

FRIDAY, OCTOBER 29, 2010

ammit! What's your problem, I curse at myself in the mirror, applying my morning lipstick.

DWhat the hell are you doing living in your sister Tricia's ultramodern soulless Venice condo (or New York-style live/work loft, as realtors like my sister call it)? You're twenty-seven, and you still don't even have a place of your own.

As I brush my long brown hair that cries out for a stylist's scissors, I recall what made me move in here two years ago. I was renting a small studio apartment in an undistinguished Mar Vista apartment building, the rent made manageable by its location one block from noisy Venice Boulevard. The owner lived on the ground floor. She was a born-again Christian, and she made sure everyone knew it. One evening I had a surprise visit from Juan, a fellow ex-student at Santa Monica College. We hadn't seen each other since we graduated, and he had moved east. He was a handsome guy whose parents had brought him from Mexico as a baby. He had a black drooping mustache and long matching hair. He was gay and very popular at school. We had become friends in our junior year and done lots of fun things together.

He was only in town for twenty-four hours, and that evening we consumed a pizza and two bottles of wine between us. At the end of the evening he decided that he had had too much alcohol to drive his rental car back to his hotel. So I offered him my bed and slept on the sofa, which was too small for him. Early the following morning we were awakened by a continuous ringing of the doorbell. Slipping

a coat over my nightshirt I opened the door to find the enraged building owner eyeing me and Juan, who was looking up sleepily from my bed.

“Miss Carter, I told you when I rented you this studio that I did not allow any illegal activities.”

Indignation made her puce in the face.

“What are you talking about?” I was genuinely confused.

“I won’t stand for any immorality in my place. You can’t bring johns here. No way.”

“*Johns?* What are you talking about? What makes you think Juan here is a john?”

“It’s obvious. He’s Mexican.”

“And what’s that got to do with anything?” I was beginning to get as heated as she was.

“You’re white, aren’t you?”

“So?”

“Well, he’s not. Must be a paying client.”

“He’s a friend, for Christ’s sake.”

“Don’t you take the name of the Lord in vain. A friend! Very likely!”

“You don’t know what you’re talking about. Besides, he’s gay.”

At this remark she turned apoplectic. “That does it. I don’t tolerate perverts. You’ve got till the end of the month to clear out.”

“Are you serious?”

“You bet I’m serious. You better be out by the thirty-first, or your belongings will be out on the sidewalk.”

“What a pitiful bigot you are,” I shouted, and slammed the door in her face.

I had only ten days to find a place I could afford, and there was nothing on the West Side available at that price. So I put my pride aside and asked Tricia if I could temporarily move into her place.

“You can have the spare bedroom and bathroom for \$1,200 a month,” she answered.

Money always did come first with her. I see money as a means, not an end. But a means to what? Self-fulfillment? Independence—especially from Tricia? I've never had to answer that question, because I've barely gotten by with poorly paid, part-time jobs.

Tricia and I share the kitchen and living room—with difficulty. Our problem isn't just traditional sibling rivalry, although there's been plenty of that. We're such diametric opposites that we disagree about almost everything—down to how to tie shoelaces or mix a drink. She's all wham-bam, make it happen the way you want it to. She just can't stand my more deliberate approach—what she calls my passivity.

It's been this way for as long as I can remember. Although my sister is barely two years older than me, she's always treated me like a naive child. From the start she acted as my protector, which just made her madder about my supposed inexperience.

One afternoon when I was four, she'd just come home from school. I was playing with a new toy phone. I loved it; each of the brightly colored keypad numbers played a different tune when I pressed it. I was entranced by it. Tricia asked me where I got it. I told her I'd used my birthday money to buy it.

“How much did it cost?”

“Seven-fifty.”

“What a stupid waste of money,” she snorted.

“Why?” I asked indignantly.

“Because you could have asked to play with either Mom's or Dad's real phones. Much more interesting, and they cost nothing.”

“But I wanted my own phone,” I said.

“And how long will ten different rings keep you happy?”

I stopped playing with that toy the same day and never picked it up again.

I look at my face in the mirror, now, for the millionth time. After twenty-seven years it still lacks firm definition. My dark brown eyes seem to be perpetually asking an unanswerable question. My small, straight nose and rosy cheeks give me the look of a country girl. Yet people tell me I'm attractive, and I get enough come-ons from men to believe it. I know I'm only talking about externals here. But in Los Angeles externals are everything. And my externals tell me that I'm an equivocator. An accommodator. Too much deference, too little pushback. Too much consideration for everyone else, too little for myself.

I don't know why, but I feel that I'm approaching a turning point in my life. I feel so much pressure within me that I might explode at any moment. I simply cannot go on as I am.

What is it with me? If I could answer that, I wouldn't be in this state of confusion. I have zero confidence in myself. I no longer feel that I have made the right life choices and that Tricia's are wrong. After all, who's living in whose apartment? Still, I have no wish to emulate her. I find her lifestyle and ideas utterly alien.

I feel I need to change everything about my life. I wish something external would force me to do that. Living with Tricia for two years has undermined my self-confidence, leaving me dissatisfied with who I am now but unmotivated to change it. What's keeping me from taking charge of my life?

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In the kitchen, I find Tricia ready to meet her first clients of the day, ready to try to sell them an overpriced, 1920s Venice bungalow—"a teardown," she calls it—that has been way too long on the market. Tricia won't tell her clients about the hoops they'll have to jump through to get the City Planning Department and the California Coastal Commission to let them demolish the house. Of course she won't: her commission on the sale will be at least \$50,000—more than I earn in a year.

“Morning, Jenny,” she greets me, barely looking round from her Italian espresso machine. “You look a mess.”

Tricia sees herself as a smart businesswoman, which she is, and dresses to fit the part. This morning she’s wearing a dark gray Roberto Cavalli wool business suit with a low neckline that offers male buyers an added incentive to clinch the deal. Sex, Tricia says, is a business tool. She’s always asking me why I’m wasting my sexual assets on “Dreary” (her pointedly unaffectionate nickname for my boyfriend Gary). And, I have to say, she can be super-sexy. Her male clients have difficulty keeping their eyes focused on her face. Strangely, she herself is only attracted to the brasher and equally self-confident bachelors who play the LA singles field with as much expertise as she does. Maybe she enjoys the challenge. She’s a born fighter.

An inch taller and two years older than I am, Tricia sees her appearance as her most important investment, and she spends accordingly. Her \$600 Beverly Hills stylist cuts her hair at a merciless angle. Her brown eyes appear blue thanks to tinted contact lenses. Her aesthetician threads her eyebrows weekly. Of course, she wears false lashes (one hundred percent human hair, individually hand placed) enhanced by Clé de Peau Beauté mascara. Her small, upturned nose, which used to look exactly like mine, is the work of LA’s premier cosmetic surgeon. Her lips are collagen-enhanced, embellished by her signature Yves Saint Laurent Rouge Vernis lipstick.

Tricia cannot seem to keep herself from offering me advice. “Get real,” she’s been telling me for years. “Money matters. Stop doing plant maintenance for that client of yours and open your own plant store. Stop working part-time for Total Surveillance and start your own detective agency. Better yet, get your plant client who owns Wealth Management to give you a job, so that you can finally earn some serious money.”

She’s talking about Todd Granger. His company, Balboa Wealth Management Corporation, is the second-biggest mutual fund corporation in the country. I’m sure he could get me into his world—if I wanted him to, that is. But do I want him to do that? What do I want?

What do I really want?

Sure, money matters. But so does what you have to do to make it. Tricia's at the mercy of her smartphone day and night. Her clients make sure she earns her commission by making her life as miserable as they can manage. They're constantly changing their minds, asking for more, more, more, all while trying to bargain down her commission. In turn, Tricia despises them and trashes them behind their backs. If that's what it takes to earn serious money, I don't want it.

"I know you meant to put the coffee grinder back into the cabinet yesterday instead of leaving it on the counter." This is Tricia's opening shot of the morning. Instantly I'm transformed in her eyes—and my own—to the recalcitrant child who forgets to put her toys away.

Tricia sees her superior income as a confirmation of my immaturity. This, in turn, justifies her taking on the role of a strict, irritating parent, a role neither of us enjoys, but we cannot seem to escape it. I can hear her thoughts. Why can't you understand the way this country works? When are you going to grow up? When are you going to learn not to put out unless the return on your investment makes it worthwhile?

Tricia fills her hideous portable traveling mug (reflective puce with soft rubbery handle) with coffee and drops it into her burgundy Italian leather purse, which she deftly slings over her shoulder.

"Your turn to sift Lulu's litter," she says with a sigh. "I wish I didn't have to remind you every time."

Needless to say, Tricia and I have different ideas of how often the cat box needs attention. Tricia always has been anal. Plus she hates the fact that Lulu, her long-haired black-and-white cat, prefers to sleep with me, which she does whenever Tricia can't find her at night to lock her in her own bedroom. Lulu's one of those rare cats who loves to sleep snuggling against a warm body. Some summer nights I wake up running with sweat because Lulu is generating double body heat. Tricia can't stand that much closeness. But she wants Lulu to acknowledge that Lulu belongs to her, not to me.

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I remember one night in our early childhood when Tricia and I were still sharing a bedroom—I must have been about five and she seven. I always slept with my teddy bear, Cuddles, pressed to my chest. I had a habit of talking to Cuddles and then answering myself in “his” voice, and that night Tricia lost her cool and snatched Cuddles away from me.

“Why are you talking to a stuffed piece of fabric with plastic beads for eyes?” she spat at me.

“Why,” I had Cuddles ask me, “does your sister have no imagination?”

“And stop pretending that it’s Cuddles who’s talking.”

Cuddles responded, “You’re not the only one who can talk.”

“Stop it!” she screamed. “Or I’ll throw Cuddles out the window.”

“If you throw me out of the window,” Cuddles replied smugly, “Jenny will cry her head off, and your parents will run in here and give you a hard time.”

“Just grow up, can’t you?” Tricia threw Cuddles at me. That was one of the rare fights in which I (or at least Cuddles) held our own.

Tricia always has been better than I am at dealing with the world. She sees me as hopelessly passive and out of touch with her world of big money and competition, the only thing that makes her feel truly alive. But I see the other side to her triumphs. The high she gets from winning a fight dissipates the minute she’s won, leaving her longing for the next challenge. Plus her inevitable defeats bring on lows that last until her next win.

I don’t want the lows, but I worry sometimes that I never experience highs like her. Is my life too bland? Am I afraid of taking risks? Am I too dependent on my sister? My boyfriend? My employers?

Tricia is my alter ego: what I resist, and what I need. I refuse to believe that the measure of everything in life is what you pay for it. How do you put a price on happy memories? Or regrets? Or longings that spur you on to your next move? Why, then, do I spend so much of my time worrying

about the money I don't have? Maybe because I can't afford to fix the brakes on my car, which urgently need fixing.

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My reverie is interrupted by my iPhone's ringtone, the chorus from Madonna's "Like A Virgin," my favorite song as a teen. I hit "Accept" and hear the voice of Felicia, Todd Granger's housekeeper, who takes care of his enormous mansion in Newport Beach. Twice a week I tend to his houseplants. I don't know what Todd pays Felicia, but I get \$15 an hour. That's not bad for the floral industry.

Felicia and I have bonded, as coworkers first, then as friends, despite our very different backgrounds. Felicia came to LA from Oaxaca in her late teens. She's like a good mother to me, the only person who believes in me completely. Which leaves me feeling guilty, since I don't deserve that kind of faith.

"I so worried." Felicia's grammar goes especially to pieces when she gets emotional. "Susan disappeared."

Susan Kirby was Todd's live-in girlfriend for two years until she ditched him three months ago. Felicia adored Susan, who treated her as an equal. Felicia was shocked when Susan and Todd broke up.

"What do you mean 'missing'?" I ask.

"I tried to call and call. Finally, I went to her apartment in Palos Verdes, and it was no right. I could see through the window. All the plants were muertas. Plates broken on the kitchen floor."

"She must have moved," I say.

"No! No! The landlord told me she pays the rent. Is not right. Something is malo. It smell bad in there."

"What does the landlord say?"

“He not care if he gets his dinero. What do I do?”

“She’s probably gone away somewhere to get over Todd.”

“No. She called me every weekend until she leave the house of Señor Granger. She is a friend. Then nothing. I try to call almost every day. Last week it say her machine full. I know something is wrong. Estoy preocupado. You are detective. You can find someone.” As I said, she believes in me, which is more than I do.

“Hardly a detective. I just review videotapes for a big detective agency.”

“You are modest.”

“Just telling the truth.”

“You’re the only detective I know.”

“Okay,” I say, cursing myself for agreeing. “I’ll look into it.”

Here I go again, I reflect. Volunteering for more unpaid work. And it’s work I’m not even qualified to undertake. But at least it’s for someone I care about. I can imagine Tricia laughing her head off at me: “Why can’t you learn to say the simple word ‘No’?”

“Thank you so much, amiga. Adiós.”

“Adiós, Felicia.”

What’s done is done. Coffee, a slice of toast, then the 405 to Newport Beach. At least I remember to put the coffee grinder away.

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I drive south through the parking lot that doubles as the 405 freeway, thinking about Susan Kirby. Tall, slim, short-cut blond hair, in her thirties, Susan dressed conservatively by day in pressed slacks, tailored blouses, and minimal makeup. She didn’t need much help in the looks department, with her wide grey-blue eyes, sensuous lips, and enviable figure. Susan was gifted as a personality, too, with a

wonderful sense of humor and an interest in everything and everyone in her radius, including Felicia and me.

Felicia worshipped Susan. Susan genuinely seemed to think of Felicia as a friend. It was always left for Todd to issue any orders on the rare occasions they were needed. Felicia is one of those exceptional workers who anticipate their employers' needs most of the time. Susan called Felicia Lici and insisted that Felicia call her Susan, not Miss Kirby.

I catch myself thinking about Susan in the past tense and tell myself to stop being morbid.

I remember the morning when Todd joined Felicia and me in the kitchen and told us that he and Susan had had a "falling out." "I'm sorry to tell you that Susan is no longer living here."

Felicia looked shocked. "But why, Señor Granger?"

"She no longer wants to live here."

This was hardly an explanation, but neither Felicia nor I was in any position to press for details.

"I will miss her."

"I will, too," Todd said with what seemed like genuine sadness.

Felicia was devastated by Susan's departure. For the rest of that day she kept bursting into tears. "Why Señor Granger try to talk with Susan? He's a good man. He will miss her muchisimo." But it's clear that it's Felicia who misses Susan, not Todd, who rarely mentions her name. Of course, that could be a way of hiding his hurt from us. Or from himself.

Susan would never let Felicia do anything personal for her, like make her a cup of coffee or take her clothes to the cleaner. "You're employed by Todd," Susan would tell Felicia, "not me." Felicia cooked their dinners most weeknights, and Todd chose the menu. Susan often joined Felicia to do the Thursday shopping at the Costa Mesa farmers market. Felicia told me that Susan knew many of the sellers by name ("Hi, Dave," she'd call out. "I want some of your ripest dragon fruit." "For you, darling, nothing but the best.") She and Felicia would have lunch under the umbrella-covered tables there,

usually, according to Felicia, favoring the sushi food truck (Susan had the appetite of a bird). And she'd carry half the purchases herself back to the car. She sure humanized the household.

As I drive south I'm wondering what made her leave Todd? What happened between them that made her return to the job market when she'd seemed so happy living a life of leisure and fulfillment? Todd made it sound like the breakup was Susan's choice. But I've learned never to trust either member of a couple to truthfully explain their breakup. The past always gets reshaped to suit the present.

Do I see Susan as my model self? A woman who seemed to derive complete satisfaction from living on her own terms without getting caught up in the whirl of money and possessions? Do I see her as my better self? Am I looking as much for my missing self as I am for her? If she is as admirable as I believe, was her breakup with Todd a sign that the man she obviously cared for had crossed some kind of line of hers? Because Susan was no compromiser. She knew what she wanted from life and would not hesitate to split from someone who didn't live up to her expectations. What might Todd have done to drive her away?

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The car radio is playing Rihanna's "Love the Way You Lie." I remember the video of the fight the two get into (he's singing, "You push, pull each other's hair, scratch, claw . . ."). He's abusive. He's also a very emotional being, which is why he hits her and then swears he'll never do it again ("though I know it's lies"). How unlike Gary and me. I can't imagine him ever losing his cool. King of bland. But what about my part in it? That's probably why we've been together as long as we have.

Come to think of it, my parents had a pretty bland relationship. There were none of the fireworks that sometimes erupted in the homes of my high school friends. If my parents disagreed about something Dad would call time out, they'd sit down at the kitchen table, and each would give the other five uninterrupted minutes in which to argue his or her side. I saw them almost contorting themselves

to reach a compromise. God forbid that they should end up with opposing opinions. That would have been too threatening for them. I try to imagine what would have happened if one of them had lost it and gone off the deep end. It might have been a lot healthier. But they seemed to think that a truly angry outburst would set them on the primrose path to divorce.

Maybe Tricia got her aggression in opposition to them. Somehow she managed to cultivate the art of listening to her own feelings and acting on them. Selfish? Maybe. But decisive. A woman who seems to have no doubts. I, on the other hand, took from my parents a compulsion to doubt authorities and authoritarian stances of all kinds.

Still, at the time I admired my parents' determination to work things out in a civilized way. I admired their keen social conscience, their insistence on thinking beyond their own needs and desires. But now I see them as stranded by the flash flood of life, bewildered by the fast-moving waters of my digital generation sweeping past them. They've never criticized Tricia in front of me, but I wonder what they really think about some of her values. Most likely they find some way of rationalizing away whatever she throws at them.

Mom was always very anti-war. She condemned even America's repulse of Hussein's invasion of Kuwait in the Gulf War. She blamed the Pentagon's inflated budget for America's failure to take care of its poor and disadvantaged. Her bumper sticker read PEACE POWER—a perfect image of her confusion, seeing that peace involves renouncing power. Mom and Dad met on a peace march. Together they got petitions signed, organized bake sales, and the like. They believed that they could curb the power of the corporations and the Pentagon.

I inherited their liberal outlook, but not their belief in acts of resistance. Recently Dad said to me, "Look at how Obama got himself elected with millions of small contributions. We can change everything if enough Americans believe we can." But look at what happened after 2008. Party warfare. Washington gridlock. Accusations of socialism (a current term of abuse), of appointing death panels for the elderly—the list goes on. And now everyone is forecasting a landslide for the Republicans this

coming Tuesday. Dad: "Pollsters are always wrong. You wait and see. I put my bet on Americans' common sense." I'm waiting. But I don't share his optimism, even while I wish I had his sense of commitment.

Work calls.