



NOW THAT
YOU HAVE SEEN ME

a novel

C.L. Roberts

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DEDICATION

This book is dedicated to my mother, Lois,
and her doppelganger, my daughter, Parker.
I love you.

“Well, now that we have seen each other," said the Unicorn,
"If you'll believe in me, I'll believe in you. Is that a bargain?"
-Lewis Carroll, *Through the Looking-Glass*

THE BEGINNING

Nine months ago, June 1, 2015, my parents took control of my life, having been granted the right to do so by the Middlesex Probate and Family Court in Cambridge, Massachusetts. It was one of the three worst days of my life, all of which happened to fall on my birthday. At 29, I was unceremoniously stripped of autonomy, my safekeeping placed in unfit hands, indefinitely. I was informed of this *incredibly* insulting decision halfway through a late-night car ride from Havenhurst Hospital in Amherst to my parents' place in Arlington. Daddy drove. Mother rode shotgun. I sat directly behind her, scanning the breakdown lane for the glow of yellow eyes, which I had been doing since we hit the Turnpike about an hour before. All I saw was black.

“The Four Seasons” was spinning in the player (“Winter,” my favorite), drowning any cohesive thought that struggled to stay afloat amid a frenetic sea of strings, and all I could think was “deer.” They sometimes leap into the highway, trying to get to the other side, I guess, and I needed to stay focused, which was tough, considering my state. I’d think “deer deer deer deer deer deer...” and then snap back from spacing out for what could have been seconds, could have been minutes. Then “DEER!” Then objects colliding at a high rate of speed,

NOW THAT YOU HAVE SEEN ME

head and hooves crashing through tempered glass. Mother and Daddy screaming as we spun out of control and into the path of an 18-wheeler... It always happened in slow motion. While there would be nothing I could do in the event of a fatal wreck (and would probably never see it coming, given my position in the vehicle), I wanted to stay present, which is funny considering I would have preferred to be in literally any place but that car, scanning the side of the road for potentially dangerous deer.

I was zoning out for the last time that evening when Mother startled the *fuck* out of me (her intention, I'm sure) by flipping the sun visor aggressively enough to smack the windshield. Daddy sighed. Mother slowwwly pulled the trigger and shot him The Look. Muted light shaded her in angularity, needlessly contributing to her God-given Maleficent-esque qualities. Slowwwly, she returned her attention to the visor, pulled it forward and stared at me through the mirror, which has always unnerved me. No one should ever be able to see the back and front of someone's head at the same time, especially at night.

Daddy didn't say a word, which would have bothered me if I didn't know him (and Mother) like I do, but I totally do, so I understood. He did, however, lower the volume considerably, which really pissed me off. I love Vivaldi, and Daddy knows that. With the volume so low, I could hear it, but I *couuuld'n't quuuuuute* hear it, like voices through a wall. I hate that, and Daddy knows that, too. Clearly, he was sending a message.

Without breaking gaze, Mother reached into the brown calfskin handbag on her lap and said, "Do you see this piece of paper?" She raised it in her left hand *slowwwlyyyy*, which I now recognize as smugly. Her arm bent at a freakish angle I didn't think possible as she shoved the court order in my general direction and shook shook shook it.

"Now, you listen to me, kid, and you listen good. With *both* of those pointy ears."

My left ear comes to a slight point at the top. It's less "Dracula," more nippy. Daddy calls it a "nubbin." When I was little, like six or seven, he named it "Nubbybumpinstuff." "Does Nubbybumpinstuff want a little kiss? Ready or not, here I come!"

NOW THAT YOU HAVE SEEN ME

Nom nom nom nom..." I still sometimes talk to Nubby and pretend he's talking back. He sounds like Cookie Monster, only sinister, doing a half-joking shtick. He's a riot. He's never a problem per se, rather a minor insecurity as I've gotten older. I often forget he's there until I look in a mirror.

By alluding to Nubby in a bad light that night in the car, Mother unwittingly established two things: 1) she apparently thinks he bothers me much more than he does, which kind of embarrasses me for her; and 2) she really is an incredibly insensitive asshole.

"This piece of *paper* says you are not capable of making *decisions* for yourself. No surprise there. <low chuckle> It says that your *father* and I, by order of the *court*, are now in charge of overseeing your day-to-day *affairs* as well as your *rapidly* declining mental *health*. *Get it?*"

Synapses fired like machine guns, and I fully understood the combined meaning of the bloody words that fell from her Chianti-stained lips like casualties of war. I did my best to block out her Valium-soaked cadence and dissolve into "Winter," but with the volume so low, I could barely fucking hear it.

"You're losing *The Game*, 'Angel,'" air quotes, "*See?*" She shook the paper again. And then under her breath, "Happy Effing *Birthday* to you." She folded the document a million times and slid it back into her hideous brown handbag made from the skin of a dead baby cow.

Resentment blinded me, and I couldn't see my hands flapping like a beautiful bird in front of my face, which they sometimes did without warning, let alone the fact that I was, by all appearances, a prime candidate for 24-hour supervision and/or psychoanalysis and could have probably benefited from a trial of psychotropic drugs as well. Mother was right; I was losing *The Game*. I realize that *now*. She didn't have to be such a dick about it.

"Just *look* at yourself, flapping your hands in front of your face like a fucking *lunatic*. You look positively *insane*."

NOW THAT YOU HAVE SEEN ME

I skootched forward in my seat, twisted the rear-view mirror and stared into my eyes, black licorice coins. I opened my mouth to beg to differ, but I literally couldn't. My tongue weighed about 20 pounds, and the lighting in the car, coupled with my tired and beaten countenance, made me appear *completely* insane, so I had to give her that one. It nearly killed me. I skootched back and huddled against the door, seriously considering pulling the handle and simply rolling away, albeit in a very violent manner.

She chuckled again (*so* inappropriate) and looked to Daddy for support. He took his eyes off the road, and adrenaline coursed through my body. DEER! He nodded at Mother once, slowly, as if he were bowing, and turned his attention to the long road ahead.

Granted, she and Daddy had every clichéd reason to be concerned about me. I had just spent five weeks in a psychiatric hospital, which, on paper, is a bit upsetting, particularly to a parent, regardless of how glaringly negligent they'd always been, but still. An *ORDER* from the *COURT*? I found the gesture to be *HIGHLY* inappropriate and *extremely* intrusive. Frankly, it was insult to injury.

The very next afternoon, at exactly 1 p.m., less than eighteen hours after I'd vacated Room 412 at Havenhurst, a "free" woman, before I even had a chance to swing by my own apartment in Boston, less than seven miles from my parents' place, and grab a fresh pair of underpants, I became Bonnie Marie Lowenstein, M.D., Ph.D., Sc.D., B.N., B.A.'s favorite patient in her entire professional career, or so she says. She's been practicing for at least 25 years. That's a lot of patients. I call bullshit. Nice try, though.

My biweekly, ninety-minute sessions were inked into her Hello Kitty day planner "for the time being, ultimate duration and frequency to be determined at a later date by the Court after an initial twelve-month run or untiiiiil," she said, speaking more to my parents than to me, "the proverbial baby is found in the proverbial trash, and we need to call the proverbial authorities to haul away the proverbial junk, taking

NOW THAT YOU HAVE SEEN ME

care not to toss out the aforementioned proverbial baby with the proverbial bathwater.” She jerked a thumb in my direction a few times like she was hitchin' a ride and laughed. I didn't care for her tone or for the flippant mixed metaphor at the time, but I have to admit that now, upon a period of forced introspection, it strikes me as *nicked* clever, though extremely unprofessional.

During that initial evaluation with Bonnie, Mother said she "cared" about me and even used the word "love" once, but I'm not buying it. If she loved me, she would have granted me the freedom to breathe in and out with dignity instead of ambushing me and caging me like a rabid raccoon. She looked at me exactly twice during that session: 1) when we sat down, to make sure my knees were together, ankles crossed; and, 2) when we left, to make sure I said goodbye, like a Big Girl. "Say goodbye, Farrah." Unnecessary. Bonnie and I were already leaning in for the requisite farewell hug. Mother is a condescending douchebag. She can keep her "love."

Sixteen sessions later, the past was still hazy; visibility hovered around 20 percent. Sometimes, it felt as if I were conveying someone else's history, like a best friend's story you've heard so many times, you've forgotten whether it's their memory or your own. Suffice it to say, analysis, in my view, was ineffective and utterly pointless. As a result of this shitty outlook, I wished Tuesdays, 1-2:30 p.m., and Thursdays, 3-4:30 p.m., would be forever stricken from the Rules of Time. I could have also done without Tuesdays from 12:30-1 and Thursdays from 2:30-3, since my stomach was a tangled mess for at least thirty minutes before each session, and I always felt like I had to POOP IMMEDIATELY, but it's unwise to wish away so much time. It's precious, and it's not guaranteed. One minute, we're here, and the next ...

We're all dead.

Because I find apathy and denial more comfortable than awareness and accountability, for two months, I didn't surmount the bastion of contempt I had erected around Mother because I didn't care to try. I knew the guardianship and the biweekly "chats" with Bonnie were all her idea, and that intense

NOW THAT YOU HAVE SEEN ME

(though, admittedly, unsubstantiated) knowledge made me want to strangle her in her sleep with ten yards of dental floss. I am a grown woman, almost thirty. No part of my “day-to-day affairs” is even remotely her business anymore. Besides, I've always stayed out of her shitty life. Why couldn't she just sit back, shut the fuck up and stay out of mine? Dysfunctional attachment. That's why.

I resent her for most likely orchestrating the court proceedings, and I resent her for convincing Daddy I am “somewhat mental,” which is exactly how he described me to Bonnie while I was sitting right there. It didn't help I was swatting at a fruit fly no one seemed to see when he said it, but fuck that. The man used to worship me. He hasn't called me “Angel” in over thirty-two weeks. That's Mother's fault.

She's been inappropriately jealous of my relationship with Daddy since “losing” my “baby brother” on my sixth birthday. Turning six is my very first memory, so she may have been jealous before then. I just don't remember. If she was, it intensified, I'm sure, after that day. Six is probably old for a first memory. Maybe if I'd had a sibling(s), I'd have earlier memories worth remembering. I should talk to Bonnie about that.

I remember waking up before dawn in my Big Girl Bed, SO EXCITED, knowing it was a SPECIAL DAY! I remember feeling *extremely* proud, having slept in my own room, which was *very* dark and probably haunted, for the very first time. And I have *veeery* vague memories of sleeping in my parents' bed, snuggling with Daddy and then, at some point, relegated to the floor, right beside the bed, in, like, a sleeping bag or something up until the night before my sixth birthday, but it's *veeery* vague.

I should probably talk to Bonnie about this, but I'm afraid she'll make air quotes when she inevitably says “Big Girl Bed,” and that might sting. Not worth it.



Being an only child may seem attractive to someone with a sibling(s), but it has its drawbacks. No one on hand to play with, conspire with, walk to school with, blame shit on, relate to on a familial level. No forever friend. It's the #2

NOW THAT YOU HAVE SEEN ME

drawback of being an only child. Being an orphan is #1, of course. If an only child's parents die, that kid is fucked.

Being an only adult is worse. Only adults have an obligation to live our lives properly, do it "right." Be "normal" people. Don't be in psychiatric hospitals. Legitimately procure the means to live independently. Get married at a respectable age. Subsequently, produce at least one grandchild; two or more is probably better. My parents will never experience those things if I don't live my life appropriately. That's pressure. And it's not even the worst thing about being an only adult. It's #3.

When my parents die, I'll be an orphan, alone. Aunts, uncles and cousins don't count; they're distant. Any children in my cards? Who knows? My future husband's/husbands' people, if any, don't count. They're not family. I don't even know them. When my parents die, I'll be alone, which, in my opinion, is the #1 advantage of being an only adult.

If my parents don't plan accordingly, however, I'll have to care for them, alone, when they are, eventually, unable to care for themselves, for the rest of their lives. And then I'll have to deal with their deaths, which will hopefully come swiftly upon deterioration, one rapidly on the heels of the other. Then again, Daddy's savvy, and there's a pretty good chance he's put a plan in place for long-term care and eventual funerary expenses for both himself and Mother, so that's good, but still... I'll still have to deal. Dealing with that kind of shit is horrible in and of itself. I would imagine dealing alone is 100 times worse. I'll have to coordinate shit and talk to people... It's the #2 drawback of being an only adult.

The #1 drawback of being an only adult, in my recent experience, is shouldering the insurmountable weight of an aging, obviously mentally unstable parent with a *terrible* mean streak and pathological need for control and having no forever friend upon whom to unload the overwhelming burden.

Ironically, when I was little, Mother never exhibited classic characteristics of control or, for that matter, displayed classic signs of love and affection like hugging me or caring for me in any way at all, really. I belonged to Daddy. He was the one

NOW THAT YOU HAVE SEEN ME

who wiped away my tears and buttered my cinnamon toast in the morning. I've made my own dinner since I was six. Daddy's "worked late" for as long as I can remember, and Mother... Well, suffice it to say, she considers food affection. If I wanted to eat, I needed to do it myself, and I needed to eat, so I did. Usually alone.

Nine months ago, after years and years of disinterest and emotional neglect, Mother affixed herself to my life like a fucking tick on my jugular and has been gorging on my dwindling life force ever since. Her issues account for at least 95 percent of the reason I'm in the situation I'm in right now, and the situation I'm in right now sucks a great, big bucket of dicks, so thanks for that, Mother.

Undiagnosed psychosis aside, she and Daddy recognized I needed help, and they acted as, perhaps, most parents would, I suppose. I get it. Still, they acted foolishly, recklessly and overstepped their collective boundary. Do they really deserve thanks for that? I, for one, do not think so. If they'd only come to me first, before running amok and concocting such a ludicrous plan, I could have explained everything and saved everyone a whole lot of time and unnecessary trouble and money. Unfortunately, they respected the court system more than they trusted their only ADULT child, which is really quite sad and *unspeakably* insulting.

Their intentions, in my opinion, were nothing less than nefarious, selfishly motivated and intentionally cruel, and I am certain that Mother was simply trying to fill a gaping hole in her pathetically empty life. I am also certain that Daddy was at her service, agreeable to just about any means that might justify that end. I've always thought she must have some pretty good dirt on him, the way he always caters to her every fucking whim, but maybe that dirt is "love." Maybe that's what it looks like.

In any event, regardless of intent, I'm pretty much screwed. Screwed by my own parents. It wouldn't be the first time, and I'm sure it won't be the last. At the end of the day, Mother really is an awful human being. Daddy's okay, though he could certainly try harder. I often fantasize about a world

NOW THAT YOU HAVE SEEN ME

without her.

On a related note, Life is a HUGE pain in the ass sometimes, amiright? I haven't taken a poll or anything, but I'm pretty sure most of the population would agree with me. Almost everyone I know runs for the shelter of a Mother's Little Helper daily, and while I don't know many people, you have to look at percentages. It's encouraging to know I'm not alone. Sometimes, to live is to flounder in a rough sea of existential ennui, and, sometimes, some people get thrown off course. It happens. That's when I need a little push to persuade my boat to float gently down the stream in the proper direction again. With the aid of the appropriate legal (or not-so-legal) drugs in the appropriate (or not-so-appropriate) dosages, Life is but a quasi-dream.

Sometimes, though, for some unfortunate bastards, such as yours truly, push comes to shove, spinning ensues, and life is a balls-to-the-wall waking nightmare in the blink of an eye. Reality is skewed, and literally nothing is clear. To function effectively is to skip rope while hogtied, wrapped in a blanket, in a locked box, on a swinging hammock, on a rocking boat. Self-care gradually diminishes until it is no longer a "thing."

To cope, some people drop the oars and check out, which is highly unadvised and considered very unwise among those in the medical field and probably everywhere else. They eventually stop spinning (if they're "lucky," like me) and drift dazedly down the lazy river of small expectations in an extended fugue, depth and duration determined by mental capacity and/or ability to get and sustain a grip. Sometimes, they check back in (or, as I like to call it, "get committed") to the nearest cuckoo's nest for some much-needed TLC and R&R and better ASAP than later. Sometimes, they sign the discharge papers within a week and leave for good. Sometimes, they're assigned a temporary/permanent box in The Mailroom, free with the price of admission; become SUPER close with Xynthiope, the mailroom attendant (who is also a resident); and/or repeat the process of checking in and checking out and checking in and checking out until the baby is found securely wrapped in three

NOW THAT YOU HAVE SEEN ME

taped-up Hefty bags way in the back of the overcrowded spare deep freezer in the basement, and the proverbial authorities are called to haul away the proverbial junk. That's just a "for instance," of course. A worst-case scenario.

Homicide aside, a grown woman's indiscretions (her poor life choices, if you will) should not be a valid reason to strip her of her inalienable right to be free, and, frankly, I refuse to believe that it's legal. I've been conducting a bunch of research lately just to make sure that it is, and I haven't found anything substantial to date, so I may be in the clear. Daddy, however, has a lot of connections within the court system, and I'm sure that Mother convinced him, and will continue to convince him, to call in a few favors, so I may, indeed, be fucked. The jury's still out on that one.

There was a time, a very long time, when Daddy would go to bat for me, be my voice, stand up to Mother when I was trapped beneath her thumb, unable to rise to the occasion. This was not one of those times. This was serious. It's a good thing they don't know about my first, albeit brief, hospitalization in New York a year and a half before my "latest plight," as Mother mockingly calls it, was exposed to the judicial light. If they did, chances are good they'd be rowing my boat until my (or Mother's) death. Amen.



I understand that Mother has had a few crosses to bear: The death of her spawn so soon after losing her mother; moving far, far away from her BFF since childhood, Lorna Friggenheimer, and weekly book club, Jazzercise class and somewhat estranged brother and sister. I get it, and I sympathize to a respectable degree. That said, in my opinion, personal loss is not a valid reason to treat anybody, least of all her only offspring, her *daughter*, like shit for the rest of her life. It's not right, and it's not healthy. She's never sought professional help, which I find *veeery* interesting. Hypocrite.

Last June, nine months ago, as I was carted away from the psych ward, I tried to explain to Daddy that Mother is the one who needs psychoanalysis, not me, but who was going to

NOW THAT YOU HAVE SEEN ME

listen to my line of reasoning? He suggested instead that the three of us utilize one of my twice-weekly sessions as an opportunity for family counseling, which was most definitely not on my agenda.

“This is happening, Farrah,” he said. “Make the most of it. It’s a gift, really. The gift of time.” He winked at me. Daddy’s a winker, which I’ve always found pervy.

In an effort to sabotage my parents’ self-righteous attempt to save me, and because the past was still considerably unclear, for sixteen sessions, which translates to twenty-four hours, one day, 1,440 minutes, 86,400 seconds, I filled the time with innocuous fluff that held a loose, at best, footing in reality. Since 1986 through 1991 was buried far too deeply to effectively discuss (even fictionalized) with a stranger, I took off running on June 1, 1992, and I didn’t break stride until two months into therapy, seven months ago. In my defense, like I said, my view of the past was through a soapy window of a vehicle as it trudges its way through a carwash on a mechanized track: A fuzzed-out, clouded bluuurrrrrr. I could see it, but I *cooouldn’t quuuuute* see it. Like music played at too low a volume. Suffice it to say, I embellished.

I talked about the smell of Daddy’s skin: baked potato and Barbasol. Mmmmm... I love the smell of Daddy’s skin, but I don’t love it nearly as much as I pretended to love it. I talked about nuzzling in the crook of his neck, all warm and a little prickly. Part of elementary school and most of high school. Boston University. Something about adult education classes at night. Dirk, of course. An English guy named Tad and boats and The Hamptons. A temp job at a law firm and premature termination due to an excessive amount of time spent online, chatting with strangers. A kinky doctor named Kyle with whom I used to work and eventually sleep. But that’s about it.

Fibbing and manipulation come naturally to me, and I’m very good at it, so in the name of efficiency, I did it again and again and again. It’s a typical thing to do if you’re trying to avoid the truth. I’m so good, I was almost taken in by the whoppers and actually swallowed two of them whole. One was

NOW THAT YOU HAVE SEEN ME

about graduating summa cum laude from Boston University. The crowd went WILD for my stand-up comedy commencement routine! I had to pause at least five times and wait *forever* for the applause to die down. The other was about dedicating the entire summer of 2006 to humanitarian services and charitable causes, such as reading Bible passages to blind parishioners and singing hymnals with elderly shut-ins. From what I've been told, that stuff didn't happen, but no one has offered definitive proof that it didn't, and while I can't imagine I'd be selfless enough to read Bible passages to blind people, it remains to be seen.

I lied by embellishing and/or making shit up, but mostly I lied by omission. I was approaching existence in the manner to which I had become accustomed, via fabrication and avoidance, and I lied in one way or another about anything that happened to pop into my head that I thought might satisfy Bonnie and my court-appointed requirements. Evasion seemed easier than facing the mental evisceration I was certain to suffer had the truth been exposed, so I idly killed time, naively expecting it would go down without a fight, but it didn't. It seldom does when you want it to.

For two loooong months, I defiantly mocked treatment, and nothing that should have been talked about was talked about. Instead, I made shit up as I went along, and, for a while, that worked. During "The Lost Sessions," as Bonnie likes to call them, she and I would shoot the shit; I'd put on a show; she would pretend to be fooled; and then we'd part ways until the next time we met and did it all over again. And again. And again. Sixteen times in two months. Once the anticipatory wave of anxiety and gastrointestinal distress passed, it was almost like hanging out with a friend, talking shit about people we didn't know, like Michael Jackson and his monkey, Bubbles. For a while, Tuesdays (from 1-2:30 p.m.) and Thursdays (3-4:30) were okay. Sometimes, they were almost fun. To date, the Lost Sessions remain the best days of therapy. The absolute BEST.

I was pleased to be getting away with the ruse, but I wasn't. Bonnie was playing her own game, and I wasn't getting

NOW THAT YOU HAVE SEEN ME

away with anything. In retrospect, it should have been obvious. Bonnie's a terrible actress, very over-the-top and way too interested, even for a therapist. I wasn't fooling anyone but myself. Part of me knew it; none of me cared. I now know I need to care, and I now understand, thanks to Bonnie, that my failed attempt to outsmart healing was like hitting a mental snooze button over and over again. I was only delaying the unavoidable awakening. Had I been willing to "go with the flow" and "follow the program" sooner, I may have lessened my time in captivity. Silly, counterproductive me.



Twice a week, I leave Bonnie's office at 2:30 or 4:30, depending on the day, and I push through the door of that crumbling brick building at 2:34 or 4:34, and I feel Mother's oppressive proximity before I see her. As soon as I see her, with that painfully bony face and wax-beans-meets-white-asparagus complexion, every last drop of "almost fun" oozes from my psyche and soaks into the deeply-cracked asphalt of the parking lot. She waits for an hour and a half (sometimes in a handicapped spot if the lot is full) in her tacky, white Jaguar, a fiftieth birthday gift from Daddy, like, ten years ago, idling, thumbing through the shiny pages of a *Palm Beach Monthly*, fancying herself so proper, so classy. Mother has absolutely no connection whatsoever to Palm Beach.

If I could turn and run down the street, I would fucking sprint, but I don't run, like, anywhere, ever, and Bonnie's office is at least two miles from my parents' place. That's far. I'm not good with distance; maybe it's a mile. Anyway, Bonnie insists on seeing me out, *all* the way out, after every single session, her arm hooked through mine at the elbow as if she's escorting me down the aisle, giving me away, and running isn't an option. Each time I climb into the backseat of Mother's car, I feel like I'm making the biggest mistake of my life. But I have no choice. We ride "home" in awkward silence.

About three weeks post-Havenhurst, Mother had Daddy install a combination lock on the guestroom door after finding a few letters I'd tossed in the trashcan in the kitchen,

NOW THAT YOU HAVE SEEN ME

never imagining anyone would sift through the fucking *trash* to dig up dirt on me. Each outlined in great detail my “courageous escape” and/or “elaborate suicide,” which are kind of the same thing. There were diagrams and at least two pie charts in each note, which looked drawn with a very sharp, red pencil. I found them under my pillow three nights in a row. They were sealed with a pink lipsticked kiss. I still have no idea how Brandie (I assume) snuck into the house to deliver the message, but I got it loud and clear.

Anyway, twice, Mother forgot the combination to that lock, and *twice* I spent over ten hours straight in that room, hungry and dirty and pissing myself crazy, until it was eventually hacksawed off by Daddy, and I was finally, temporarily, released. Another lock was attached posthaste. Legal? I don't think so. Cruel and unusual? Most definitely. Who the *fuck* puts a *combination* lock on a door to keep their 29-year-old daughter from escaping? Three times. That's whack. Bonnie calls it "tough love," which I've always considered a very abusive term and even more abusive practice.

Day after night after day after night, for *far* too many days and nights, I would sit on the bed inside that locked room, feverishly planning my daring escape and/or elaborate suicide as outlined in the very persuasive letters, and anxiety returned in full force. Living literally became a chore. Producing red blood cells became laborious, almost pointless. I tried like the dickens to cope, but I couldn't. The nadir of my existence was staring me right in the face, daring me to blink, and I eventually did, hard. My eyeballs burned from the sudden onslaught of FEAR; tears fell. I knew I had lost the battle. It was still anyone's war.

It was at that *reevery* low point seven months ago that I decided to take advantage of Mother and Daddy's sanctimonious “gift of time” and engage in cooperative and productive discourse with Bonnie. I announced it the day after sobbing violently for over fourteen hours straight. I was exhausted. “I'm ready,” I said, entering the office. For the very first time, I reclined on the crushed velvet couch, which was once burgundy but is worn to the bones in too many places by

NOW THAT YOU HAVE SEEN ME

too many crazy-ass bodies. It skeeves me. I usually sit in the brown leather wingback across from Bonnie as she sits behind her desk, judging me.

“Well, it’s about time,” she said all dramatically, throwing up her hands and letting them fall heavily to the desk. SMACK!! “OW! That fucking HURT! Tell me your life story, sweetheart.” Bonnie reminds me of Jerri Blank from *Strangers With Candy*, minus the “boozer, user, loser” part. She makes me giggle. “And put it on paper, please. The TRUTH. For *you*. Your memories are not for public consumption, hon. Well, not at this juncture, anyway. We’ll see how things go here. A paper trail is a valuable asset when making accusations about a former client in court. Apparently, it’s ‘required.’ I learned *that* the hard way. HA HA HA! I can’t talk about it. It’s pending.”

The TRUTH “truth” is a lot more “truth” than I’m ready to share, and, honestly, I’m not 100 percent sure about a third of it, so I’ve been divulging it gradually, sparingly. I have to. My freedom is on the line.

This is how it starts. I think.



June 1, 1992: I was a hyper child generally, but the morning of my sixth birthday, it was all I could do not to rip out my hair and pluck my eyes clean from their sleep-deprived sockets. From breakfast on, I wore a golden crown with "Birthday Princess" scrolled across the front of it in rubies and diamonds that Daddy had presented to me in grand fashion as we ate triangle-cut cinnamon toast and Bing cherries (Daddy loves cherries) on the living room floor and watched *My Little Pony Tales* while Mother “slept in.” She was totally faking it. She did it a lot to avoid dealing. I don’t blame her for that, though. I was a pretty manic child with lots of unfocused energy, and she’s always been a woman of very little patience.

That afternoon, there was a party and a strawberry ice cream cake shaped like Minnie Mouse’s head. Apparently, I used to love Minnie when I was little, at least up until that afternoon. There was even a piñata. It was pink and purple and shaped like a pony. Due to The Incident, the other kids were sent home

NOW THAT YOU HAVE SEEN ME

before we had a chance to whack it.



I can appreciate the emotional and physical pain associated with the passing of a fetus one has been referring to by name since the first trimester. I cannot, however, appreciate Mother's failure to come up with a better way to express her grief than by using it as a weapon, exploiting it, cheapening it. Love aside, perhaps it's why Daddy indulges her. She's a bitter concoction of misery and tyranny, and he seems to suck it right up.

Its name was Brandon. Mother's never come right out and said it, but I'm pretty sure she holds me responsible for its demise. Consequently, and because the anniversary breeds such incredible sorrow, I haven't celebrated a birthday in a conventional or apropos manner since I was six years old. Well, five, actually, but I can't remember that far back. I will never forgive the woman for ruining My Special Day forever. Never.



Since the evening of my sixth birthday, my sweaty body curved into a lowercase "s" on the cool, green, vinyl couch in the visitors lounge at Women & Infants Hospital, my head in Daddy's lap, I've had this recurring dream. Though it has changed slightly over the years, various poignant elements remain. I know it's pointless to talk about dreams, since no one finds them interesting, BUT...

In my dream, I'm wearing my Birthday Princess crown and a yellow sundress with scarlet cherries where the boobies should be. Just as I'm about to blow out the candles and make a wish, tears stream down Minnie's creamy pink cheeks, slicing clear through and exposing pulpy, red clots. She squeals (silently) in anguish, pain and despair while her polka-dotted-bow-topped, strawberry-filled head softens until it is liquefied beyond recognition. Her melted face flows over the side of the table, a river of red.

I turn from the horror, crane my neck until it hurts and look up and up and up at my lovely Sparkle Pony piñata swinging from a high branch of a HUGE, knotted, leafy oak.

NOW THAT YOU HAVE SEEN ME

Brandie is behind me (weird on a few levels), wrapped all around me, gripping my fists in hers, raising our arms higher and Higher and HIGHER, and it hurts, but I know that resistance is futile.

The sun beats down from its place in an infinite sky of the *deepest* blue, bursting through bent branches and a mess of fluorescent green leaves, and wave after wave of BRIGHT, splintered light washes over me, and suddenly I'm doggy paddling with all my might against an undercurrent that rapidly grows stronger and stronger until...

It overtakes me.

And I struggle.

And slip under.

And I can't breathe.

And then I'm barefoot in the cool, soft grass in my backyard, tickly blades poking through my toes, and Brandie is wrapped all around me, and my fists are clutched in hers. She raises our arms higher and higher and higher.

And then I see that HUGE piñata stick descend in a perfect arc and make sickening contact over and over again with a full, pliant, smocked belly. Mother's belly. Over and over again.

All of this happens in slow motion.

I'm excited, and I laugh as I draw back the whacking stick for the last time. I want to destroy this piñata and eat its guts! I want to devour Minnie's bloody, melted head! I want to open presents! IT'S MY BIIIRTHDAAAY!

And then I'm scared because Mother looks *very* scared, and I throw the stick to the ground so she wouldn't know it was me who caused the ruckus, and then I either scream or laugh, because I'm SIX! and it's my SPECIAL DAY!

I should mention that much of this dream happens silently and kind of... over there. I watched the whacking sequence from a safe distance. All these years later, I still don't know if I'm screaming or laughing.

And then I'm standing in the middle of a small, empty room with bubble-gum pink walls (I just retched), and Daddy is on his knees in front of me, literally licking tears off my face and telling me my "love tap had nothing to do with Baby Brandon's

NOW THAT YOU HAVE SEEN ME

decision to live up in Heaven with Kitty Kat and Nana instead of down in Dayton with us,” and his tongue is like sandpaper on my cheeks and my nose and my lips and my cherries...

And then I'm lying in a HUUUUGE field of poppies, like Dorothy in *The Wizard of Oz*, and Daddy's breath is hot in my face, and I'm sleepy, even though I'm asleep in real life, and just as I'm about to fall asleep, I think I wake up in real life, and I try to move, but I can't, and Brandie's an inch from my face, screaming, "GET UP! GET UP! GET UP!" and I yank myself from REAL sleep to something like "GETHHPF! GETHHPF! GETHHPF!"

It is absolutely terrifying. Upon rousing, I am crying and/or feel sick to my stomach yet tremendously relieved.

While the point of this dream is frustratingly unclear, and the Brandie connection remains a Scooby-Doo mystery, with therapy it has become somewhat less recurrent, so I guess I have to give Bonnie props for that. Thanks, Bonnie.



Grown-ups should censor what they say around children, but they hardly ever do. Back in the 80s, they did even less. At least, mine did. Mother often answered "How many children do you have?" with "Two, a boy and a girl, but I lost one. His name was Brandon," and it worried me to the extent I would vomit in secret. From six to ten, I kept a "puke bowl" in my room and emptied it on the sly. It was one of Mother's beloved Tupperware containers, and it worked like a charm. The seal was impeccable.

A good portion of my early childhood was spent feeling queasy while searching for Brandon, thinking maybe he was hiding somewhere or *GASP* in danger! Was he tucked between the couch and wall like I had been on many occasions, thinking it was a Safe Place, where no one could "Ready or not, here I come" find him? Crouched inside the scratchy wicker hamper in the upstairs bathroom? Behind a thorny rose bush in the salty neighbor, Mrs. Bernstingle's, backyard, cold and scared and hurty but still somewhat safe? KIDNAPPED?! I knew I had to find him. If I found him, I would be great; Mother wouldn't

NOW THAT YOU HAVE SEEN ME

be mean anymore; Daddy would have his “baby boy” back; and my family would be GREATER. Three plus one equals four. Four is greater than three.

Of course, Brandon was always missing from the equation, and my family of three remained less than. By the time I entered third grade, I realized, probably later than I should have, that we’d never be greater, ever, and I stopped searching. It was intensely liberating. I also stopped throwing up in my closet, which was a welcome upshot of surrender to circumstances beyond my control.

Whenever Mother worked Brandon into conversation within Daddy’s earshot, he would promise me that Brandon’s decision to live up in Heaven with Kitty Kat and Nana had nothing to do with me, which obviously wriggled its way into my psyche and is why my subconscious still tries to hammer that shit out in my sleep. Thanks, Daddy. He absolved me of this manufactured (in retrospect, projected) guilt many times, attempting to grab the reins of my runaway childhood and correct an uncontrollable skid that had been set in motion years before, but it was counterproductive and only served to complicate the matter. A heartfelt swing and pathetic miss, God bless him.

“Do you understand?” he’d ask.

I didn’t, but I loved Daddy, so I pretended I did. “Yes, Daddy,” I’d say. “I understand.”

I missed Kitty Kat (a goldfish I had for one and a half days) and Nana a lot, and thinking about them made me sad.

“Don’t cry,” he’d say, and, like a Big Girl, I would try not to cry, but I always did. “Shhhhh... Come here, Angel.” And I would come there, and Daddy would crush me with his love and tell me I was the best little girl in the world (paraphrasing), and I wanted to believe him. Even at that young age, though, it seemed contrived.

At six years old, it never occurred to me that I might have had *any* input in Brandon’s decision not to join the Glickman clan. Culpability is a grown-up concept. Plus, my only “contact” with Brandon had been through Mother, and I don’t

NOW THAT YOU HAVE SEEN ME

even have vivid memories of *that*. I mean, I must have rubbed her stomach or did whatever it is that young children do when their mother is expecting, but who knows? Maybe I didn't. Mother's not maternal by any stretch of the imagination.

She groundlessly resents me, and I resent her for that. Even at six, I was aware that she blamed me for the loss of her "beautiful baby boy" (puh-lease), due in part to Daddy's frequent "absolution" but due in larger part to Mother's tendency to side-eye me whenever she spoke of Brandon. Thankfully, she hasn't spoken of him in years.

When I was ten, I came to learn that she also blames me for the sale of her childhood home in Ohio a year after The Incident. We were in the kitchen when she passive-aggressively insinuated it was I who had convinced my father, at seven years old, to move to Massachusetts, some 850 miles from her kin in Dayton. Perhaps it is this preserved irrational sense of betrayal that has prompted her to seek custody of me at 29, forcing me to live within her neurotic clutch, veiled in the shroud of "love" and "concern," but who the hell knows? The woman is insane.

When I was ten, she took me aside for a twisted version of a mother-daughter chat I recall as if it were an hour ago, and I always will. It was that traumatizing.

It was a Sunday, around six in the evening, and I was staring at the toaster, tearing apart string cheese and waiting for the frozen Lender's onion bagel I was cooking for dinner to pop up. Mother was standing in the open door of a curio cabinet, replacing a crystal angel she had been polishing for at least ten minutes. The door closed with a magnetic *click* and she walked to the kitchen island and pulled out a stool. Metal screamed across the Mexican tile floor. I cringed.

"Sit down, Farrah."

My bagel popped up. "Wait a minute," I said. I've never respected her.

I buttered the bagel, put it on a paper towel, sat and took a bite. It was SO good. I use a *lot* of butter. It soaked right through the Bounty.

NOW THAT YOU HAVE SEEN ME

Before speaking again, Mother walked back to the cabinet and stared at her precious “forever babies” tucked safely inside. She would remain like that for the entirety of this terribly misguided, terribly unwelcome conversation. I tried not to look at her for fear of seeing the back of her head and her face reflected in the glass door at the same time. <*shivverrr*> When she finally spoke, she advised me on a *bunch* of awesome stuff, including, out of absolutely nowhere, to keep a check on my “Baahhston” accent. I was two bites into the second half of my bagel, considering another.

“You sound like stupid townie trash, Farrah. We are *not* them.” As if speaking through one’s nose, as Mother does, is an enviable quality in a gal, the epitome of class and breeding, very refined, indeed.

“Whatevah, kid,” I said under my breath.

We had lived in Massachusetts since I was seven years old. My gradually developing accent must have been grating on her ears for three years until she just couldn’t take it anymore and needed to unleash her pent-up rage on me when I was just ten, minding my business and eating string cheese and a frozen bagel for dinner.

Another strong suggestion of note: Keep my legs together. Inappropriate. I didn’t even know what she was talking about. I do now, of course, since I’m not *ten*.

Though my recall of this next part is hovering around 60 percent, I remember her saying something like, “Daddy’s little *Angel!* Whatever Angel *wants*, Angel *gets*. *Doesn’t* she?!” She was LOUD, so I knew whatever she was talking about wasn’t nice. “You couldn’t *wait* to get out of Ohio, *could* you? Away from Auntie Paula and Uncle Tommy and Auntie Susie and Uncle Jackie. You never *did* accept Ming Lee into the family when Auntie Paula and Uncle Tommy bought her from China. I mean brought her from China!” Mother always says “brought her from China. I mean brought her from China” when referring to Ming Lee’s integration into the family. Racist.

I was around two when my new cousin came home; Ming Lee was maybe five months old. Our families weren’t

NOW THAT YOU HAVE SEEN ME

super close. This means that she and I had very few occasions, if any, to interact with one another, to the extent that children of that age can interact with one another, before we moved to Massachusetts. As far as I recall, I had nothing against Ming Lee. I didn't even know the girl. I still don't. We don't keep in touch. I kinda wish we did. I should totally Facebook her. That's family right there.

That experience, when I was just ten, which is *such* a developmental year, is only one of several devastating childhood moments with Mother, and though it was super hard not to cry, I didn't. For as long as I can remember, I have never cried in front of her (or because of her, for that matter). She's not comforting. Solace is sought within, and I self-soothe, which is a survival technique I learned when I was six, maybe seven, that Mother considers "cold, antisocial behavior." She told Bonnie it was one of my "many bonding issues" and attributed it to my "failure to latch on to [her] breast," which is *totally* whack. That's on *her*, not me. I was an *infant*, for fuck's sake.



From what I gathered when we moved from Ohio when I was seven years old, it was a promotion to senior partner in a larger office within the regional law firm where Daddy worked that landed us in Arlington, Massachusetts, his hometown. I wish I could have been a stupid kid, but I wasn't. I could follow most adult conversation, and I understood that Daddy was using this "great opportunity" to "get us away from it all." Even back then, I knew that getting "away from it all" wasn't really a thing. The weather would be with us no matter where we went, even Massachusetts, some 850 miles away.

Daddy's new status meant more money, which was appreciated, I'm sure, since Mother's mounting obsession with hoarding knickknacks and gimcracks and various whatnots and tchotchkes in a sad attempt to stifle her unbearable grief showed no sign of stopping. Angels are her favorite, naturally. Ceramic baby figurines with huge, sad, eyes come in a close second. The last time I counted, which was four months ago, on Thanksgiving, when I was unexpectedly released for the day,

NOW THAT YOU HAVE SEEN ME

free to roam the house, literally hundreds of various-sized curios filled four cabinets in my old bedroom, one in the bathroom, three in the den, two in the dining room, one in the kitchen and four, the dearest of all, in my parents' room. Thinking ahead, they had moved a cabinet from the guestroom to the bathroom when they locked me in, because God only knows what could have happened. Countless more forever babies remain packed away in boxes and bags in the basement, some broken, most still snug in their original packaging. It was a problem twenty-three years ago and apparently remains one to this day.

Despite the objections and passive-aggressive digs I'm sure Daddy must have endured as he tried to enjoy his moment in the sun, it was a done deal, and the move to Arlington worked out well. Our new house was within cuppa-sugah-borrowing distance from my grandparents' place, which meant that Daddy's mother, Gammy, aka Gizella Glickman (nee, Florsheim, no relation to the shoe empire), who had previously dedicated her entire geriatric life to monitoring Papa Jim's bowel movements and tearing up junk mail, could now devote herself to caring for my still-grieving mother as well as for me, since Daddy was *always* at work.

Mother's daily sobbing dwindled (thank God) to weekly crying jags and then bi-monthly episodes until, eventually, it stopped altogether (at least in my presence) maybe a year later, which was a blessing. Had she been alive, I'm sure my maternal grandmother would have taken on that nurturing role, albeit by telephone from Ohio, but Nana had met her maker under most unfortunate circumstances just five months before Baby Brandon went into The Light. The details of her passing, disclosed during that punishing tête-à-tête *when I was ten years old*, included her station wagon, a garage and a garden hose "back home, in Dayton. Franklin was in the backseat."

Franklin wasn't only my favorite "thing," just a "teddy bear," he was... I can't even describe him, because it makes me sad. He just was. I swear he had a soul. We totally communicated. He probably started out white but was a comfy hugged-in, worn-out splotchy gray for as long as I had known

NOW THAT YOU HAVE SEEN ME

him. And he smelled fucking GREAT, like dried spit. I don't even know where he came from. He was just always there. Until one day when he wasn't, and I never knew why. I may not remember much of my early childhood, but I do remember Franklin. He was my forever buddy, and everyone knew it. Even at ten, I thought about him a lot, wondered what became of him, and I remember feeling so desperately alone when Mother told me. That's pretty fucking mean.

I was emotionally ruined enough to pick up on the Dayton dig, but my unworldly brain could not comprehend the particulars of poor Nana's (and Franklin's) passing, so my fourth-grade through fifth-grade boyfriend, Nicky Pellegrino, tried to clue me in during recess, making use of elementary ideas and timeless visuals I hoped and prayed had nothing to do with anything. His one-man show culminated with his left fist hovering a foot above his head, gripping an imaginary rope from which his neck hung at a 90-degree angle, but I still didn't get it. I loved Nicky to death. He looked just like a hot kewpie doll, all pale-skinned and blue-eyed and yellow-haired. He was an actor and had starred in two commercials for a local hardware store owned by his uncle, Harvey Pellegrino of Harvey P's Hardware, which was very impressive back then. Despite his dramatic display, however, complete with HUGE teal eyes rolled to the back of his head and blueberry-punch-stained tongue peeking from the corner of his blueberry-punch-stained lips, I understood the situation only slightly better, if at all.

Now that I'm older and I'd like to think wiser, I am convinced that Nana had an imbalance, and, in light of recent events, I'm convinced it got passed down.



So that all happened when I was ten.

From the day I turned eleven, and my across-the-street neighbor, Charlene, who was five years older, began sharing the intimate details of her life with me, sixteen couldn't come fast enough. The age, to me, was womanhood wrapped in gooey, pink taffy. It even sounded sweet:

Siiii>teeeeeen

NOW THAT YOU HAVE SEEN ME

It smacked of make-up and perfume and riding in cars with boys. Dating cute boys who drove cars and kissing those boys in the backseats of those cars while wearing make-up and perfume. SIXTEEN! It was all I could do to stick it out until the Big Day. My entire existence was about waiting. I wrote my first poem when I was eleven and a half. It was called "Just Wait."

JUST WAIT

Everything will be okay.
Tomorrow is another day.
Everything will be all right.
Tomorrow is another night.
Everything will be just fine.
Count down the seconds. Do your time.
Everything will be just great. Just wait!
And wait.
And wait.
And wait...

That's how it went. Pretty good for eleven and a half. It became my mantra for the next four and a half years.

When I was fourteen, my parents forgot my birthday. Granted, we hadn't CELEBRATED!! it since I was six, five maybe, it's questionable, but I'd always gotten a fake smile from Mother and a hug and card with money from Daddy. Apropos of nothing, he loves cards with chimps in clothing, but who doesn't? When I turned fourteen, I got nothing. A few days later, long enough for them to appreciate their faux pas and make it right, Mother, apparently sick of my passive-aggressive, three-days-long pouting, said, "Oh, *Farrab*. Stop PMSing and *bleed* already," and I completely lost it.

It was a Wednesday evening, around 7:30. We were in the kitchen, and I was heating up some Totino's bagel pizzas for dinner. The next thing I remember is Mother shrieking like a fisher cat, Daddy entering from the mud room, "late from work," and ceramic crunching beneath his Italian leather loafers. It was a scene; I'll leave it at that. Suffice it to say, they haven't forgotten a birthday since. We've never "celebrated" it, of course (and Mother often ignores it altogether, punishment, I'm sure,

NOW THAT YOU HAVE SEEN ME

for murdering at least a dozen and a half of her precious forever babies), but they've never forgotten it. That means a lot to me.

In due time, fourteen met sixteen; sixteen wasn't all it was cracked up to be, since Mother wouldn't let me get a driver's license, fearing I would commit vehicular homicide and/or die in a fiery crash; and I waited in a cherry lip-glossed, Love's Baby Soft haze to turn eighteen so I could get my legal ass to the nearest voting booth and ROCK THE VOTE! I thought I was very interested in politics back then, but it turned out I was just perpetually irritable and argumentative, a byproduct of dissatisfaction with life in general. Like many girls my age, I was angsty, a cliché. I was always waiting for something. Something else, something better, anything better, anything *else*. Anything else that was anything better than what I had going on, which was absolutely nothing. I was just always... waiting. Always anticipating a valid reason to live, and it was always coming. Tomorrow. Next week. Next month. Next year. When I turned 18.

I turned 18 on June 1, 2004 and idly killed time until I turned twenty-one 1,095 days later.

TWENTY-ONE!

Twenty-one rolled around, and I wished I were eleven again. Go figure.



There's an old Puerto Rican saying that, very loosely translated, goes something like this: We were a lot, and then Grandma had a baby. It sounds much prettier in Spanish. My friend Giselle Puente used to say it all the time:

- when the bar was shoulder-to-shoulder, and we had to wait *forever* for a cocktail, since we were often overlooked by bartenders, and guys hardly ever bought us drinks;
- stuck in highway traffic;
- every single Sunday during the summer of 2005 when Blackbird Baking Company, the coffeehouse where we worked, was

NOW THAT YOU HAVE SEEN ME

filled to fire code, and patrons crowded the vestibule and lined the sidewalk, waiting for up to an hour to munch on our open-mike brunch while listening to acoustic covers of Tracy Chapman and James Taylor...

“Éramos mucho, y luego la abuela tuvo un bebé.”

See? Much prettier. Four years of high school Spanish, and, other than the basics (“buenos días,” “buenas tardes,” “buenas noches”), it’s the only thing I retained, thanks to Giselle. I can barely conjugate.



In the fall of 2006, I was a junior at Boston University and on the very first day, in my very first class, my Psych III professor screamed:

"GOOD MORNING, CLASS! AND WELCOME TO PSYCHE III! I AM PROFESSOR KELLY! BOSTON UNIVERSITY SEEMS TO HAVE MISPLACED THE SHIPMENT OF TEXTBOOKS PROFESSOR KELLY ORDERED AT LEAST THREE MONTHS AGO! HE HAS NO IDEA HOW THIS INSTITUTION EXPECTS HIM TO TEACH AN ADANCED COURSE IN PSYCHOLOGY WITHOUT THE TEXTBOOKS HE PURPOSELY ORDERED *THREE MONTHS IN ADVANCE* IN A MADMAN'S ATTEMPT TO PREVENT THIS SORT OF THING FROM HAPPENING! *AGAIN!* FOR THE FOURTH YEAR IN A ROW, BUT HERE WE ARE! UNFORTUNATELY, THOSE TEXTBOOKS CONTAIN THE MATERIAL NECESSARY FOR PROFESSOR KELLY TO CONDUCT THIS CLASS! THEREFORE, WE WILL USE THIS UNEXPECTED OPPORTUNITY TO TELL PROFESSOR KELLY ALL ABOUT OUR LIVES IN 500 WORDS OR LESS!"

Professor Kelly often referred to himself in the third person, and he ALWAYS SHOUTED, flexing his LIMP GRAY BALLS, showing us who was IN CHARGE. It didn't bother me. I don't have an issue with authority. Plus, I, too, have been

NOW THAT YOU HAVE SEEN ME

known to dissociate, as well as holler from time to time, so who am I to judge?

I considered the senseless task a complete waste of my time and even bigger waste of Daddy's money. If I'd wanted to take a creative writing class, I would have enrolled in "Intro to Creative Writing," against Daddy's wishes, I'm sure. Besides, who can sum up their life in 500 words or less? I guess a six-year-old could, not having lived long, or maybe a loser whose life consisted of dressing his cats in handmade pajamas, rocking them to sleep and ideating clever ways to kill himself, but how could I encapsulate twenty years of living in approximately two pages?

I was tempted to raise my hand and share my view on the ridiculous assignment, but the first day of class is quite possibly the worst of all occasions to piss off the teacher. The class, forty-five amateur Jung and Freuds dressed in flannel and denim, removed notebooks from backpacks and began scribbling like madmen. This is what I wrote:

Once upon a time, high on a hill in the Kingdom of Arlington, in the Northeastern region of a land called "America," there lived a really hot princess whose poise and demeanor none could surpass.

"Were you not born a princess," her mother frequently told her, "you would most certainly stumble as often as The People in The Valley Below. Remember that, Sweetheart, and keep your prominence in your purse. Tango through time with the passion of a zealot and the virtue of a saint, welcome a miracle when you meet one on the street, and your journey will always be smooth. Should you lose your way, simply go with the flow, and The Universe will always steer you in the right direction. Now, finish your dinner, and clean your room. It's a royal pit."

Though her tendency to speak in metaphor was maddening, the Queen was a wise woman. The princess figured her mother knew what she was talking about and did as she was told. Excepting the occasional

NOW THAT YOU HAVE SEEN ME

bout of PMS (a wicked curse handed down from generation to generation), she was loving and kind and generally blithe. Indeed, she was easy like Sunday morning. She saw no reason not to be.

"All we are is dust in the wind," she would say, and she lived her every moment with grace, the way a princess should.

Instead of pushing forward, determined, against the pounding surf, like most of The People in The Valley Below, the princess rode the wave of The Cosmos, and that seemed to make all the difference in The World. Good fortune rained down on her, kisses from the gods. Of course, it didn't hurt to be born into royalty.

One tragic day, with no forewarning of any kind, Life got in the way of living, and I - I mean the princess, was trapped in existence. Ironically, wherever she was, most of her was somewhere else. Venus. Mars. On occasion as distant as Pluto. Gone.

Duties were executed with automaton proficiency. She removed herself from dull conversations and mentally compiled lists when she should have been listening to what was being said.

Have to do my laundry.

Have to deposit that check.

Have to pay the rent.

Have to keep going.

Half there, half not.

The princess had lost her way. She was drowning in a sea of existential ennui, and that frightened her. Despite her mother's counsel, she challenged the current and waged war against the crashing surf, but her defiance only agitated the waters. Apathy turned to panic, and atoms collided as she frantically tread Life, desperate to stay afloat.

It wasn't easy; the princess was a real trooper. Despite her constant kicking, she was forever going

NOW THAT YOU HAVE SEEN ME

under, always knocking her dainty chin on the dirty rock bottom. Eventually, she grew weary from the struggle and wept as Life washed over her.

Suddenly, the princess felt heavy. Thick. Claustrophobic in her skin. Empty, yet full. Filled to capacity with nothingness.

Éramos mucho, y luego la abuela tuvo un bebé.

I am a crowded house: fixations, neuroses, regrets and responsibilities share limited space within the cramped quarters of my skull.

I am Grandma, the source of more. And I am the kid.

THE END



Professor Kelly didn't get it. He said I didn't follow the rules. He was a close talker; his breath could take down a small animal, like a ferret. His teeth, a curious shade of grey-yellow (grelow? I'm pitching it to Crayola!) were outlined by what appeared to be at least sixty years of decay. He said the content deserved a "D," but because the paper ran thirty-nine words over the 500-word limit, he'd be giving me an "F." I wiped his fetid cheesy stench away from my ear, but I can still smell it, all these years later (I totally just gagged), and I can still hear it.

"THIS IS NOT INTRO TO CREATIVE WRITING, DEAR!" he screamed. "IF YOU DESIRE TO WRITE FICTION, I SUGGEST YOU ENROLL IN A CREATIVE WRITING COURSE!"

Touche.

If only Smelly had focused more on THE THEME and less on THE RULES, I may have received a passing grade as well as the help that I, obviously, desperately needed, but I didn't. Instead, I failed the entire course, had to take another in my senior year to get enough credits to graduate and floundered, trying to live an acceptedly productive life. I pretty much failed.



At my session today, Bonnie decided that, going forward, it would be a good idea to read each journal entry out

NOW THAT YOU HAVE SEEN ME

loud, and we'd discuss the disjointed memories of my life as history continues to reacquaint itself. Dissect my past, if you will. "That's why we're here," she said.

Is it?

Maybe it is. I don't really know how it all works. Given the choice, though, I wouldn't be doing that. Writing it down is one thing. Discussing it with Bonnie is, obviously, another. She said it would give us a "clearer view of the BIG PICTURE."

"I promise you, once we have a clearer view of the BIG PICTURE, the raggedy-ass, jagged pieces of your fractured life will magically fall into place; the puzzle will be complete; and the BIG PICTURE will be revealed! HOORAY!"

I wandered off for a moment, trying to make sense of what she'd just said.

"And if they don't?"

"If they don't? Hmmm... Well, that's a good question. I hadn't thought about it, since I tend to live in the moment and think positively, but you're a smart cookie for considering it a possibility. Hmmm... Let's see... Well, if they don't, I guess we'll have to pound them into place one by one. BAM! BAM! BAM! BAM! HAHAHA! It'll be cool! Like keeping a retro diary. Anne Frank's diary was AWESOME! Have you read it?"

I was appalled. To even *allude* to such a tragic figure in such a dismissive way was highly inappropriate. To call her life "AWESOME" was contemptible.

"Anne Frank?" I said. "You want to talk about Anne FRANK?!"

Bonnie stared at me, eyebrows knit, right ear almost touching her shoulder, seemingly confused and surprised by my passion. "Hm?" she asked. "What's that about Anne Frank, hon?" She didn't seem to understand the impact of making light of such profound pain, and she didn't seem embarrassed when I pointed it out to her. Suffice it to say, I was *PISSED*.

I grabbed a ceramic figurine from the corner of her desk and chucked it against the wall behind her where it made direct contact with one of five framed diplomas. It was a unicorn with wings and had "My Little Unicorn Guardian Angel" painted

sloppily on its side in glittery purple. Bonnie flinched when it exploded and fell to the wood floor in a million pieces, sounding lovely to my ears, kinda like wind chimes. Apparently, her dead niece had made it for her shortly before dying. Had I known that at the time, I probably never would have done it.

That question, though, that one ignorant question, "What's that about Anne Frank, hon?" infuriated me to the point of nausea, and I really thought I was going to vomit. The woman was supposed to be an expert, and she was asking ME what's up?

"You think it will be COOL," I yelled a little too loudly, "like keeping a fucking *DIARY* á la Anne *FRANK*? You think it's gonna be *AWESOME*? I'm *JEWISH*, you sick *FUCK*! You sick, sadistic, Nazi *BITCH*! And, no, I haven't read it."

"The assignment," she said, more clearly and carefully this time, "will be cool. Like keeping a retro diary. And, frankly, diaries are awesome. They're the shit."

"Oh," I said. "I must have misheard you. Pardon me. I'm sorry about the paperweight. And about smashing your credentials. I thought you were making a Naz-"

"Hey," she said, "it's okay, hon. Really. We'll let Maintenance deal with it, right? I *love* Anne Frank. '*Lowenstein*? Hellooooo! Ha ha ha...?'" It was a forced, fake laugh. I could tell. Bonnie was uncomfortable. Her throat held a tear bubble. "Anyway," cautiously, "like I was saying. Ummm... It might be fun? I do it all the time."

"You do?" I was trying to sound cooperative, trying to regain at least a portion of Bonnie's trust I was certain I had lost within the last three minutes.

"Oh, *yeeeeeah*," she said. "*Aaall* the time. Only, *I* do it with *other* peoples' lives. I'm no nut! HAHAHA!" Bonnie laughed way too hard when she said that, but the woman sometimes seems to know what she's talking about, and she usually cracks me up, so I let it slide. "You should see this one guy who comes in on Wednesdays. I'll call him Tommy Pacheco, since that's his name. He sews entire wardrobes for his *dozens* of baby dolls, which isn't so bizarre in itself, BUT he modifies the patterns and makes

NOW THAT YOU HAVE SEEN ME

matching outfits for *himself!* HAHahaha! He's HUGE, like 6'5", 350 pounds, at *least*. I swear to God!" Bonnie's always swearing to God. "One time HAHahaha! he came to a session HAHahaha! in a snap-crotch onsie that had 'Mama's Little Man' embroidered on the front! HAHahaha! It *reeeally* upsets him. HAHahaha! But he HAHahaha! just can't help it! HAHahaha!" And then she laughed and laughed and laughed until it became awkward.

I have to assume she was joking.



After getting back into the groove, thanks to the juicy, tremendously inappropriate gossip, I got a tenuous grip and decided to take her "suggestion" to retroactively chronicle my life and lay it out before her to be picked apart and examined. I've been shooting along this vein of "honesty" and "productivity" for twenty-eight weeks now, and it seems slightly foolish, quite frankly, to stop the forward motion. I've invested too much time. Plus, when I agreed to the assignment, I was so relieved she hadn't actually brought up Anne Frank that I might have agreed to just about anything. Fucking Anne... Poor thing.

I told Bonnie it made most sense to me, since I had already covered 6 through 20, albeit sketchily, in a notebook she is free to peruse at any time, to begin with the event I consider the foremost trigger of my mental murk and its underlying emotional mayhem, and she agreed. It surprised me how readily she accepted the idea, considering she's tried to incorporate my "matricidal bent" and "inappropriately close relationship with Daddy" into every single session since Day One, but I like to think she allowed me the wiggle room because she believes in me. Deep down, I know she was afraid I'd freak out again if she refused, but whatever. I'll take a pass whenever and however I can get one, even if it means I have to pull a nutty every now and again and chuck something against a wall.

"This is only the beginning," she said.

"Well, Bonnie," I said, feeling a bit calmer (Bonnie has a sneaky way of calming me), "in a nutshell, it goes like this: It all began with a head-spinning rendezvous in a seedy downtown

NOW THAT YOU HAVE SEEN ME

bar with a very bad dog in the closing hours of my twentieth year. The End.”

"Okay, wise guy," she said. "I'll take the unabridged version, then. You may start wherever you please. But since we've pissed away, what? Seven months? Nine months? I want you to pump out at *least* one entry a week. Two or more is better. And show your work in the margins, please, so I have something substantial to show your folks and Judge Zabin. Sound good, sweetheart?"

Uh, no, it does not sound good. It sounds like breach of doctor-patient confidentiality. But, here, for this assignment, is the somewhat unabridged version from the beginning. I have no idea how it ends. I also have no idea what she means by showing my work in the margins, so that's probably not going to happen. Sorry, Bonnie.