition — but of course we were going to just be friends. What I did like was his easy way of leaping from flowers to places and politics, and the saga of how he had held onto his rent-controlled apartment while living part of the time with his wife and daughter in their slightly larger illegal sublet across the street. We talked until I noticed it was nearing 5:30. I'd promised Kelly I'd go to a movie with her that night.

"It's getting chilly. Wear this home." He opened a bureau drawer and pulled out a red sweatshirt. It had a lemony soap smell. The sleeves hung to my fingertips. At the door, he shook my hand.

♪♪

It was getting cooler. A few dying leaves swirled around me on the walk home. The sweatshirt was a fortress, but even so, I sneezed a few times.

In my apartment, the lights were on and I heard voices.

Yoko jumped into the foyer. She rubbed against my leg. I picked her up and mumbled hello cutie pie and silly things.

Bart was folding his clothes beside a suitcase that he'd opened on my coffee table. Kelly watched him from the rocking chair.

I saw that Bart's face was swollen and his lip was cut.

"He beat him up!" Kelly shrieked.

Bart didn't stop folding. "Yoko was bouncing all over the place. As you see, the miracle drug is working. She jumped in bed with us this morning and he threw her down. I said don't be rough with the cat. He said, why, don't you like it a little rough...and before I knew it he was trying to slap me, like I was supposed to like it. I gave him a shove. He hit his head and he said what're you trying to do, kill me.... He punched me...and he picked up the phone and said he was calling the police, so I grabbed the cat and high-tailed it."

With a cashmere sweater hanging over his arm, he shed tears. "I miss Simon," he mumbled.

"So where are you going?"

"San Francisco. I have an old friend there and I can get on the red-eye. It'll cost, but..." What he didn't say, but I could tell he was thinking, was that California could be the end of the line.

"I'm staying right here. You and I will live on welfare together," piped in Kelly.

Yoko jumped in Kelly's lap.

"The cat has to take her medicine twice a day," said Bart. "It's in the kitchen. You have to force it down her throat."

♪♪

Bart has gone, and Kelly has spent Monday sitting in the rocking chair, frowning at the television, with Yoko in her lap much of the time. I have been sitting on the futon, hermetically sealed from the city. I have been sneezing but fortunately Kelly stocked up on Kleenex a few days before I was fired. All day my mind has wandered involuntarily to those eyes with the dark brushstrokes.

When the evening news comes on, Yoko meows in that demanding tone that means "Feed me."

"Wine?" I ask Kelly.

"I'll take it without coercion," she says.

While Yoko gobbles down fish-and-chicken mush, I examine her medicine, a clear liquid in an orange glass bottle with a dropper. The directions say to dispense two drops per dose.

"Kitty...." I make high pitched noises. I pry her mouth open. She screeches and takes a small chomp at my thumb. The first drop dribbles down her chin. I push the dropper way down into her throat. She makes a loud gulping noise.

Yoko watches me silently as I open the refrigerator and pull out a cheap, but reliable, Orvieto Classico.

The orange bottle sits on a bare slice of counter space, like a holy grail amidst the desert.

Four drops in one wineglass. It can't do much, surely. I flick tap water into my own glass as a placebo of sorts.

"We'll appreciate this when we're drinking Thunderbird in some alley," says Kelly.

"Isn't there anything you want?" I ask her.

"Yeah, I want to fall in love with a soul mate and have a child."

"You were always telling me that men they were the enemy," I remind her. "I'll never forget that guy you brought here for dinner and you held up a piece of cheese to him and said 'Here's how I feed this primitive life form.' "

"I'm out of control." She sounds proud of herself.

I stand up. My brain feels numb but my arms and legs are stirring. I think of running, of writing, but mostly of wrapping my limbs around those refined muscles.

The phone rings like a temporary reprieve. Somehow I am not surprised at who it is.

"This is short notice, I know, but do you think we could do something tonight?" he asks.

"Well...I have a serious case in my apartment. I'm not sure she should be left alone."

"Shall I come over and bring some Prozac?"

"Actually, that won't be necessary..."

I am smiling too broadly when I come back to the living room, and Kelly knows me very well.

"Oh, god...I warned you, but no, you've been gazing off into space with lust on your mind all day, I could tell. Because you're my best friend I wish you a sexy man to hold on to as you slide down into the muck with me. I'll go to a movie..." Suddenly she looks eager to get out. "That is, if I can have some money."

"You know lots of political activists here," I point out as I hand her \$25. "You could do special events, or something."

"My Palm Pilot was in the car...I'm finished, I tell you."

What if she doesn't come back and someday I see her screaming at invisible offenders on the street? She says something about that herself as she leaves.

Tomorrow will hurl itself upon us. Right now I'll make a decision about what C.D. to play. I settle on Vivaldi.

The buzzer rings.

Jacques has ridden here on a ten-speed bicycle, which he parks in the foyer. He is wearing shabby chinos. He kisses me once on each cheek. Then we kiss more purposefully.

"Wine?" I ask him.

He nods.

Yoko follows me into the kitchen. She stares quizzically up at the little orange bottle on the counter.

One of the side effects, I remember, is loss of sex drive. This wine will be unadulterated.

"Here, a melancholy yet resolute bouquet, with a pedagogic undertone," I tell Jacques. Then I sneeze.

"You should take vitamin C," he says. "There are easy cures for some things."

From the stereo, a long low chord dares us to talk about other things.

“I wanted to tell you,” he says, “ &a

