

Girl From Baltimore

I drive into the parking lot, cut a corner too close, and almost swipe the bumper of the red Chevy. In my allotted space, I tug the emergency brake hard and yank the key out of the ignition. The windows are rolled down halfway, and I leave them even though it's supposed to rain tonight. Down windows are a sign of temporary mooring. I'm not staying— just running in for a spell, which couldn't be further from the truth. It's Friday. I'm home at seven minutes to six. It's Friday. Did I already mention that?

At least there's mail to check, dog to walk, toenails need painting too. I've got a lot to look forward to and on my way to the mailbox, anticipating all the good fun I'm about to have, I try not to think about what I'd be doing if Simon and I hadn't split.

My college quarterly, free movie offers from Blockbuster, and a postcard from two teens and a toddler wondering if I've seen them. I dump the quarterly in the recycling, having no interest in reading about how the guy I used to buy my pot from is now anchoring the six o'clock news in Rochester, or how the class graduating seven years after me is now eighty-seven percent married off. Did we go to college to get an education or a husband, Class of 2002? I'm mildly interested in the Blockbuster envelope, and I try prying it open with the same hand that feels for my keys. I use my leg for balance and decide not to eat for the rest of the weekend after one thigh grazes the other. Thighs, like all good neighbors, should never be that close.

Opening my door brings the warmth of western exposure windows, and more importantly, Chi Chi, snoozing on the patio.

"Hello, my love," I call out to her. "I see the laundry still isn't folded. I hope you at least emptied the dishwasher."

She's spread out on what used to be my queen-size feather bed. It took me three months to pay Visa back for that thing, but after Chi Chi practically dislodged her senior citizen hips yanking it from my bedroom to the patio I decided to let her have it. Her eyes are at half-mast and her cheeks overflow onto her paws like cream from a puff. She's motionless except for the rise and fall of her ribcage, pretending she doesn't hear me. This is our little routine.

The patio overlooks a neighborhood nicer than my own and the roof of the Wal-Mart that separates us. There's House of Pasta, home to the world's greatest blue cheese dressing, the dry cleaner that holds my clothes in hock, and on top of the nice neighborhood's hill, a church with a royal blue dome. Chi Chi and I parked in the church's parking lot once when I drove her to the nicer neighborhood to let her walk on sidewalks for a change. The people who live in the nice neighborhood keep the church bustling, using it for weddings, bazaars, support groups, sign language classes. Arterial views never change and I find that comforting.

"Everyone's had their heart broken," Rose said after Simon and I broke up. "Yours won't wind up in a medical journal." Rose Wuzzy is never stingy with the Roseisms. She slings advice through phone lines like greasy hash browns in a diner. "*Go with the flow*" is what she told me after I bit the bullet and told her I was dating Simon. I shouldn't have told her, didn't want to get her hopes up, but borrowing a superstition from my brother I decided not telling Rose was worse luck. "Just enjoy the ride," she said, which I did, but the captain has turned on the two-bell signal because this ride has come to a complete stop. And yes, my heart should be in a medical journal. Or the Ripley's Museum my parents took Boy and I to in Ocean City. *See the gorilla-faced girl!*

Get your picture with the man with two heads! Witness the broken-yet-still-beating heart of Madeline Wuzzy donated by her skeptical mother! Maybe I'll sell it on eBay. One slightly used, broken heart. Excellent cardiovascular recovery. Limited romantic capacity.

Breakfast at Uncertainties

When the weekend is over, I'm back to my regular routine of being held captive behind a fiberglass desk with barely enough room for the phone, computer and stack of magazines I need to catch up on. I'm contemplating my issues when the woman who could very well be responsible calls.

"You should be working, not answering the phone."

"It's a sales job, Rose. How productive would it be if I ignored the phone?"

"You ignored it all through high school."

"I didn't get commission based on dating."

"Thank God," we both say in unison.

"Rose, if you're not going to buy a full page ad in the Northwest Film Guide then we really should hang up."

"Speaking of commission checks," Rose says, getting down to business. "Guess what I have in my hands."

"A baby chicken?"

"Don't be an asshole."

“What does it have to do with commission checks? Are you finally admitting I’ve built enough character by this working for a living garbage and are ready to hand over my trust fund?”

“You’ll be handing over your commission checks for the next four months. I’ll give you a hint. It’s about 6 x 8, covered in numbers and is associated with something about to be ripped from your greedy, spoiled little hands.”

I look down at my hands. The only thing I’m holding is the phone cradle and a cold coffee. “A tall, nonfat, sugar-free vanilla latte? No wait, 6 x 8 would be a Grande.”

“What did you buy for eighty-eight dollars at Pink Boutique?”

My blood turns cold. If we were in a movie, (and at this moment I wish I were,) this is where the organ music would sound—doo, doo, doo. “It’s an emergency clinic. I needed penicillin.”

“Macy’s for \$132?”

“Umm...Grandma’s birthday present.”

“The Davis Cole Salon for \$125?”

“Waxing!”

Rose is silent for a moment. She’ll probably let this one slide. Rose is a big fan of grooming and has always been a proponent for doing away with unwanted hair. She’s been stashing portable nose hair trimmers in Boy’s stocking since he was four years old and I can still smell the trademark stench from all those home bleaching kits and bottles of Nair she stocked our bathroom cabinets with. Admittedly I was rocking a pretty intense unibrow in high school. Rose said it was very Brooke Shields from *Pretty Baby* while my classmates thought it was more Bert from *Sesame Street*.

“Do you know your brother barely has a wisp of hair anywhere on his body? He looks like a Ken doll,” Rose goes on.

“He also has long eyelashes, naturally curly hair and what Grandma used to call “tough skin” making it impossible for him to get a zit.”

“He never did get zits.” Rose says this like she’s remembering a trip to Paris with the one she loves. “But honey, don’t feel bad. He may have been smart enough to swipe model-like facial features from the gene pool but he’s crazy as a loon. Not only is he suddenly superstitious but he’s calling me twenty-four times a day to tell me his superstitions.”

“Maybe it’s bad luck not to say them out loud.”

“I didn’t know it was bad luck to eat steak on Mondays and now I’m responsible for the New York Mets being in last place. I feel terrible.”

“You should.”

“Maybe if you both had been exposed to kids your own age instead of hanging around your father and me these things wouldn’t have happened. I thought it was important for you to come home to your mother after school instead of some bimbo aerobics teacher at the Y.”

Admittedly, Boy does have some strange tendencies but at least he can see one conversational topic to completion.

“So we’re done talking about the credit card? Now you’d like to analyze our childhoods?”

“And how my role as stay-at-home mom gave your brother too strong a desire for

routines and you the inability to foster intimate relationships with anyone outside your nuclear family.”

Here we go. “Just because happy hour didn’t start until after school doesn’t mean you were a stay-at-home mom.”

Rose laughs and says I’m right but that’s how things were back then. “Women were old school. We traveled in packs, drank vodka, talked about our kids and husbands— or in Nancy’s case other people’s husbands. And this was what? Twenty years *before Sex and the City*. I’m a pioneer! Your father just got home. Carl, Maddie says hello and she loves you.” In the interest of time, Rose speaks on behalf of the family.

“No I didn’t. I can speak for myself.” Good thing she doesn’t live nearby. She’d have me asking out everything with a brainwave and a briefcase.

“No boys.” Carl yells out his usual greeting. “She better not be going on any goddamn dates until she’s thirty.”

Rose tries to cover the mouthpiece but I still hear her. “Carl. Please. It was cute when she was six. Not twenty-eight.”

Pink Palace

I was in my pink palace; a room Rose paid someone to decorate. A rainbow in three shades of pink took over one wall. Miss Piggy dressed as queen on a throne was on another. I was too old for Miss Piggy but Rose said she wouldn’t repaint because I already destroyed most of the walls with Scotch tape and thumbtacks. A shirtless Rob

Lowe sat to the left of Miss Piggy while the entire cast of *the Outsiders* is slid along the curve of the rainbow. I had stacks of aggressively perused issues of *Tiger Beat* and *Seventeen* I was quite proud of and used as a nightstand. I had been collecting them for years. Rose gave me the coveted subscription to *Seventeen* when I started junior high. I let the issues fall out of my backpack during gym class knowing my classmates would swarm around it the way a dog flocks to people food.

Rich Mondri's phone number was on a piece of loose-leaf paper propped on my Mickey Mouse phone. The phone I begged Rose and Carl for, said I wouldn't survive without, was the bane of my existence. Rich Mondri was cute. He played lacrosse. He was popular enough to win class Vice President. He told Judy Callahan I had a nice butt and gave her the casually scratched digits on a carelessly torn piece of paper from his Social Studies notebook.

"He wants you to call him," Judy said with all the enthusiasm of a normal thirteen year old. Judy and Kevin Medlock, a ninth grader, had been going out for seven months. They tongue kissed in front of the South-siders bus every day after school. She wanted me to have a boyfriend too. Carl said I wasn't allowed to date until college but Rose thought he was being dramatic.

I secretly liked that Rich Mondri thought I had a nice butt. It made me feel older and confident and dangerous like someone on *Knots Landing*. It also made me sick to my stomach to think of Rich Mondri thinking about my butt and maybe trying to touch it when we tongue kissed in front of the South-siders bus. I wondered how many times a week I could wear the wicked flattering Jordache jeans that snagged me his phone number. I wore them every day after school when I was in my pink palace supposedly

learning how to add fractions. Really I'm trying to look at my nice butt from every angle in the white wicker full-length mirror Rose bought me from Pier One. While Mickey Mouse and Rich Mond's phone number stared at me, I finished rereading *Tiger Beat*. I brushed my teeth. I played a few rounds of *Astrosmash* on *Intellivision* and beat my brother's high score. I really should have cleaned my room because it was Wednesday and Evelyn, our cleaning lady, came on Mondays. I should probably have gotten a head start on next week's vocabulary lesson. After I did all this I realized it was dinner time and inappropriate to call Rich Mond. If his dad was like Carl he'd get bent out of shape if the phone rings while we're sitting down to eat, sighing loudly and mumbling mean words before telling Boy or I to tell our rude friends not to call during dinner. Our rude friends had been reamed by Carl before and didn't call during dinner but Carl's friends did. I knew it could get me in trouble but I couldn't help feeling a little smug when I told the caller we were having dinner and Carl would have to call him back.

After dinner, I sat down with Rose to play a series of *Crazy Eights*. Boy and I watched *Who's the Boss* and *The Wonder Years* and by the time *Roseanne* started I realized it was too late to call Rich Mond.

The next day at school Rich told Judy I didn't call so I must not like him. He gave his number to Johanna Murphy to give to Jennifer Small. Thirteen year-olds who have all the time in the world, aren't nearly as patient as thirty year-olds. Judy said she was sorry. I was so relieved.

Yes No Maybe

Rumor had it Scott Boonton liked me. Did I know him? Did I like him back? Would I go out with him *if* he asked me? Yes, I knew him. Not sure if I liked him. Maybe I'd say yes *if* he asked me out. He was a year older than me and a year younger than Boy; they used to play hockey together in grade school. Carl gave him a ride to practice once. He wasn't the cutest boy in school but I knew a handful of B-level girls and one A-level girl who went out with him. Kristie Collins, the A-level girl said he was a good kisser. Missy Rezinsky, a B-level girl used to stick her hand in his back pocket while waiting in the hot food line.

He apparently wasn't very bright. Boy told me Scott was taking algebra as a sophomore even though it's a freshman level class. And everyone's heard the story of Scott Boonton and the baking soda. He accidentally used double the soda instead of powder when his group was tasked with making a cake in Home Ec. and the stupid cake exploded all over the oven. His group had to stay after school to clean it up.

Kara Sweeney was in his group. "God, how hard is it to read a recipe?"

My best friend was leaving school grounds every lunch period to have sex with her senior, varsity football-playing boyfriend. She was very encouraging.

"Scott's so sweet," Judy said. "You should totally go out with him. Then we can double date."

That was a terrifying thought—Judy and Paul romping on her canopy bed and Scott and I in the living room on that filthy couch Judy's mother made us help rescue

from the Salvation Army's parking lot. I got a shiver, not sure if it was the thought of lying down on that couch or lying down with Scott.

"Paul said he's really cool," Judy continued. "Paul said the coach might even let him off the bench if he passes algebra this year.

"Awesome," I said not wanting to talk about Scott or any boys in high school. I wanted to watch Duran Duran videos and talk about probability of John Taylor taking me to the prom. John Taylor was a boy I'd say yes to.

Must have been a slow day at Brighton High School because loads of people were interested in Scott maybe or maybe not asking me out. I heard whispered conversations, wondering if we were going out yet. No? Was I going to say yes? Even at fifteen, an age when girls would date their second cousin if it meant having a boyfriend, I found it unsettling Scott Boonton's and my first words to each other will be "Will you go out with me?" and "Yes."

"I don't know," I said. "I don't really know him."

The girls would laugh off my reservation; some would offer their own acquaintance with him as a placeholder. "He's in my algebra class. He's really funny." Or "He's Jennifer Small's square dance partner. She said he said you were really cute."

Kara Sweeney sat down next to me. We were about to have something in common. She had been dating a sophomore for three weeks.

"Scott Boonton is going to ask you out."

Duh! Old news Kara! I would have said if I weren't afraid of her. Instead I said, "Oh."

"He's going to ask you after lunch."

That was news. Up until now my social life didn't have an estimated time of arrival. Or an audience. I suddenly wished for a doctor's appointment or a fire drill or mono. In addition to more homework and longer lunch lines there was another big difference between high school and middle school. High school guys did the asking out themselves while the middle school students relied on friends and notebook paper.

Will you go out with A.J.?

Yes

No

Maybe

Tell me before Social Studies because my mom is picking me up early to go to a funeral.

Nathan

Thanks to Kara Sweeney, everyone knew Scott was coming for me after lunch. In person! His attention was predicted like a massive storm. "Madeline Wuzzy will be hit with a major question later today. We strongly advice she board up her windows and doors and take shelter in her basement." I speed walked to all my classes, often arriving with the wrong books and no homework assignment. By fourth period my stomach was cramping up. Fifth period Biology my mouth wouldn't stop watering and I got so lightheaded I knocked over a model of the human stomach en route to my desk. I had to find Boy and his friends. Certainly Scott couldn't be so bold as to ask a girl out in front of her brother?

By lunchtime I was too sick to eat the tuna fish sandwich and Doritos Rose packed for lunch. She wrote a note on the napkin like she always did—*Have a good day, Moo Moo! Mommy loves you!* Boy wasn't at his usual table so that meant he was at some downtown diner smoking Newport Lights and eating well done hamburgers. I couldn't stay in the cafeteria but wandering the grounds outside made me too much of a moving target and hiding out at Judy's was certainly out of the question. I wasn't ready to give

my answer. Besides, shouldn't I talk to Carl and Rose? What was it Carl said about dating? Absolutely not? Unfortunately I don't live in an after school special because no one really talks to their parents about dating. I thought about getting extra help with my math lesson from Mr. Studdard but even he was at lunch. Maybe I could help the drama geeks build a set or something. Out of options, I resort to locking myself in a bathroom stall to read the Jackie Collins novel Rose lent me until lunch was over. I showed up late to sixth period English with Jackie Collins instead of John Steinbeck but no one notices. I read three more chapters before the bell rings. Why can't I exist in a Jackie Collins novel? Some girls have all the luck.

The Chicken & the Egg

We skip work later that week to stake out the clinic from a diner across the street. Sevet stirs three packets of cream into her coffee while I pick the flaky skirt from my once-frozen bagel. I wonder how many pleading conversations have taken place in this booth. How many consoling cups of coffee have been downed. How many frozen bagels have gone unbuttered and hardened on the thin white and brown plates.

“Are you sure you don't want my other half?” I ask, nudging the plate toward her. She's ignoring the cheese Danish I ordered for her. She shakes her head, not taking her eyes from the general direction of the clinic.

The building itself is as unassuming as a post office except for the noticeable lack of traffic coming and going. The sign reads “North Street Clinic” except the “nic” in

“Clinic” is partially blocked by hanging ivy. Somebody mows their lawn and waters their plants and delivers their mail. Nothing wrong happened here. I half expect, half hope for a parade of young couples to seep through the front doors, happy and innocent like homecoming kings and queens. Sturdy, dumb boys clasping their calloused hands to the elbows of frail, blonde girls, or women in their thirties with manicures and subscriptions to *Cosmopolitan* and their gay male best friends, who hold the car door open and have fluffy pillows and Indian food waiting at home. I try to see Sevet and myself leaving the clinic, her trying to find a cigarette, me forgetting where we parked.

“Do you think they have a backdoor?” Sevet asks. “Or is today just a slow day?”

“There's probably an underground railroad to this place for when protesters are outside.”

“Oh God.” Sevet covers her eyes and breaths deeply into her palms. “I forgot about them. What if they're there?”

“We're card-carrying supporters of Planned Parenthood, National Abortion Rights Action League, National Organization for Women and Bea Arthur's fan club. They can't touch us.”

“I'm not a member of Bea Arthur's fan club.”

“You are. I signed us both up last year and she's Pro Choice so that counts.”

“I won't . . . I can't. Maddie, if they say anything to me. If they shove one of those cardboard fetuses in my face. Forget it, we're not going. ”

“Sevet,” I grab hold of her hands. Her nails are bitten down to the quick. “I will march you through the wall of poster board like King Kong carried Jessica Lange and if they say anything to you I will personally shove their megaphones so far up their asses

they won't digest a piece of corn without an echo."

She laughs and tells me I'm sick. She knows I would do it too.

"And when this is over I'm treating you to a manicure."

She goes back to stirring her coffee and I continue picking the skin off my bagel.

It isn't crowded, but diners have a way of always sounding busy. Dishes clanging against one another, forks dropping in soapy buckets of water, saltshakers being replaced on Formica. The rhythmic sounds are comforting, like one of those sleep inducing soundtracks from *The Sharper Image*. It makes me realize how tired Sevet must be, how if I'm having trouble sleeping she's a functioning insomniac. We continue sitting and stirring and picking apart food, resigned to the mechanics of two friends dining until Sevet finally breaks the silence again.

"Do you think it's okay I don't tell him? It was over between us anyway. Even before this."

"It's totally up to you." Sevet and the fake Daryl Hall were approaching their three-month anniversary—the longest relationship in Sevet's history. Although I wasn't a fan of Daryl Hall's, his presence kind of grew on me as something I'd have to get used to, like a new, bad haircut.

"Would you tell him?"

"And break the vow of silence we've established?" But it occurs to me Sevet might actually need to tell him. "If you're worried about the money part, I've got some saved."

She feigns insult, but not enough to cover the relief. "Then why am I always buying you dinner, Miss Moneybags?"

“In case I need it to bail your ass out of trouble.”

Sevet’s smile snaps back into a grim line as she looks out the window again.

“Do you think he’ll find out?”

“Only if he has his private eyes watching you.” I laugh. I even do the clap-clap like Hall & Oates did in the video. Sevet looks like she's just smelled something foul. I ignore my own bad joke. “No, he won’t find out unless you tell him. Besides, if he’s like most guys his age he’ll be thankful you’re doing this.”

“You’ll never tell anyone?” She asks. Her eyes are so deep brown and so young. So something else I can’t place. I can almost picture those eyes belonging to a child, begging for a box of Legos or Auntie Anne’s pretzel or a perm. I think of a child down the road, many years away, belonging to my much older and wiser friend and a man who takes them on summer vacations and baby-sits while Sevet and I get drunk on Mojitos in their freshly mowed backyard. She’ll be ready for this child and I’ll love him or her. I’ll hold Sevet's hand and feed her ice cubes and wipe the beads of sweat from her brow when the time is right. I think about telling her this but notice she’s still staring at me, waiting for an answer to her question.

“What happens at the clinic stays at the clinic,” I say. “Besides, I don’t have any friends besides you.”

Enter Lump

A few hours later I nurse a stomachache in a bedroom I have to share with distant family members and drunken dinner guests. It’s painted bright blue and yellow in hopes

of evoking a feeling of being in the tropics. “The Hemingway Suite,” as Carl calls it. Rose is quite proud of this room and that, coupled with the just visiting vibe the townhouse exudes, encourages me to keep it clean. My clothes are stacked neatly inside wicker drawers with brass pelican handles. The comforter, sprayed with bold Hawaiian flowers, is pulled tightly over two perfectly symmetrical pillows. Rose Wuzzy, ever the hostess, left a basket on the dresser, filled with travel-sized necessities and hotel contraband—*Bath and Body Works* cucumber melon lotion, Comanche Creek Casino shower cap. Atlantic Princess minty mouthwash. Half the contents of her Christmas stocking ended up in these baskets. When she finds me, I am dissecting a sewing kit courtesy of the Miami Hyatt and nursing a stomachache from a few handfuls of non-lump shaped cookie dough.

“Maybe there is something to that raw cookie dough rumor,” she says, sitting next to me. Now would be the time for a fate worse than mine tale but I think even Ugilena would concede on this one. I decide to remain quiet, focusing on a needle shaped like the letter ‘P,’ trying to figure out what it could possibly be used for. I am being dramatic, but it’s hard not to feel like you’re in a tampon commercial when sitting side-by-side in your Florida-themed bedroom with your mother.

She rubs my back like when I was eight and threw up all over Pooh Bear, or when I was twelve and had just gotten the world’s worst perm. Back then she also cackled with laughter at the sight of me with a pink terry cloth headband wrapped around my newly frizzed locks in an effort to pin them down. Pooh Bear was on the floor next to a pile of *Seventeen* magazines. That was the first and only time I ever hit him. It was that bad.

“Deer are vegetarian,” I tell her. “They only eat leafy greens and tree bark. Not

fingers.”

“I know. I looked it up on the Internet.”

I can't help steal a glance at Rose's breast. Could I see Lump if I looked close enough? “If it's nothing, why did you have to tell me?” I just knocked twenty years off my age with a selfish, stupid question like *why did you have to ruin my Christmas?* But a part of me, a big part, is serious. I could be downstairs eating pound cake and a tub of Cool Whip and watching *Law and Order* reruns with her and Carl instead of pouting in the brand new guest room.

“I figured you might wonder where your father and I were rushing off to at five a.m.”

“A. When have I ever woken up before the clock strikes double digits, and B. You neglected to work a clock into the décor of this room.”

“Hemingway didn't like clocks.”

“No but he liked rum and deformed kitties and I have yet to come across either of those. Believe me, I've been looking.”

She looks off in the direction of the guest bathroom, and I notice a shiver run through her. She is probably imagining a litter of deformed kitties rubbing up against the his and hers loofahs. “Think of all the women in the world. Multiply by two. That's a lot of boobs.”

Lump is knocking on the bedroom door. *Can I come in?* it asks.

“Rosie, most women like to be thought of as more than just a pair of knockers. We can even vote now.”

“I'm saying that with those odds, things are likely to happen, but when things

happen it's usually nothing. But if it's something there's so many advances in medical technology that even if it was something, it ends up being nothing anyway, so there."

By the time she finishes her speech, which I suspect she practiced on the way up here, I am laughing. "Stick to writing checks to show your support. Your motivational speaking needs some refining."

"Laughter is the best medicine," she says dabbing at the inner corners of her eye with her sleeve.

"That was before medical marijuana," I reply.

"I'm not sharing,"

"I'm not changing your diapers."

"Diapers," she repeats, her sleeves streaked with mascara. "Will you make me wear diapers?"

"Not unless you prefer crapping all over your sweat suits."

"Just make sure I look good," she says. "Make sure my clothes always match and I'm wearing my diamonds."

"At the very least."