

Spring 2014

The Comedienne

Liv Stratman

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.umt.edu/cutbank>



Part of the [Creative Writing Commons](#)

Let us know how access to this document benefits you.

Recommended Citation

Stratman, Liv (2014) "The Comedienne," *CutBank*: Vol. 1 : Iss. 80 , Article 33.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.umt.edu/cutbank/vol1/iss80/33>

This Prose is brought to you for free and open access by ScholarWorks at University of Montana. It has been accepted for inclusion in CutBank by an authorized editor of ScholarWorks at University of Montana. For more information, please contact scholarworks@mso.umt.edu.

THE COMEDIENNE

Pauline thought up her best material on the subway, and scribbled ideas into the four-inch Wexford notebook she kept in the back pocket of her jeans. Later, alone in her house, she'd get out the notes and pace the dining room, try to turn whatever fleeting amusement she thought up on the D Train into an actual joke. That spring, her best bits were about Lucas, her lover, and so, while she could practice them at home, make herself laugh wildly into the bathroom mirror, they weren't useful beyond the vinyl sided walls of her own isolation. She couldn't very well go on stage and admit to having an extramarital affair—not unless she wanted to be found out. At first, she tried to contort the jokes so that they were about someone else—her husband, her brother-in-law—but it never worked. Jokes about Lucas were only really funny in the context of Pauline's bad decision to have started sleeping with him in the first place. When she wasn't wandering her house laughing about it, it kept her up at night.

Pauline was thirty-four and had never lived anywhere except New York. In addition to her affair with Lucas, she had an overweight Persian cat named Mr. Face and a burgeoning career as a stand-up comic and a wobbly marriage to a man named Drew, who was a scientist. He had been away since January.

The trouble in Pauline's marriage was like this: When Drew had taken a two-year appointment at the University of Kentucky, Pauline refused to move. She'd never so much as *entertained* the thought of living in a small southern city, and Drew was *well aware* of Pauline's plans and values when they got married four years ago. Los Angeles, maybe, but Kentucky? No. But this job was the best thing Drew could do professionally. He was passionate about his work.

So, after a lot of deliberating and pleading and finally compromising—sort of—they now had that rare and precarious

species of marriage: long distance. They'd agreed it was a temporary arrangement, but was two years really temporary? Drew's position was the kind that would lead to other, better paid but similarly located positions later on; that was why it was so lucrative. They were always talking about it that way: *The Position*. Pauline thought it an apt word, given the way Drew's work seemed, lately, to turn him in the wrong direction. His ideas about life—where to live, and why to live there—were shifting for circumstances Pauline was loathe to acknowledge; she felt a slow tide pulling her life away.

She wanted Drew. She wanted to be a professional comic. Now it looked as though she couldn't have both, so she buoyed herself on bad decisions: staying up all night, sleeping with Lucas, eating too many pancakes.

The Position was grant-funded research on bed bugs; Drew's recent studies suggested that kidney bean leaves, which were covered with microscopic hook hairs, attracted—through scent or something—the pests, and then trapped and killed them in the leaves' sharp fur. This was not, in fact, a new finding, but rather, confirmation of the effectiveness of a folk remedy that had been common in Eastern Europe until the introduction of strong pesticides in the 1950s. Pauline's comedy, which was almost always autobiographical in nature, included a joke about this, about the fact that her husband was paid to do field work running experiments that old Estonian women had already proven successful a century ago. "This is what counts as a scientific breakthrough these days!" she'd tell her audience, who were already slapping their thighs at her impression of an old Estonian woman. It was a very good bit.

On Essex Street, orange light came through the wide restaurant windows, made the crowded dining room cozy. Lucas ordered the fried-chicken sandwich. Again.

"How can you keep eating that?" Pauline asked.

"They don't start serving lunch until 11:30," he said. It was 10:45. "But they like me, so they make an exception." He spoke with his mouth full. It was a bad habit, a disgusting thing that Pauline's parents hadn't tolerated. During Pauline's childhood, rude mealtime behavior resulted in being sent to sit on the basement steps until everyone else—Pauline's parents, grandparents, sister, and often, sad, unmarried Uncle Gino—finished their own meals. Afterwards, Pauline was ushered to the kitchen to help with the mountainous sink of dishes. She was permitted to finish her own plate—which her mother had Saran-wrapped and refrigerated—once clean up was complete. Thinking of this, Pauline felt a pang of pride for her working class roots; she was the child of a Brooklyn plumber, sitting now with her back straight against the plush red booth, napkin in lap, forearms resting at the table's edge so her elbows were deliberately out of sight. And here was Lucas, who'd grown up in a Connecticut mansion, elbows all over the table, grease-smearred napkin wadded up on his dirty plate, his full mouth ajar. Pauline couldn't bring herself to tell Lucas how bad his manners were. Not to his face—she laughed about it all the time at home.

"Oh, they don't like you, they just don't know how to tell you no," Pauline said. "And, anyway, *why?*" she pressed. "Why eat the same thing every time we come here, twice week?" Lucas shrugged. "What about you?" he said. "It's not as though you're some adventurous orderer."

"Lucas," Pauline said. She could feel herself becoming unreasonably unnerved, a ripple of hot agitation making its way up her esophagus like acid. This had something to do with how little she respected Lucas, and how upsetting it was to be so attracted to him anyway. "*These are the best pancakes in New York.* And anyway, I order a variety. Sometimes I get blueberry, or banana wal-

nut. These ones have chocolate chips. Jesus Fucking Christ." He laughed, showed another revolting mouthful of his lunch.

This happened sometimes. Pauline was fuming, and Lucas thought she was just being funny.

"Well, this is the best fried-chicken sandwich in New York," he said.

"No," Pauline practically shouted. "That's impossible."

Pauline lived in a detached, three-bedroom house on 21st Avenue in Bensonhurst—where she'd grown up—which she'd inherited when her grandmother died. The house was paid off, but she couldn't afford the taxes; Drew paid all their bills.

Pauline still had a day job, though. She was a dispatcher at her brother-in-law's car service company on 86th Street three or four afternoons a week. It was lousy money, but her sister's husband, Pete, was another excellent source of material. He had over-gelled hair and the thickest Brooklyn accent of anyone Pauline knew. Of course, she had the same accent, but Pete's was much more pronounced—it had not been tamped down by a college education and the self-consciousness that came with fraternizing amongst people who spoke differently. Besides, that slight differentiation was the point of her jokes about him and many other people in her life. When he'd hired her, she'd said, "You know, I went to Fordham. I have a Bachelor's in Philosophy," because it seemed like she should say something about how overqualified she was to work at a cabstand. In general she was overqualified to be living back in Bensonhurst, where the median household income was what two people could earn if one worked full-time as a seamstress and the other at the counter of the pork store, as her grandparents had done, or on the salary of one plumber, especially if that man was in a union like Pauline's father had been.

But still. Pauline wished her sister had reminded Pete about

her education, though she knew Marie wasn't all that interested in understanding the fluctuating trajectory of her adulthood. Marie thought Pauline was nuts for taking student loans and then not even bothering to use her degree. Before Pauline moved back to Brooklyn and starting pursuing comedy full-time, Marie had spent a few years worth of holiday gatherings squinting at Pauline as though she were only a loose acquaintance, saying things like, "What's a *sketch comedy troupe*?"

"Yeah, well, you don't need to be a philosopher to do this job," Pete had said, leaning over the sticky desk behind the Plexiglas where they were currently enclosed. The storefront was about the size of a walk-in closet. The white tile was clean, but the place smelled of bleach, stale cigars, and pizza. Pauline was sure she looked tired and old against the fluorescent lights and neon yellow walls.

"The phone rings, pick it up. You press *this* button—" and here Pete jabbed a gray button with his hairy finger. "They say where they're going, when, and you get the *name, address*, write it all down *here*—" and he held up a clipboard with a pencil-marked grid, continued: "And use the radio to tell somebody to take it." He paused, chewed the inside of his cheek. "And look, no disrespect, but try not to be too much of a wiseass."

"What do you mean?" Pauline asked, knowing full well what Pete was getting at.

"You just don't need to make anybody laugh. It's better if you're serious. You know, professional." Then he took the radio's handheld microphone from its helve and began to shout at one of his drivers. "Julio!" he screamed. "Goddamnit, have you picked up Mrs. Ansenelli on Bay Parkway yet?"

It had turned out to be surprisingly difficult job. Pauline had to keep track of the fifteen drivers who were on duty at any given time, and line them up to take the nearest fare once they'd

dropped the previous passenger off. Julio was insubordinate and took fares off the street even though it was against the rules. Then Pauline had to deal with the pissed off customers who called to abuse her when he never arrived. If someone wandered into the cabstand looking for a ride, she usually had to lock up and go looking for Mr. Courtly, the seventy-five year old Jamaican man who was on stand-by at the Dunkin Donuts around the corner, where he read the paper all day and flirted with the trapped young girls behind the counter who usually did not pay him any attention. Mr. Courtly claimed that he could neither hear his pager go off, nor could he feel its vibration in his pocket. Half the time he left it in the cab.

Pauline savored the chunk of time when she didn't have to punch in at My Way Ride Service. Her talent agent was getting her good stuff in addition to the bi-weekly gigs at the Laugh Vault, including the highlight of her career so far: three minutes on The Late Show last winter. Sometimes she could get a ride with other comics to play a club in Jersey or Philadelphia. She ultimately wanted television work. Her comedy might start moving forward with greater velocity soon. Besides the TV appearance, last summer she had been listed in a *Time-Out New York* article called "Ten Comediennes To Watch." She'd been interviewed on WNYC, played Ginger's in Chelsea (a very difficult club to book, even on a Wednesday night at eight o'clock), and, every now and then, someone approached her on the subway to say they'd seen her—on Letterman or at some club—and that she was a really funny lady.

Pauline had started sleeping with Lucas shortly after her husband took the job in Kentucky. Like Pauline, Lucas was a comic. Their affair nudged its way into her life from the Laugh Vault—a basement comedy club in Manhattan where Pauline was a regular headliner and Lucas occasionally did ten or fifteen minute

openings. Lucas wasn't very funny, but Pauline kind of liked that about him. He was also too young—twenty-five—and not as smart as most of the men she'd been with; he'd gone to Dartmouth and thought that having an Ivy League degree in Film & Media Studies bore witness to his sure intelligence, but it didn't. His education only served as more evidence to what was already obvious: Lucas's family had a lot of money.

Still, there were things about him. For one important thing, he was a big fan of her work. Whenever Pauline had a gig at the Laugh Vault, Lucas hung around the dim light at the club's rear bar. This was the case whether or not Lucas had stage time of his own. (He usually didn't.) But he laughed at Pauline's set, hard, and with what looked like total sincerity, even when her material was old and he'd already heard all the jokes. Sometimes his eyes were still watering when Pauline left the stage and came back to her own greasy leather barstool.

And the affair certainly had its amenities: Lucas's wide-windowed Clinton Street apartment, for example—one of those luxury renovations in a grungier part of town, an obvious attempt at a kind of prefabbed coolness that only a wealthy suburbanite would be uncool enough to want. Privately, Pauline thought the place was cheesy, with its reflective wood laminate flooring, track lighting, the stainless steel kitchen that reminded her of an operating room. She thought she could kick a hole through the drywall without hurting herself. But it did have a spacious, superficial extravagance she couldn't help but enjoy. Also, Lucas didn't bother keeping a day job; so long as he lived in a neighborhood like the Lower East Side, his trust fund obfuscated the need for mature ambition, for a plan that might eventually lead to real income. He was always available when Pauline called. She loved waking in the white sheets of Lucas's sun-streaked bedroom. She loved throwing on yesterday's clothes and heading downstairs to yawn over a huge breakfast. She

loved watching Lucas pick up the check.

She did not, however, love Lucas. Pauline floated inside the affair as if through a dream—things happened, she enjoyed herself, but when she was alone and unable to keep her thoughts from delving into practicality, Pauline knew her actions weren't without consequence: She was playing at a life that didn't belong to her, acting out a fantasy like a child. Worse, she saw that Lucas really did have feelings for her—he wanted to eventually become a legitimate boyfriend in the wake of the divorce he hoped she'd seek—and she ached to think of her husband, who had no idea how she currently was spending her time. Pauline understood how terribly she was behaving, and her heart raced as she wondered, like the reader of a *Choose Your Own Adventure* Novel, how she'd make it end.

Pauline had met Lucas last November at the Paley Center, where they'd both come to see the cast of *The Ben Stiller Show* reunite as part of the New York Comedy Festival. Drew wouldn't sneak off to interview in Kentucky under the pretense of attending a conference for another two weeks, but, unbeknownst to Pauline at that time, he was in the process of applying for jobs all over the country. He was still working his post-doc job in the biology lab at NYU; out of pity they'd hired him on for an extra semester. He worked all the time, and could rarely get away in time to accompany Pauline to watch or perform comedy. But they always met afterwards, had dinner, and went home together.

After the talk, Lucas walked up and introduced himself. Pauline couldn't decide if he was really so handsome, or if he only appeared that way because his clothing was expensive.

"I've seen you at the Vault a couple times," he said. "You're really funny."

"Oh!" she said. "Thank you. That's so nice."

But the conversation flew over the horizon when Lucas said

"I'm opening there next Wednesday. My first real gig." His smile was either sheepish or an excellent imitation of sheepishness. Pauline nodded. "A comic in a Burberry jacket," she said. "That is... unprecedented."

Lucas laughed. Pauline was having a hard time resisting the urge to do crowd work. Of course, off-stage, crowd work was just flirting.

"Well, good luck to you," she said. "If I were in the audience, I'm sure I'd want to laugh at you, but people tend to favor an unfortunate looking comic. You're too attractive, and even if you were ugly enough, you can't go around telling jokes in designer clothes." She wanted to go on about designer clothes, what made them unpalatable to club audiences, who were a generally dorky bunch. He could do well with the Midwestern college girls who came to New York for internships at places like MTV and Condé Nast. They only liked the surface of the jokes, anyway. There was a bit in here, Pauline felt close to cracking into the crunchy joke nut that hid beneath every conversation's lumpy shell.

Lucas raised his eyebrows. "You say that as though you're unattractive."

"Oh, I'm smoking hot for a comic," Pauline smiled, sure to show her crooked bottom teeth, which were small and unnoticeable.

If Drew were there, he'd have leaned over and whispered, *You're on*, which meant she should turn it *off*—stop performing in casual conversation. She had a tendency to get away from herself. Things were fine when she wasn't standing; Pauline had no ability to be a comic while sitting down, but milling about—at parties, on long lines, in auditoriums like this one—she got nervous and revved into action.

She didn't yet know how old Lucas was; he could be twenty-two or thirty. Most of the aspiring comics she met after shows

and at events like this were quite young. College kids whose view did not yet hold the gray carpet of waiting rooms for sitcom and soda commercial auditions, the countless nights of being bumped from a gig when someone funnier or better-known rolled into a club looking to work out new material, the lunches with suited network bozos who'd finally just come out with it and admit they were looking, really, for an *actor*, someone who could *play* funny but wasn't limited to anecdotal pantomime. Pauline would never have pursued comedy if she hadn't had Drew to support her, financially and otherwise. And now she was standing in this auditorium with a comic who looked like a model. And Drew—her husky, good-natured scientist—had only just gotten off work and was no-doubt waiting outside the 8th Avenue Shake Shack in the rain, in the cheap windbreaker he'd bought at Marshall's. Pauline was already a few minutes late; she needed to get to him. But for reasons she could not quite understand, she first needed to touch the quilted fabric of Lucas's jacket collar. He showed no surprise when she reached up and gently massaged his coat between her thumb and finger. It was even softer than she'd imagined. "I've gotta run," she said, letting go slowly. "My husband's waiting."

"You're married," Lucas said, not well concealing his disappointment. "You don't wear a wedding ring."

"No," she said, looking down at her pale, chapped hands. "I don't."

Drew's work was going to be featured in *Pest Control Technology* magazine.

"That's not an actual publication," Pauline said when he called to tell her about it. But it was. It was a *trade* magazine, not something you found at the supermarket next to *People* and *Redbook*. This meant that businesses—not universities or research foundations—might read about him; maybe he could get into the

private sector.

"If I could get a job as a manufacturing consultant," he said, "I could make a lot of money working with design engineers to invent some synthetic mattress cover that mimics what the kidney bean leaf does—"

Pauline interrupted: "Wouldn't that be uncomfortable?"

"Trichomes are microscopic," Drew said. His words were clipped in a way that only Pauline could detect and perceive as annoyance. He'd said all this before, to Pauline—many times—about the trichomes, about the kidney bean leaf's razor-like hairs being bed bug-sized, soft seeming to a human's comparatively gigantic touch. This was not extra information on the topic of Drew's work: It was the information itself. Pauline knew this, she did, but her mind had buried the practicalities of her husband's job beneath its more amusing implications. Without being reminded, she could only recall the old Estonian woman who was a product of her own imagination.

"I'm sorry," Pauline said, and she was. "I don't even know why I asked that."

"The point," Drew said, "Is that if I could get a job like that, I could come back to New York. No more following measly grants to places like Lexington."

"How is it there right now?" Pauline asked. "Is it warm?"

"It's about seventy. Sunny," Drew said. "How's Brooklyn?"

"Rainy and cold, and, as usual, reeking of Chinese food and wet garbage," Pauline said.

"I really miss you," Drew said.

"I miss you, too."

"I don't think we should split up."

This was the way about every third phone call went. Drew had good news about his career, Pauline congratulated him, or meant to offer congratulations before they slipped down into the

thick familiarity of their marriage, into the soft, sweet muck of their having known and loved each other for the better part of a decade. Pauline's affair came into sharp focus, revealing its shameful yellow twinge. She thought of leaving New York on the next flight out to Kentucky. She'd make the kind of sacrifices wives made for their hard-working, understanding men, drive a Toyota Highlander to Target, get her hair cut at the only Aveda salon in town. She would buy a Vera Bradley handbag—the bizarre paisley duffel that was common, alongside pink manicures and pastel embroidered denim, on the tourist ladies who sometimes came to the comedy club—and a large dog. Maybe a St. Bernard. She would, eventually, begin to convincingly pronounce words like *y'all*.

The problem, then, was the other two-thirds of their conversations, which were pocked by the holes of their very different lives. Drew was still a scientist and Pauline was still rooted to show business, to New York, and her cheating with Lucas was still the angry punishment she was inflicting upon their future.

But now all she said to Drew was, "So let's not split up, then."

"We need to plan everything around each other," Drew said. "Not just say 'someday we'll have the things we want and then we'll be a normal couple.' Because it's always going to be about someday."

But the thing about the house was that she couldn't give it up. It was something that couldn't move away from her, couldn't expect anything from her, and—now that her mother was in Florida and her dad and Nonna and Grandad were all dead, and Marie and Pete had that gaudy place in Dyker Heights—the house was what was left of who Pauline had been before she'd had to make any decisions about what kind of woman she was supposed to become. In the house, she felt like a kid, safe from whatever she might want her own funniness to mean in the scheme of her adult-

hood. And, anyway, when Pauline thought of driving a Highlander around a southern state's suburbs, she wasn't really picturing herself. She was imagining a woman who could do things she couldn't do. She was imagining, for example, a woman with a driver's license.

Lucas was up that evening, doing his best bit. It was about romantic hot-air balloon rides. Under the pulsating yellow lights on the small triangular stage, he explained with just the right amount of indignation that hot-air balloons were the antithesis of a romantic vehicle—they were technologically antiquated flying machines, and therefore terrifying. He did a decent sound effect of the propane burner that, coupled with the wind, apparently made in-flight conversation impossible on a hot-air balloon.

From the bar, Pauline turned to watch. She'd seen this set a couple dozen times already. The audience always laughed. Not hard, people weren't bending their heads down to their tables or wiping tears away, but it was solid. It made Pauline smile. But she also thought: *So?* It was such an obvious abstraction: *Of course* hot-air balloons were only an ideal of romance. *Romance itself was only an ideal.* This was the fundamental difference between the kind of hostile, "smarty-pants-in-a-dumb-world" comedy Lucas and so many younger men favored—the kind of comedy that was most popular on the college circuit and with the YouTube clip watchers—and the comedy Pauline made. Lucas's sets were self-referential but insincere and impersonal. True, he had been in a hot-air balloon, but only with his parents while on vacation in Saint-Tropez.

Pauline knew that her burgeoning success was due, in part, to an appearance of effortlessness, to the comfortable space her body took up on stage and the conversational quality of her delivery. It wasn't easy. This was something that had taken years to get

a handle on; Pauline had done her first open-mic when she was a nineteen year old college sophomore; no one had laughed. She had long forgotten the content of those early attempts, but the content was only half relevant in any case. She hadn't been able to sound unaffected on stage for years. She hadn't known how to turn mere funniness into comedy; the two were so different.

Of course, content mattered somewhat. Pauline didn't set herself up as someone who saw what was wrong with the world the way Lucas did; she gave her audience credit enough to recognize that the world was a silly place without her insistence. So she joked about her shit job, about her heavily accented, ravioli eating family, about her selfishness in refusing to move away with her husband. "I just don't think I can get the kind of rejection I'm looking for anywhere else," she explained in one bit. She had a willingness to inhabit the whole joke, and not merely be a jester: Pauline's jokes about her husband told the story of failing marriage. She didn't have to come out and say this. If she had, it would have ceased to be funny. The humor was not in what was obvious or over-arching: Bed bugs weren't really funny. They'd ruin your furniture and bite your face. Pauline's jokes about Pete and her sister—their hair, their accents, their clothes—were really about her loneliness in being the one who'd changed. Her material didn't outright address how close she'd been to Marie, or that the sound of the elevated train rumbling a few blocks from her grandparents house made her think, every time she heard it, of her dish-gloved mother, widowed and chain smoking in front of the television in Ft. Lauderdale. Pauline missed her fiercely. And she missed her father, her grandparents, hated the sound of her lone feet hitting the carpeted steps in their house. Her joke about that horrible sea-foam shag carpet gave her a chance, for a few minutes on the stage, to feel good about being in that house all alone. To laugh about Drew not being in the kitchen, telling the Mr. Face to get off the table. These jokes

provided the kind of release that only came with hard work.

"A hot-air balloon," Lucas was saying, his complexion not even a little shiny from the stage's incubator heat, the armpits of his blue Armani polo shirt uncannily dry, "looks so tranquil in the poster they hang on the ceiling above my dentist's chair." The audience laughed. That detail about the dentist's chair had been Pauline's; she'd given it to him, as a gift. "But it's not so serene once you're up there and you realize: 'This is a life threatening situation'." Lucas's inflection was such an obvious imitation of Jerry Seinfeld that sometimes Pauline couldn't stand it.

Not that she didn't appreciate Seinfeld's tame observational cynicism, or even Lucas's application of it. But a good comic would start out imitating, eventually developing those forgeries into something less wooden than what Lucas was enacting just then. Lucas wasn't a comic; he was a handsome man—far too attractive and young to be parroting Seinfeld, for god sakes—who happened to be funny and who liked attention. And lucky Lucas: Crowds loved men. When a male comic came onto the stage, the energy in the room was just what it should be. Everyone thought, *Let's see what this guy is about*. About one in every ten performers was a woman, and Pauline was the only woman recognized as a regular, as one of the club's draw-ins. When women took the stage, the club's energy shifted to skepticism. The sense was—even among the half of the audience who happened to be women themselves—*This isn't going to be as good. This is lady comedy*.

To a certain extent, Pauline understood. So many of the women she worked alongside performed unadventurous diet-and-shopping sets that were unconsciously and sickeningly sexist. Pauline knew a comic named Lindsay Gelbert whose sets focused entirely on her desire to get married—she even had a little prop veil. She spoke in a baby voice. But what bothered Pauline was how Lindsay couldn't just be a shitty comic, she had to be the definition

of female comedy itself—why? Her shtick wasn't worse than half of Lucas's lame jokes about stupid fucking hot-air balloons.

When Lucas's set was done, he hurried over to her. Pauline smiled, took a long swallow of beer.

"How was that?" he asked.

"That was great."

"Yeah," he said. "I was really on tonight, you know? I feel like they laugh a little harder every time."

"That's how it works," Pauline said. She gestured to the bartender for another drink.

Pauline had an audition for a cough syrup commercial. It was a principal spot on a national run, which meant thousands and thousands of dollars in residuals. It could air for a year or more. On primetime, probably. She was reading for the part of a twenty-something woman sick with a cold, tossing and turning in a tank top and pair of pajama shorts, described in the script as CUTE, YOUNG—NOT TOO SEXY, until, unable to stand the discomfort and exhaustion any longer, she gets out of bed and goes sneezing and hacking into a dim-lit apartment kitchen. There, her chic but bespeckled roommate (wearing silk button down PROFESSIONAL LOOKING pajamas) sits at the table in front of a laptop, presumably working late into the night, as young professionals in the city are wont to do, and advises the sickly role Pauline was after that the leading brand cold medicine would leave her groggy in the morning. However, the patented formula in Flunot™ would ease her symptoms, induce sleep, and have her feeling energized for her big interview tomorrow morning. Pauline was going to say, "So Flunot™ takes care of everything?" to which her mature, business savvy roommate would reply, "Except acing your interview. That's all you," and then give a reassuring smile.

It wasn't comedy. Not purposefully, at least. It was an

insulting attempt to market a hypnotic acetaminophen cocktail to young women who were sick all the time because they worked and drank and wanted too much in filthy cities. Pauline looked young, still got ID'ed at the bar more than half the time, and would lie at her audition, claim to be twenty-six.

The commercial was stupid and embarrassing, but if she got it she could quit the cabstand and get a learner's permit—again—and try—again—for a driver's license, buy a car. She wanted the well-paying state college gigs, and the exposure that came with going on the road. She ultimately wanted to write a television show about a Brooklyn comic married to a scientist. But, unless she got something like this lame commercial, the only way she could currently afford to do that was to sell her grandparents' house and move to Lexington. She'd Googled "Comedy clubs in Kentucky." There were three. She'd like to play them, sure. But afterwards she'd like to head home, stopping in a couple other three-venue states along the way.

The morning of the audition, Pauline was eating cornflakes over the kitchen sink when her stomach lurched with a sudden strong nausea and her mind made the startling move away from her ambitions: She realized with slick terror that she did not know how long it had been since she'd had her last period. At the large wall calendar above the kitchen table where her cat was currently sleeping, she counted backwards from May into April. Upstairs, in her bedroom, she snapped the plastic birth control case open and tried to make sense of the amount of pills therein. There were nine. What did that mean? In what she had begun to think of as her real life, Drew had reminded her each morning to take her pill. If he left for work before she woke, he brought the case to the night stand with a glass of water and a large note, something along the lines of: PAULINE TAKE THESE PLEASE XOXO.

Pauline had been to Rite Aid and back when Lucas called, and had a neat row of three positive pregnancy tests. In the doorway of her pink and black checkered bathroom, she was sure she was not herself. She couldn't be the producer of those six blue lines, displayed in perfect lucidity along the sink's ledge. She wasn't the woman, swallowing hard until the tight sob creeping up her throat receded back into her stomach, who was hitting the answer button on her iPhone, saying, "Yeah, hey."

But she was, and from the lilt in his voice, Lucas's life had also shifted out of frame sometime in the thirty-six hours since they'd last spoken.

Lucas said, "Are you home? I'm headed down there now."

"What?" Pauline asked. "Down where?"

"To Brooklyn. Listen, what's your address?"

She was waiting on the stoop when Lucas pulled up in the silver Lexus he sometimes borrowed from a college friend. Lucas had never been to Pauline's house. If he came to Brooklyn at all, it was to bars and venues in the hip, gentrifying northern neighborhoods.

"I never realized how far out you live," Lucas said, surveying the street's paved lawns and short brick townhouses, the aluminum awnings and Italian flags and ceramic St. Anthony shrines. He looked now at the house's vinyl facade and Pauline could not read his reaction. Maybe her assumption of his supercilious politesse kept her from gauging his true opinion. He knew enough about Bensonhurst from her comedy, sure, but she felt protective of it now. "Your house is bigger than I'd imagined." Pauline just stared at him.

When he realized that he wasn't going to be invited in, Lucas asked if Pauline wanted to go for coffee. There was a place, she said, a few minutes away. In Bay Ridge.

Inside the Lexus, Lucas said, "So how're you?"

"I have that commercial audition at 3:30," Pauline said.

"Why are you here?"

"Right. I have some news." There was a pressured pause.

"I need to talk to you, actually." They drove under the elevated tracks, and the passing train made it impossible to say anything for a while. Lucas was clearly rattled by the awesome noise and energy the raised subway made.

"Here," Pauline said. "Just park here—it's only a block."

The café was not really a café. Rather, Pauline had brought Lucas to the Societa San Calogero: a meeting place for Italians—mostly old men—to play Scopa and watch soccer games that came through the massive satellite dish affixed to the fire escape. She loved it here. Maybe she liked the Society Hall, as it was known in the neighborhood, better than any place in Manhattan, or anywhere else in the world. She'd never written a joke about it, though she'd thought of a few.

The interior was a hodgepodge of card tables in the center and restaurant booths lining the walls, which were decorated with cheap paintings of the saints and popes and some faded posters of the 1982 World Cup. The room smelled of strong coffee, aftershave, and cigars. It smelled like Pauline's grandpa. Pauline had brought Lucas here out of some defensive instinct. It seemed important to communicate to him that she had an identity a wealthy person couldn't buy, to demonstrate the ways in which her life was interesting *because* she was not rich. Pauline had the sense that Lucas didn't see how she really was this person, not just someone who joked like it was pretend. So she spoke to John at the counter in the sifted Italian she used with old people, and was sure Lucas noticed that she wasn't charged for their espresso.

"So," Lucas said the minute they sat down outside where there were two tables with wicker cafe chairs and a view of the Ver-

razano. "Remember the part I got in that web series a while ago?"

Pauline nodded. "It never happened," she said, as if reminding Lucas of this fact.

"Yeah, well, Ryan Keene, the writer/producer guy?"

"Yes, I know him," Pauline tried not to sound impatient. *But get on with it*, she was thinking. And so he did. Ryan Keene had spent the last couple months shopping the proposed web series, called *Broseph and Joey*, to cable networks. And it had only taken a few meetings before it was picked up for a pilot. And Lucas, who played Joey, was going to L.A. to start shooting in three weeks.

"Just like that," Pauline said. Her face felt heavy from the strain of trying to hold up a mild expression.

"Just like that," Lucas said, breathless, finally sweating for once in his life.

Pauline realized now that Lucas had always had a better shot at getting what Pauline so badly wanted, despite how much funnier they both knew she was, and how much longer she'd been working—his looks, his charm, his being a man—and becoming famous or something close to famous. She managed to congratulate him, but her thoughts were petty. Few pilots ever made it onto the air.

"The other thing," Lucas said, his voice going apologetic, "is that I've been thinking. About you being married."

"Oh have you." Pauline didn't intone a question.

"You're not getting a divorce?" Now Lucas was making a statement that sounded like a question. Pauline looked down the street, toward the bridge. In high school, her history teacher had told the class that Robert Moses once described the Verrazano-Narrows as "a triumph of simplicity and restraint over exuberance." She'd forgotten that until just this moment.

Lucas was still talking: "...and with me going to California, and getting the TV show—"

"You got a *pilot*," Pauline said, returning her attention to him. She didn't care that she sounded wounded and jealous; Lucas was about to make it very awkward for her to ask him for money and a ride to Planned Parenthood.

"Right, a pilot," Lucas conceded. "Still. I like you, but we aren't dating, right? You're married, so that says to me that we aren't dating, and if the show *is* ordered—"

Pauline held up her hand. "You can stop," she said. "I get it. And it's obviously okay. I'm willing to bet you'll end up staying out in L.A., anyway."

"And you aren't leaving your husband," Lucas said. "Admit it. Say it."

"Why?" Pauline was shaky from caffeine and her own pregnant nerves. "Things are more complicated for me than they are for you."

"That's your own fault," Lucas said.

"Not necessarily."

"Okay, fine, Pauline. But I don't know why you won't just say it. You aren't going to leave your husband. You don't want to be with me. You could at least admit that."

It was all true, but she couldn't. She could only say, "I have to get ready for my audition." Lucas looked exasperated to the point of tears. Pauline could not bear to think what pathetic thing he might say if she divulged what she'd been doing when he called. So they went off in a silence that was too thick to cut through, even to say a proper goodbye when the Lexus pulled back onto 21st Avenue.

Pauline played the Laugh Vault two days later. Lucas wasn't there. She hadn't expected him, of course. After saying hello and thank-you, she asked the audience, "Who here is from New York? Besides the first two rows, she couldn't see the crowd through the

lights, but it sounded as though more than half clapped and hooted. "No," she said. "Who's *from* New York? I don't give a shit if you moved here for college." The club was on Thompson Street, surrounded by NYU's ever expanding empire. There were titters, but no more applause. Pauline knew she was being uncharacteristically aggressive toward the crowd. Like a man. She softened, shrugged. "Because, see, I'm from Brooklyn, and I'm starting to think I'm going to die there, too."

This was new material, but Pauline was finding that, like old, hard memorized bits, she didn't need to concentrate much. This could mean it just wasn't very good. The set focused on life in New York, on how everyone wanted to be here, and everyone here hated it but couldn't leave, couldn't imagine any place better.

Pauline said, "New York makes you nuts. Thomas Wolfe said—" here she interrupted herself to add, "And I'm up here quoting Tom Wolfe because I'm definitely not an asshole." She paused for the laughter. "He said, basically, that a person becomes a New Yorker within five minutes. And that's gotta be true, because it takes about five minutes of being in the city before you go crazy. And New York is just the world's biggest insane asylum." She went into an anecdote about an argument she'd had with Pete on the way to Atlantic Terminal once, and as she told it, she found herself squinting past the bar, toward the door. She had a sense that, magically, Drew might appear now that Lucas was gone. That he'd know she needed him to see this and tell her it was funny.

But Drew was in Kentucky. The thought of his distance was a hard lump in her throat. That soreness was enclosed in what she was going to do—ask her sister for money for an abortion? Spend Drew's money, and then lie and say it had been for something else? She didn't think she could do either. Nor could she even wrap her mind around the inevitable infant that would result from inaction. Thinking all this, Pauline was sure she'd lose her voice in the

middle of her time. She worried also that her jangling hormones could send her into a tearful fit, right there under the lights.

But Pauline didn't lose her voice. Or cry. She finished her bit without forgetting the jokes, and then, after attaching the microphone back to its stand with a steady grip, she descended back into the crowd.