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Things You've Inherited From Your Mother

by

Hollie Adams

A Creative Writing Project

Submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies through the Department of English
Language, Literature and Creative Writing
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Master of Arts at the
University of Windsor

Windsor, Ontario, Canada

2010

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Ottawa ON K1A 0N4
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Your file *Votre référence*
ISBN: 978-0-494-62733-4
Our file *Notre référence*
ISBN: 978-0-494-62733-4

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Abstract

Things You've Inherited From Your Mother is a second-person novel narrated by its main protagonist, Carrie, who is simultaneously narrating her experiences to herself. In light of losing her mother to ovarian cancer and refusing to confront her grief, Carrie has fragmented herself into actor and commentator, protagonist and narrator. The resultant internal monologue features a constant reference to a "you," which is not meant to evoke the reader, as is common in second-person texts; instead, second-person perspective is used by the narrator-Carrie to comment on and analyze the experiences of protagonist-Carrie. Consequently, Carrie sees her life as unfolding like a Choose-Your-Own-Adventure book (in which second-perspective is the standard), affording her the freedom from taking responsibility for her actions (as in such a book there is minimal choice for how to act) and a subjective reality that the narrating self has created (as the illusion of minimal choice is a construct of the narrator).

Acknowledgements

I would like to acknowledge the following individuals for their contribution to this endeavour:

My advisor, Dr. Nicole Markotić, for her unwavering patience, encouragement, support, and for her brilliance and insight as an editor, even on the other side of the world. I cannot thank you enough.

Dr. Dale Jacobs for his continuous support, encouragement, and friendship during my time here at the University of Windsor. Thank you for always having an open door.

Dr. Catherine Hundleby for her enthusiasm and insight. Thank you for being a part of this project.

Jen Ferguson for her extremely close reading and valuable input.

My extremely supportive family—of which, thankfully, Herby the tumour is no longer a member. Thanks and love.

I would also like to thank all of the graduate students and my cubicle mates for their friendship and support, for keeping me sane, and for always being willing to grab a drink, especially Janine Morris, Danielle Romenello, Melanie Santarossa, James Farrington, Matt Hunt, Mario D'Agostino, and Brian Jansen. Cheers.

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Tuesday your mother died. Ovarian cancer. For years there was a tumour growing somewhere inside her abdomen she affectionately named “Herby.” “Herby is acting up again,” she would say, fingering her left side with her middle finger, simultaneously flipping Herby off and scratching him between the ears. She claimed to have several reasons for not having him removed, but why she ultimately refused a Herby-ectomy is an arcane secret your mother took to the grave. “If Herby really was cancerous, don’t you think he’d have finished me off by now?”

“Maybe he’s waiting for the right moment. If I were a tumour I’d have the most wicked sense of humour. I’d be waiting for the most comical time to off you, like right after you’ve made your last mortgage payment.”

“You are sick, Carrie.”

“*Me?* You’re the one who named your tumour!”

You made a deal with her some time ago that if she saw a doctor, so would you. Neither of you held up your side of the bargain. You picture yourself ten years from now, flipping through a book of baby names, trying to decide whether your own tumour is more of an Emma or a Rachele.

Time begins to speed up and the days following your mother’s death blur together as if someone has thrown your life and copious amounts of red wine into a blender and hit “liquify.” Thankfully, you have consumed copious amounts of red wine to deal with this feeling. Also, Izzy is taking care of every post-mortem detail with highlighters and post-it notes. The schedule for the visitation, funeral, and wake is now wound as tightly as your older sister’s bun. This very morning you opened your closet to find a grey shirt and pair of grey pants with neon “wear me” stickers. You thought your sister knew you

better than that. In order to spite her, you must now show up at the church in the assigned attire with her neon post-its still affixed to the collar of your blouse and thigh of your pants.

Fact: Post-it notes are available in 8 standard sizes, 25 shapes and 62 colours.

Fact: Your boss is 64% more likely to give you the day off if you write the request on a pink, flower-shaped post-it.

You picture Jerry sitting in his underwear (in your mind you take the liberty to paint in the tire of flab around his midsection and the extra grey hair he has invariably accumulated since the divorce). He is flipping through the newspaper, stopping at the “Announcements” section, scanning “Deaths,” shoving a chocolate chip muffin down his throat to ease the pain of being separated from you. The name of his ex-mother-in-law is in bold typeface beneath a picture of her in her thirties (one of her many dying wishes), wrinkle-free and sporting an auburn beehive. He drops a cup of boiling coffee on his crotch, his “Over the Hill” mug shattering on the tile floor as he chokes on chocolate chips. You smile. But if he truly were in the habit of daily skimming the paper for deceased ex-relatives, he certainly would have called. He may want to scoop out your eyeballs with scalding soup ladles, but surely he has enough decency to extend his sympathies for your mother’s death.

You deduce that he hasn’t yet found out. Well then, you should call, shouldn’t you? Perhaps it would ruin his day. Yes, that’d be nice, but do you really want to have a chat with your ex? Your last attempt at a conversation with Jerry drove you to rent *The Way We Were* and down a shot of tequila every time Babs gazed forlorn into the distance.

Not wanting to polish off more tequila than a sorority girl with daddy issues on spring break (again), you look for the answers to your present dilemma in a freshly uncorked bottle of red wine and half a pack of cigarettes. It is 10:56. You promised yourself you would stop drinking before lunchtime, so you pop a frozen burrito into the microwave for good measure.

You pick up the phone but before you can dial Jerry's new number a commentary begins running in your head similar to those "Choose Your Own Adventure" books Kate used to read, before her body was invaded by a Sylvia Plath-craving parasite with a smart mouth and a distaste for "the mainstream." You stumbled upon one such book in the basement last evening, while you busied yourself reorganizing boxes of things you forgot to get rid of. All your subsequent decisions have been based on this less-than-formidable genre of tween literature. For instance, when you asked yourself what you wanted for breakfast this morning it sounded like, "*Choose toast and flip to page 81*" or "*Take the cereal and skip to page 112.*" You chose to eat both toast and cereal this morning which is the equivalent of sampling page 81 then peeking at page 112 to see which of the two might feature your untimely free-fall down an empty elevator shaft. That was the problem with those books: they incited their readers to cheat the system. Unfortunately, you cannot both call Jerry and not call Jerry. You rest the phone back in its cradle.

Immediately the phone rings. The mouthful of red wine that was half-way down your throat ejects itself onto your pajama shirt which is, of course, white. The stain settles into the shape of a gnarled hand. Arthritic fingers are reaching to undo your buttons.

“Hello?” you ask hesitantly, sure it is Jerry on the other line as if you’ve telepathically summoned his sympathy.

“Carrie, do you think they’ll be enough flowers?” You should’ve guessed it would be your sister. She’s been calling so frequently you’d swear you were a radio station giving away free tickets to see her favourite lecturer discuss stem cell research.

“Hi, Izzy.”

“I keep calling the florist and they’ve assured me there will be plenty, but I want it to look *really* nice, you know? Not just thrown together last second like we didn’t put any thought into it.” You wet a dish cloth and begin patting at the wine stain. Stain removal is exponentially more riveting than listening to Izzy.

“Right, you want people to think we’ve been planning Mom’s funeral for some time now. Like while she was lying on her deathbed vomiting out her insides and asking us to suffocate her with her too-flat pillow, we were thinking about the placement of the petunias.”

“Don’t be ridiculous. Petunias are *not* funeral flowers. I really hope the florist considers flower placement in terms of size *and* colour. They better not stick the red roses next to the pink ones. I really can’t stand when red looks like it’s bleeding into pink. It just makes the red less vibrant and makes pink look like a second-rate colour, you know? They should be separated by the white carnations and it needs to be symmetrical, obviously, on both sides of the casket.” You only succeed in changing the red stain to a larger pink one. Maybe you should’ve left it red since pink is so second-rate by comparison.

“Well *obviously*, but I bet you anything Mom won’t notice. You know what she would’ve loved though? If Poncho could come to the funeral. You know she liked him more than the two of us combined. And we can get him one of those kitty-cat tuxedos with a hole at the back for his tail.” Poncho glowers at you from the countertop, clearly angered that you would consider dressing him in a suit other than a lycra sweat suit with ample “breathing room.”

“Thanks for taking this seriously, Carrie. I should’ve known. I’ll see you at the funeral home tonight. Wear the grey outfit. I put a green post-it on it. And don’t leave the sticky on to spite me.”

“I wouldn’t dream of it.” Perhaps you underestimated Izzy.

“Oh, and I called Jerry because I knew you wouldn’t.”

She hangs up before you can protest. Poncho eyeballs you from across the kitchen where he is resting his fat cat belly on the cutting board. He is looking altogether too smug. You wonder when you last washed the cutting board. You also wonder whether cat dander is edible; it is unlikely you’ll remember to wash the cutting board before you cook next.

“Soak it up, Poncho. Let’s see *you* try to deal with *your* ex.” On your way out of the kitchen you toss the wine-stained dish cloth at him. He’s too lazy even to flinch as it lands on the arch of his back.

Things You Inherited From Your Mother:

1. One purple '91 Buick Regal that smells of sun-baked beef jerky and deceased buttermilk; namely, that smells of your mother's cat, Poncho, whose dietary mainstays include excessive amounts of both. He always rode shotgun in the Buick, regardless of whether there were four other non-feline passengers aboard. May it be known that you are as much a cat person as you are a Buick Regal person.
2. One half of your mother's one-story house that is charming in the way aluminum fences and green shingles are charming. Poncho's ginger fur blanketing every surface not wrapped in plastic furniture covers. You can't believe your mother ever had the nerve to criticize your house for "smelling like the smoking section at Waffle House."
3. One wardrobe of elastic-waist jeans, vests with sewn-on appliqués themed after every holiday from Christmas to Flag Day, and a septuplet set of faux-leather loafers. You find the outfits you and your sister bought her (re: your sister bought and you were forced to fork over money for some time after the fact because she didn't think a will-writing kit was an appropriate birthday present) in a cardboard box in the basement marked "Goodwill."
4. One morbidly obese Cheshire cat who has been both haughty and melodramatic since your mother died, whom you've inherited as a means of "converting" your "heathen ways" because you once mentioned to her that you were more of a dog person, if anything. When you told Izzy you would graciously forfeit your custody of Poncho, she threatened to take you to court.

The phone rings again when you are nearing the bottom of your second bottle of wine and first pack of cigarettes.

“Got it!” Kate calls from the other end of the house. Good, you think, let her deal with Izzy and the placement of the petunias. Although it might really be Jerry this time—or another telemarketer.

You quite enjoyed taking a call from a telemarketer this morning, feigning confusion (“Auntie Claire? Is that you?”) and not waiting for a response before you began fake-sobbing into the receiver, rambling on about not getting to say goodbye (“It all happened so fast. . . I thought I’d have more time!”) while the bewildered cold-caller went from trying to peddle a low-interest credit card to trying to spontaneously eject herself from the conversation as tactfully as possible (“Perhaps I called at a bad time. . . . Please stop threatening to hang yourself from the ceiling fan if I hang up.”)

Kate wanders into the kitchen, cradling the cordless phone between her ear and shoulder, swirling a glass of water in one hand, the ice cubes tink-tinking against the glass. Her eyes are red and watery behind the non-prescription, tortoise-shell glasses she wears to make her look “sophisticated,” but at least half her mouth is smiling.

“Who is it?” You ask in a loud whisper. She makes a swatting motion with her *free hand*.

“I’m doing okay, I guess. Thanks for checking up on me,” she says into the receiver. “The funeral’s on Friday. I’d really like it if you could come.” Who told Kate she could go around inviting people as if it was her Sweet Sixteen?

She opens the refrigerator and begins rummaging through the crisper.

“I know it might be a little awkward to be around the whole family, but—”

You creep around behind her and lean towards the phone. A male voice. Words you can't quite make out.

"Ooh, it's a boy!" you shriek, "Is it your new boyfriend?" Earlier that week you listened in on a call between Kate and her best friend Andrea. Apparently Kate's in the early stages of a relationship with someone called "Braydon." Apparently he is "so handsome he could be British," whatever that means.

Kate whirls around, rolls her eyes, and leaves the fridge empty-handed to hunker into the pantry. You wonder when you last saw her eat something. You hear her apologize to her gentleman caller more politely than she has ever spoken to you.

You position yourself outside the pantry door. Fueled by almost two bottles of cabernet-sauvignon, you begin making the most obnoxious kissing noises you can muster, in between verses of a new song you've written called "Katie-Kate's in Love." The song takes a sad turn when the only word you can rhyme with "boyfriend" was "end."

Kate pokes her head out of the pantry. She is giving you her best "you're ruining my life" look. It's a cross between looking directly into sunlight and sucking on a lemon. You're positive she spends more time in the bathroom perfecting that look than doing her homework.

"Mother, seriously, shut up." Kate has taken to calling you "Mother" a lot recently.

"Oh, is Katie-Kate embarrassed? Did you not like my song?" You fake a frown so big you will probably have two new wrinkles in the morning.

Kate covers one end of the receiver with her palm.

“Yes. I am. Embarrassed for you. You know who’s on the phone with me right now? It’s Jerry, and he can hear you acting like a five-year-old.”

You have always supported Kate’s continued relationship with Jerry even after your relationship with him dissolved, and by “dissolved” you of course mean, “went up in flames.”

“Oh. Well, tell him I said hello. Very nice of him to call.”

Cheeks burning, you return to your wine, finishing the bottle in three quick gulps.

You wake sometime later that evening on the couch, legs dangling over the armrest. One of two empty wine bottles is on the coffee table sitting on top of the sympathy card-turned-coaster your boss mailed you, all your coworkers’ names signed in the same handwriting. You don’t remember the wine bottle being quite so large. You wish you would’ve had the sense to dispose of the evidence. Luckily you never got dressed that morning so you were able to sleep comfortably still in your pajamas.

From the couch you can see into the dining room where Ben is at the table marking papers on top of a *National Geographic* to avoid scratching the wood. His reading glasses balance on the tip of his nose, making him look older than. . . How old is he now? Thirty-six? That must be it; he just had a birthday when? Shit, when’s his birthday? You make a mental note to steal his driver’s license from his wallet the next time he’s in the shower.

“Morning Sunshine,” he says without looking up.

You catch your reflection in the black, blank screen of the television. You are the spitting image of a cockatiel coming off hard drugs. The wine stain on your shirt isn’t

helping your case.

“Oh, I wasn’t sleeping. Just resting my eyes,” you say, furiously trying to rub the sleep out of them.

“Carrie, you’ve been passed out since I got home. Two hours ago. And you’ve been talking in your sleep. Shouting vulgar insults at Poncho, actually. I’m sure he would appreciate an apology.” Ben still hasn’t looked up from his numbers, not missed a beat checking and x-ing.

“I’m sure the insults were well-deserved. Why didn’t you wake me?” You are still attempting to preen yourself in the television screen, trying to untangle what was once your hair and is now a cozy nesting place for small to medium-sized woodland creatures.

“I tried. You almost bit my hand off.” The monotone of Ben’s voice is so soothing.

“Oh. Hm. I see. Speaking of food, what do you want for dinner?”

Things You Love About Ben:

1. He is not Jerry.
2. When you face monumental challenges to which you can see no feasible solution he dreams up elaborate plans you never thought could work, such as pausing the movie to drive to the store to buy a new bag of salt and vinegar chips.
3. He does not judge you on what you do for a living, your past relationships, your parenting techniques, your alcohol consumption rate, your repeated failures to quit smoking. . .
4. He knows how to make you fall asleep fast on restless nights. You only have to ask him about his day and he will dutifully start droning on about dealing with the politics of college administration and his displeasure at the fact that none of his students are as enthusiastic as he was about theories and proofs in college and. . . you will be going to bed early tonight.

Two days later you're wearing another of Izzy's outfit choices, staring at yourself in the full-length bathroom mirror when you realize that this will be the first time you'll see Jerry since the divorce and you look like an L.L. Bean catalogue model. What if getting divorced from you was the impetus he needed to regain his youth? As the jilted lover you deserve some sort of revenge and you've come to terms with the fact that it won't involve an ice-pick and his cerebral cortex.

In the back of your closet is a box of clothes you had enough insight to save from college (a time when choosing an outfit was determined more by fashion trends and less by what might remain comfortable should you choose to catch a nap on your lunch break). There is only one black item in the box: a figure-flattering skirt that falls just above the knee. Funeral perfect.

Kate eyebrows your outfit as you climb into the car. It's been ages since she saw you look this good. You'll have to hide this skirt when you get home so she doesn't pilfer it to wear to school.

Once in the church your sister gets one look at you, mouths the words "Oh my God," and drags you by the elbow into the bathroom.

"A skintight, *leather* skirt? What happened to the outfit I picked out for you?" She is pacing the length of the stalls, click-clacking her heels on the white and blue ceramic.

"I thought this looked a little more hip, a little more youthful. . . And it may or may not be the only black skirt I own."

"And the leopard-patterned nylons?" She has added shaking her head to her pacing routine.

“Every other pair had runs in them?” you offer.

“I don’t even know what to do right now. You look like you need a pole. Maybe the church has some donated clothes somewhere that you can throw on?”

“Even I am above stealing donations.” Izzy’s pacing has incited you to chew your nails.

“And here I thought the worst fashion crisis I had to deal with was mom. Can you believe she wanted to be buried in corduroy?”

If you stand on your tiptoes in front of the mirror above the sink you can see your outfit to your knees. In the harsh fluorescent light you realize the look on Kate’s face might not have been one of adoration, or your next guess: jealousy.

Reluctantly, you take your place next to Ben, shaking hands with people you don’t recognize as they tell you how sorry they are. You notice the corners of their mouths curl when their eyes pan down to your lower half. One of your mother’s friends cannot keep his thoughts to himself.

“Too bad I left my leather chaps at home,” he quips.

“My mother specifically requested an eighties-themed funeral.” You poke his chest with your index finger. “You sir, are the one whose outfit is inappropriate.” You don’t think you’ll have to talk to him again.

“Why didn’t you tell me to change before we left the house?” you hiss in Ben’s ear.

He shrugs. “You look. . . well, kind of hot actually.” You have only heard Ben use the word “hot” in reference to things like stolen goods or the Sahara Desert.

You say the word “hot” in your head. “Hot, hot, hot” and you are ready to strut

your stuff down the centre aisle like it is your own personal catwalk. The choruses to several eighties pop songs begin playing on shuffle from some invisible boom box. You consider stopping in the middle of the church to vogue *à la* Madonna, when you see Jerry sitting in a middle pew: sans grey hair, sans spare tire. Your strutting turns into awkward sidesteps as you try to distance yourself a little ways from Ben; you pick up your pace without making it too obvious, so that maybe Jerry won't notice that the two of you are together. Maybe he will think Ben is the secret half-brother your family kept locked in the basement, only allowed to see daylight in dire circumstances such as the death of his mother. However, Ben begins increasing his pace accordingly until the two of you are in an almost footrace, about to overtake the priest.

Then it dawns on you that Kate's definitely told Jerry about Ben, even though she refuses to tell you what the special was at the school cafeteria. You're feeling much too open for the whole church to ravage through, like the registration book that was in the funeral parlour for the past two days that you didn't know whether you, as the daughter, were supposed to sign.

Also sitting alone is Howie from work, wearing a t-shirt with the outline of a tuxedo printed onto it. When you make eye contact with him he puts both hands over where his heart would be if he wasn't a vacuous shell of chauvanism. You quickly look away. A cigarette would make everything approximately 92.8 times better.

You find your seat in the reserved row at the front of the church. You don't recall ever getting to sit in a "reserved row" and for a moment you feel like you won a prize. Then the organ music quiets so everyone can hear your leather skirt squeak across the wooden pew. You now notice the skirt is perhaps not real leather and perhaps a smidgen

tight across the hips. Crossing your legs proves to be an impossible feat. To distract yourself from the inability to sufficiently inhale you mentally recite the chorus of Madonna's "Like a Prayer." Funeral perfect.

You glance sideways at your sister. Izzy appears to be in a staring contest with your dead mother lying in her casket, looking like a figure from a wax museum.

"I can't believe Mom wanted to be buried with her eyes open," you whisper. Your inner thighs, swathed in leopard and currently stuck to one another are growing uncomfortably moist. The leather skirt, much like yourself at the moment, is not breathing properly.

"She looks so peaceful," Izzy whispers back.

"She looks like she just walked into her surprise welcome party in heaven."

As you and Izzy bicker about your mother's facial expression, the priest is throwing around generic qualifiers which are probably true of most dead people, but betray the fact that he didn't really know your mother. Such words include "giving," "sympathetic," "selfless," and "humble." For most of the eulogy you are busy trying out different sitting positions within your very limited range of motion, in an attempt to find one which doesn't make you feel like a sleeping bag being shoved into an impossibly small nylon sac. Every time you change positions your skirt audibly chafes against the pew like a wet balloon. After a total of seven new seating positions and seven slugs on the arm from Izzy, the priest commands, "All rise." There is only one appropriate response: a resounding "AMEN!" Except no one else echoes your sentiments. You can feel a hundred eyes burning into the back of your head as everyone asks themselves who let Izzy's crazy sister out of the basement . . . Izzy's crazy sister who apparently hasn't

seen the light of day since the apex of Madonna's musical career. A cigarette would make everything 99.99 percent better.

Unfortunately, immediately after the funeral you are herded down into the church basement for the wake. The basement reminds you of the inside of your elementary school gymnasium with a lower ceiling. You would rather be playing a game of dodge ball. There is a long table of food set up against one of the walls. You count nine large bowls of pasta salad.

While vanquishing a butter tart of its raisins, you wonder aloud why there is so much pasta salad.

"It's in honour of Mom's favourite dish." Izzy is holding a styrofoam cup in one hand and swirling a plastic ladle in the punch bowl. She shows no signs of actually intending to drink any punch.

"Oh, well in that case, let me go take her up a plate!"

"How can you be so insensitive?" Izzy smacks the ladle into the punch, sending the fruit cocktail splattering onto her cheeks and the lenses of her cat-eye glasses. Then she begins to sniffle; the sniffing becomes whimpering; the whimpering becomes weeping. Her cat eyes are weeping berry-coloured tears.

"Ben, help me. Izzy's lost it. She was fine upstairs." Ben is in the process of decapitating a powdered-sugar doughnut. His beard has experienced a snowfall of roughly two centimetres.

"Hm. Let's see. . . Her mother died and she's upset. Yeah, we should have her committed."

"I love how we can finish each other's sentences."

You steer Izzy towards your mother's two sisters, whom you associate with death and have mentally nicknamed "Epidemic" and "The Plague," as you only see either of them at funerals. You leave Izzy with a Kleenex you were keeping in your bra along with fifty others and head outside to light up. As you reach the door it flies open hitting you hard in the nose. Jerry walks in to the church basement.

"Carrie, listen, I am *so* sorry." You survey his face for evidence he is lying.

"It's fine. . . . I don't think it's broken," you say, putting a hand to your nose to check for blood.

"Oh, uh, no, I mean about your mother. Well the door too, but I mean—Are you okay?" Why isn't he delighting in your pain?

"Yeah, I should be fine. No blood or anything."

"Sorry?" His forehead furrows in confusion. You forgot his brain turned in slow motion.

You speak slower this time. "I don't think you deviated my septum, but if I do have to have a nose job I'll send you the bill."

"No, I mean are *you* okay? Your mom. . . . Oh Carrie." Jerry is looking at you as if you are a three-legged baby deer, orphaned because he accidentally killed your mother in a hunting accident. He steps closer and reaches a hand toward you. You extend both of your arms for the hug, but he changes his mind and pats your forearm instead. He leaves you with your arms dangling midair.

You refocus. The cigarette will have to wait because it is doubtlessly your God-assigned duty to keep Ben and Jerry on opposite sides of the basement. You rely on Kate to keep Jerry occupied, sending her telepathic messages not to let him out of her sight.

You turn on your heel and march over to where you left Izzy to console her with newfound vigour. As you rub the cashmere pills off her sweater, you watch Ben mingle with family members you hadn't bothered to introduce him to. Izzy, however, appears to be in much better spirits since Jerry arrived, which can only mean she is finding some sick, sadistic pleasure in watching you try to maneuver between past and present while dressed for a costume party.

As Izzy begins reminiscing to your aunts about your childhoods at warped speed, Ben takes off to the pasta salad buffet. Cigarettes form a conga line in your brain. Kate is in a corner whispering secrets, probably about you, not with Jerry, but with that Andrea girl, whom she needed to bring for "moral support." How could she have gotten so distracted? You knew you shouldn't have counted on her. Where did Ben go now? Where is Jerry? Why is everything in the room, including your beloved family members, starting to resemble things you might be able to light up and smoke? You wonder if you will go to hell for having a quick smoke in the church bathroom, figure that yes, it must be one of the commandments, and make a dash to the nearest exit to enjoy just half a cigarette.

Of course outside it is now raining, nay pouring, which means there *is* a heaven and it is lenient enough to grant your mother entrance so she can ensure her funeral has the proper dramatic setting. Fortunately the church has an awning you can stand under. Unfortunately, the church has an overzealous usher who takes it upon himself to strictly enforce the "no smoking within five feet of the church door" rule. In other news you now look like a stripper *and* a wet t-shirt contest participant.

You return a minute and a half later to discover, under the papier-mâché helmet

that is your hair when wet, that Ben and Jerry are somehow engaged in conversation: a conversation which does not appear, from where you are standing with your mouth agape, to be the precursor to any sort of spontaneous duel. In a peculiar twist of fate you are now craving a pint of Cherry Garcia.

Fact: Ben & Jerry's makes 63 flavours of ice cream.

Fact: Eating 63 pints of ice cream is a sure-fire way to mend a broken heart and turn one's upper arms into flabby "bingo wings." Win-win.

It is not until this exact moment that you notice the striking similarities between the two men. You notice, for instance, the way they can easily converse with a stranger as if that person was their best friend (however unlikely), the way they laugh silently but convincingly, even the way they rub their respective, immaculately trimmed beards between their thumbs and index fingers, and their apparent love of nine varieties of pasta salad. Your wayward daughter approaches your side, watches her ex-step-father and her mother's new boyfriend having a jovial time without the need for either of you to moderate, and says, "Wow, Mom, that's fucked up," at which point you can't argue or even tell her to watch her language because the two of you are, for once, thinking alike.

If you have begun dating your ex-husband's replica and not realized it until your mother's funeral, turn to page 86 where you will find a pier. Walk off it.

"Mom, did my dad also have a beard and dress like he was from the fifties?"

"Kate, do me a favour. Let's pretend we didn't notice I've been swapping versions of the same man for over a decade. Can you do that for me?"

Before she can answer there are two heavy hands on each of your shoulders. You

turn around to find your nose pressed against the fake tuxedo.

“Carrie, how you holding up?” Howie asks, pulling you in for a hug. In true Howie fashion, he has over-cologned himself. You pull away coughing.

“I’m fine, Howie. You really don’t have to stay for the wake. It was nice enough of you to come to the funeral.”

“Oh, it’s my pleasure, really. Seth asked if anyone would volunteer to go as a work representative and I told him I’d be glad to go because of our—” He lowers his voice. “*History*,” he finishes with a wink.

“YOU TOLD OUR BOSS THAT WE HAVE HISTORY?!”

Perhaps you should have also lowered your voice. Once again, all eyes swivel toward Izzy’s crazy sister.

“Well at least *he* looks nothing like Ben *or* Jerry.” Good point, Kate.

Things That Remind You of Your Mother:

1. Internet pop-ups.
2. Ovarian cancer.
3. Paper flyers stuck in your windshield wipers by tree-huggers when you're parked outside the mall, demanding that you drive a more environmentally friendly vehicle.
4. Pancakes that looked fully cooked, but upon the first bite reveal their gooey, uncooked centres, which you ravenously consume anyway because you are starved and they are still, by definition, pancakes.
5. Children dressed up on Halloween as mummies, costumes you know are homemade from toilet paper and cloths that used to be white but upon inheriting a greyish tinge were confined to the "rag bin." When it starts to rain, their costumes begins to wilt and droop and you can see the black turtlenecks they're wearing underneath making them look like your newspaper that is always soggy even though you're sure you didn't sleep through any rain the night before.
6. Internet pop-ups that warn you about internet pop-ups.

People With Whom You Share Cubicle Walls:

1. Howie

Age: Middle-aged.

Age he pretends to be in chatrooms: 28

Pedophile?: Probably.

Marital status: Single.

Have you dated? Explain.: Yes. Only once right after you split from Jerry and were feeling particularly desperate. He took you to an Applebee's where he proceeded to get tanked off frozen strawberry daiquiris. You had to drive him "home," which is how you discovered he lives on a friend's couch and keeps his clothes in a duffel bag.

Most annoying workplace habit: Playing air guitar along with the depressing adult contemporary radio station which promises "light rock, less talk" and is all your company considers "workplace appropriate music." On a side note, your company policies have started to remind you more and more of your mother who was always convinced that listening to rock n' roll "made a girl want to take off her blouse."

Manner of dress: Faded, ripped jeans, too tight Rolling Stones t-shirts, and a bandana tied around left forearm, serving no apparent purpose.

Productivity level: -4

2. Bethany Marie

Age: 32

Age she acts: 50

Marital status: Destined for crazy cat lady-ness.

Number of cats in current possession: 4; 5 until last week when Pickles was gunned down by a pickup truck (re: committed suicide) after wandering (re: escaping) through a hole in the gate.

Have you offered Poncho to replace Pickles?: Yes, but she refused to take your inheritance and insists you need Poncho to help with the grieving process.

Manner of dress: Floral muumuus.

Did you just type “muumuus” because you liked how many U’s it has?: Guilty.

Most annoying workplace habit: Logging onto animal websites to audibly coo over kittens in tea cups and puppies snuggling with bunnies and whatever it is that chipmunks do that makes them so goddamn adorable. Then forwarding the pictures to you and expecting a response other than “I really hope fur coats make a comeback this year.”

Productivity level: 72%

3. Ian

Age: Thirtyish.

Age he acts: Thirtyish.

Age he wishes he were: Thirtyish.

Marital Status: Possibly dating an older, mysterious man named Marcus who pops by the office a few times a month to take Ian to lunch. Ian has neither confirmed nor denied your suspicions.

Are you friends?: You wouldn't say friends, but you appreciate the way he berates Howie's attempts at youth and hipness, and the biweekly speeches Ian gives to Bethany about why she needs to get laid or at least start dressing "sluttier."

Most annoying workplace habits: Speaking as if every third word happened to be cosmically italicized and using patronizing finger quotes, often employing both simultaneously.

Manner of Dress: Sweaters, chinos, and vests from The Gap, neon striped sneakers and pinky rings from trips to various Asian countries.

Productivity level: Five out of five stars.

Making profiles of your coworkers is so much more satisfying than inputting random numbers into arbitrary spreadsheet boxes so you decide to make a profile for yourself:

4. Carrie

Age: Presents modern medicine with an anomaly as she mysteriously ages backwards.

Marital status: Recently divorced from Jerry, shacking up with Ben, no plans for remarriage.

Dependents: Kate, daughter, age 16; Poncho, reluctantly adopted cat, age unknown, hopefully very old.

Interesting facts: Refuses to eat at Applebee's; still can't figure out how to work the iPod her boyfriend got her for Christmas; has trouble explaining to people (including herself) exactly what she does for a living.

Annoying workplace habits: Gets obsessive compulsive over FreeCell games; finds feeding the shredder therapeutic; answers all serious questions with sarcasm.

Manner of dress: Currently in mourning attire: black jeans, a black turtle neck, and black boots.

FreeCell stats: 84% to win.

Game Over.

Sorry, you lose. There are no more legal moves.

Do you want to play again?

Y/N?

When you return to work after your allotted four-day grieving period, you find that Seth, your boss, has instituted a “no jeans policy” to create a more “professional working environment, which will surely increase the morale and the productivity of the staff.”

You decide you need more clarification on the recent prohibition of denim so you e-mail Seth asking him to clarify what exactly constitutes “appropriate” work attire.

Carrie sent on 03 11 9:28am:

<<Will dress pants suffice or should I be looking into renting a three-piece tuxedo for five-day intervals?>>

Flagged as Urgent

Seth sent on 03 11 3:12pm:

<<Carrie, the new dress code is clear in its mandate: no jeans. Anything else is acceptable attire.>>

Naturally, your mind starts to wander to all “acceptable” forms of leg wear. You start with sweatpants, move to spandex leggings in shocking fuchsia, end up somewhere down the progression with lederhosen, though you’re not entirely sure what lederhosen are, whether they can take the place of pants altogether, or if some other apparatus is required in conjunction with said lederhosen. At any rate, your closet is not bursting with German apparel but you do own a fair number of sweatpants, many of which are a few sizes too large and feature a handsome spectrum of stains from bleach to coffee. You settle on a particularly homely pair of black ones (as you are still in mourning) with a

satisfying number of holes and a stain of unknown origin but with the peculiar property of being neon green. They also have those handsome little elastic bands which bunch at the ankles, making you look like a helium balloon character from a Thanksgiving Day parade. The drawstring that is supposed to hold up the waist has since departed, but you do not let this detail stop you. Thankfully when you get to work Ian is in a meeting with an advertising client and has changed out of his Nikes into the dress shoes he keeps in the bottom drawer of his filing cabinet. You swipe one of the neon yellow shoelaces from his unattended Nikes and repurpose it as your new belt.

You wear sweatpants every day since receiving the memo ostracizing denim. More specifically, you wear the same pair in succession without washing them. You no longer mind when Poncho scratches at your pant legs for more wet cat food after his third helping. You encourage him. “Scratch your heart out, Poncho!” you say, at which point he predictably stops scratching. You wonder if you were to encourage Poncho to scratch your brand new tweed bag as well, he would stop scratching your brand new tweed bag, but you figure he is much too crafty for reverse psychology.

You are sure your boss will soon take notice of your silent protest at which point he will have no choice but to retreat, dejected, into his office and retract his previous statute, replacing it with a “no sweatpants policy” to which you will happily comply while wearing your beautifully worn-in denim. After a week, however, the only people who seem to take any notice are Ian because that was apparently his lucky shoelace and Ben because you haven’t been bothering to change out of your sweats when you come home to ensure that they achieve maximum contact with all stain-inducing cleaning products, food items, and the cat fur that is now a constant in your home. After three

more workdays, Ben all but gives you an ultimatum.

“Seriously, Carrie, I feel like I’m dating a homeless person. And those have to be Jerry’s pants. I don’t appreciate the daily reminder of your ex-husband.”

You don’t confirm that they once belonged to Jerry because that would make you the cold-hearted woman who flaunts her ex-marriage in her current boyfriend’s face, nor do you deny it because you would not want Ben to think pants that could fit a grown man are actually your own. You know that Jerry would have found the humour in your sweatpants protest, albeit ex-husband’s sweatpants, but nevertheless, the next day you are at work wearing newly purchased “slacks” (you aged thirteen years when you put them on and another eleven when the saleswoman [who was your age] thought that telling you her mom has the same ones would be a useful sales tactic), a white button-up blouse and some scarf thing tied around your neck. You realized after you bought the scarf that it is no different from the bandana Howie ties around his forearm and has since traded in for a workplace appropriate piano-key necktie. You tried to get Kate to go shopping with you but she said, “Please, Mother, I’d really rather not,” before returning to her new hobby: turning her “emotional energy” into abstract paintings using only the colours black and grey. Poncho gave you a look that said the same thing, except Poncho would never call you “Mother” and Poncho turns his “emotional energy” into presents he leaves for you in the litter box.

You remember when work used to be fun. Bridget, your boss before Seth, rarely came out of her office (re: rarely took a break from filling her nostrils with illegal narcotics) to tell you and your cubicle mates to quit your game of stapler-toss (a game in

which a loaded stapler is thrown, without warning, over cubicle walls; similar to the children's game hot potato). You fondly remember the time you borrowed her stationery and issued a memo to Howie declaring the following Friday to be "Hawaiian Shirt Day," or maybe your exact words were "Wear Your Hawaiian Shirt to Work or You Will be Fired Day." Minor details. That Friday Howie was meeting with the company's regional manager for a performance review. When he later woke Bridget up from a nap on the bathroom floor to ask why she would send such a memo to only him, she mistook him for a waiter at Bahama Breeze.

"Could I get a strawberry daiquiri?" she asked, barely lifting her head. She really was your favourite boss.

Fun factoid: The reason for Bridget's eventual termination is completely unrelated to her drug use. A slew of underaged delivery boys accused her of sexual harassment, and asexual Seth was quickly put into her office.

Things You Can Get Accomplished While Driving to Work:

1. Shaving your legs if you have one cup of water (no lid) and one of those new razors with the shaving cream attached to it in a handy, solid bar (re: not having to wear opaque nylons as part of your “workplace appropriate attire”).
2. Reading at least four of the eight-page, useless report from work which was emailed to you yesterday at 3:59 with a note that shouted “Important! Must be read by start of day tomorrow!”
3. Going over in your mind exactly what you will say, in a ten-point speech, when you confront Seth about why you should receive a raise of at least five percent.
4. Making up important lists for yourself and writing them down with your eyeliner pencil on the back of fast-food napkins you found stuffed in your glove box.
5. Applying said eyeliner if you no longer wish to have vision in your left eye.

Fact: 0.003% of car accidents are caused by people shaving their legs at traffic lights.

Seth tells you half an hour into your shift on Wednesday that you're being "let go." As reason for your dismissal he cites your numerous late arrivals. Furthermore, he wants you to know that your protesting of the dress code by wearing your oldest sweatpants for a week straight did not go unnoticed (you: 1, inane work policies: 0). In addition, he does not think you are contributing to the workplace morale and that "it is plain to see" you just do not value your job. You argue the contrary.

"I absolutely, one-hundred percent love my job!" you say, to which Seth hands you the rough draft to an article you've been using company time to work on and apparently left in the break room, called, "Reasons Why I Hate My Job." Fine.

You ask why he couldn't have *fired* you on Tuesday as you were leaving work, because then you wouldn't have had to wake up early this morning, put on your newly enforced "workplace appropriate attire," and drive across the city, wasting your gas, contributing to ozone depletion with your exhaust fumes, putting the lives of innocent pedestrians in peril as you "diligently read over, for the second time, all eight pages of the extremely important and useful report."

"Did you just decide to fire me this morning?" you ask. Was he on his way to work, sitting on the heated seat in his company car, sipping a tall non-fat double-whipped mocha-latte when he decided he could easily do without one sloppily-dressed employee? If so, you suggest he go home, perhaps right now, and sleep on it. "No sense making a hasty decision," you tell him.

He tells you that, no, he did not just decide to "let you go" this morning while he was sipping his tall non-fat double-whipped mocha-latte, which he actually repeats verbatim, making you wonder, if by some act of God, you have become the prophet of

hot beverages. As it turns out, Seth did “sleep on it.” He decided to fire you yesterday after you sauntered, unapologetically, into work forty-five minutes late, but then he thought to his “kind-hearted self” that he should give you the day to redeem yourself. Plus, yesterday was the one-week anniversary of your mother’s death and he is “not *that* cruel.” Then, when you ducked out of work twenty minutes early he decided that the “let go” would be final, but of course you were five floors down the elevator shaft by then. He thought about calling you that evening, but knows from experience that these things usually go over better in person. He tells you some anecdote about a “cubicle person” he once fired over the phone who cried and pleaded until he hung up, only to then turn around and show up at work the next day, bright-eyed and seemingly unaware that she was prohibited from so much as touching a company pen, so he had to fire said person a second time, you see? The only anecdote you’re in the mood for at the moment is the one where the oppressed employee overthrows the oppressive boss with a staple gun.

“Seth, I’d like to remind you that my mother just died. This is a very difficult time for me.” You say this so coldly not even you believe it’s a valid excuse for anything. “I would think this company would be a little more supportive,” you add.

He reminds you that you did receive the four-day grieving period to which you were entitled.

“Yes, but aren’t you always saying that we’re a family here? Shouldn’t I get more than four days—”

“Didn’t you get the sympathy card we sent? I had everyone in the office sign it.”

“Well yes, but—”

“And Howie was at the funeral, was he not? He better not have used your funeral

as an excuse to get out of work and go paint-balling again—”

“Yes, he was at *my mother’s* funeral.”

“And besides,” Seth continues, “Your workplace behavior has been an issue since long before you found out your mother was dying. Which was some time ago really. You found out months ago it was terminal. You *did* have time to prepare.” He says this all very matter-of-factly, which makes you cringe. Up until this point you have heard only yourself speak of your mother’s death like it was just the inevitable thing that it was.

It seems you have no choice but to retreat to your cubicle with the *almost* empty cardboard box that Seth handed you (he threw in the rough draft of your most promising article as a parting gift, though that seems a little like re-gifting now that you think about it) and begin packing your things, and some things which are not your things, such as the company staple gun. Unfortunately, packing up the company shredder might be a little too conspicuous. You throw Kate’s baby pictures in the box with all the unorganized loose-leaf paper that was previously scattered on your desk, under your desk, in your drawers, on top of your computer, with grand, sweeping gestures. The spreadsheets, charts, and graphs mean nothing to you, but you continue to shovel this stuff into your box with great fervour. Perhaps when your cubicle neighbours have to spend their time wearing out their “enter” keys, they will see how truly indispensable you are.

Occasionally, you make it a point to stop packing your box as if you are too drained of breath to continue. You put a hand to your forehead and make sure to sigh audibly. Your neighbours predictably peek their nose noses over the top of their cubicles. You want to put on a good show for them so you start muttering things under your breath such as “Oh, what is a poor, unemployed mother to do?” and “Who will feed

my daughter now?” Ian asks if you’ve been “let go” in a whisper that can be heard in the radius of twenty cubicle-feet. Naturally, he uses finger quotes as he says “let go.”

Reasons You Should Not Have Been “Let Go”:

- 1. Your mother just died.*
- 2. You’re a recent divorcée.*
- 3. You have a little girl at home who needs to be fed, clothed, and sheltered, and the only one else here with mouths to feed is Beth, but too bad for you Kate won’t eat cat food.*
- 4. You are the only one in the office who knows that “fricative” is not a euphemism for a swear word.*
- 5. Ovarian cancer is hereditary.*
- 6. Your ovaries have started to feel sore.*

In truth, you don’t so much know if ovaries have the capability to be sore, though you have found yourself mindlessly poking your left side with your middle finger. You leave the list on your now tidy desk (a state in which you have not seen your desk since your very first work week), give the office one dramatic sweep of your eyes, one highly emphatic sigh, and bust through the doors before Seth can have the satisfaction of calling security. Howie follows you out, collapses into your arms, which were by no means outstretched, and begins to weep convulsively. He promises that “this will not be the end,” to which you make a mental promise to block his work number, cell number, and email address as soon as you get home.

Dear _____,

So you are replacing me. Apparently you are great with numbers, enjoy mind-numbing work, and will never need to come in late or need to leave early. Kudos to you. How often do you have to oil your joints and update your computer chip? Does it hurt when you have a power surge?

I purposefully broke the lever on the side of the chair before I left so you couldn't adjust it. Welcome to a life of back pain. Check the drawers-- that's right, I stole everything. Here's hoping Staples is having a sale.

I took the liberty of telling everyone at the office some things about you:

1. You love to donate to worthy causes, buy things other people's children are selling, and help fund school trips.
2. You are allergic to sugar and being offered baked goods offends you.
3. You need to pay back the money you squandered away on a decade-long methamphetamine addiction so you are more than willing to work overtime for anyone who needs to leave early.
4. You are single and looking for a conservative woman who shares your number one interest: cats.
5. You are single and looking for a liberal man who shares your number one interest: air guitar.

Not only are you responsible for entering sales data into the weekly spreadsheets, but also for writing articles for the company newsletter. Do not start on the spreadsheets until you are finished writing the newsletter, as it is the most important aspect of your job. In fact, Seth has informed me that his first task for you is to finish the article I

started entitled, "Reasons Why I Hate My Job." You will find the first draft in the top right drawer. Bring it to him by the end of the day for bonus points.

Signed,

Your friend, Carrie

Flip to page 56 to avoid informing Ben and Kate that you, the employee-of-the-year, have joined the ranks of the unemployed. Continue to get ready for work in the morning, preparing a “workplace appropriate” outfit that does not include sweatpants or jeans.

On the second day of newfound freedom, you actually get into a heated argument with Ben for taking too long in the shower and, thus, making you hypothetically late. “I could get fired!” you yell at him across the shower curtain, as you flush the toilet. He asks if you’ve started your period. You hurl a can of shaving cream into the curtain and hope it hits a major organ.

You pass Poncho on the way down the stairs. He has plopped himself halfway either up or down and given up on continuing in either direction. “Poncho, you hippo,” you say as you pass, recalling the hour you spent last week holding the front door open and telling him to run free. You see Kate in the kitchen, watching you. She looks as though she is keeping a delicious secret. You’re sure Kate likes Ben well enough (because Ben is as inoffensive as water or bread or Switzerland), but still she seems to light up whenever the two of you fight. Maybe she will turn this scene into an abstract, grey-scale painting you can hang in the living room above the fireplace.

You hand Kate a lunch bag that you’re not completely sure has anything in it; it feels suspiciously light. You were tired the night before; you give her a five dollar bill just in case. Isn’t she too old for you to be making her lunch anyway? You remember the time you mistook a beer can for a pop can and sent her to school with a Bud Light. She has never let you forget that because of you the kids at school went around saying, “Hi, I’m Kate and I’m an alcoholic” for an entire month. As per your inquiry, she

assured you that *no*, other kids' parents surely *have not* made such a mistake.

Instead of driving to work, you drive to a Starbucks-like coffeehouse (in addition to serving overly priced drinks, this coffeehouse serves overly priced drinks you can get spiked with alcohol for an even more ridiculous price than Starbucks, but also at 9:37am on a Thursday). It is located off the ramp you usually take when exiting the expressway for work, and took today out of habit. You hope you don't run into any ex-coworkers, but are reasonably sure that ten dollars a coffee is out of their price range. When you were employed you would have balked at paying more than two bucks for a caffeine boost but curiously now that your income is non-existent, you are able to spend money guilt-free.

You arbitrarily order an almond-drop espresso. You take residence in a corner couch with the Classifieds section of the newspaper and another espresso which you order half an hour later. At eleven, which you feel is sufficiently past what you would call "morning" you order lunch (ie: a danish) and an Irish Coffee and tell the pimply-faced barista not to "skimp," as you lean over the counter watching your milk being frothed into foam. He adds loads of whip cream thinking that's what you don't want "skimmed." There are no circled job positions on your paper by noon.

Possible Careers:

1. *Librarian.* You enjoy reading and telling other people to be quiet. You also like that calm, musty smell of used books. However, you're not the most organized person in the world, which was made clear to you when you won your ex-office's "Most Disorganized Person Award," though the cataloguing system of putting things wherever you please seems to be working out nicely for your bedroom.

Other Awards You Won at Your Ex-Office:

a) Least Punctual

b) Most Tardy

2. *Coffee Shop Owner.* Your first order of business would be to do away with those annoyingly teeny shot-glass thingies that the Bailey's is measured in before it makes its way to the cup. You see no reason why you couldn't just pour it yourself like you are forced to do with the milk and cream.

3. *Teacher.* You are sure the teaching degree is just a formality. You'd already have summers off so you wouldn't have to quit your job every June and look for a new one every September.

4. *Stay-at-home trophy wife.*

Just before one o'clock your cell phone rings. It's Izzy. She consoles you on losing your job. If it was anyone but your sister you'd be shocked to find out that she knows something you told no one. But you are not shocked. Izzy claims to work for a pharmaceutical company but of this you have seen no substantial evidence. You're convinced she's actually employed by the CIA's gossip division.

"It's fine, really. Just don't go putting out a family newsletter, okay?" you tell her.

"I only made a newsletter that *one* time. But if you need help finding something let me know. I know some people who are in the hiring departments of some great companies." You venture to guess that your idea of great and Izzy's idea of great are not one and the same. Unless hers also involves a drink cart that pulls up to your desk every hour on the hour.

"Thanks, Iz. You think you could do me a favour?" You're going to have to choose your words very carefully.

"Sure. Name it."

"Since I'm not working at the moment, money's going to be a little hard to come by. . ."

"Of course, of course. You need a loan." You can almost hear Izzy rustling in her purse for her checkbook.

"Not exactly. . . I was more so wondering if you could take Poncho off my hands. You know, like adopt him? I mean, I've got to buy his food, vet bills--"

Izzy does something completely out of character. Izzy hangs up the phone mid conversation, a final "Pon—" dangling on your lips.

Later that week you decide you may have to take your sister up on her offer; you don't know how many more days you can spend slumped in the corner couch of a coffee shop. The staff knows you by name, though you've overheard them calling you "Mrs. Bailey's-Before-Breakfast" behind your back, and you may need to take out another mortgage on your house to continue drinking, nay inhaling, Irish coffees. Yes, you may just have to take Izzy up on her offer—not to find you a job, of course, but to loan you drinking money.

People You're Sure Your Mother Hired From Beyond the Grave to Drive You

Insane:

1. Every single employee at the coffee shop you should have stopped frequenting when they refused to let you have your mail forwarded there.
2. Poncho. Though it's just as likely your mother began to indoctrinate him years ago.
3. Your daughter's new friend Andrea, whom you are only allowed to refer to as "An-DREY-uh," though she has decided to call you by your first name and helps herself to your Diet Mountain Dew which you later find half-full on your daughter's bedroom floor, making you resort to hiding them in your pantry and drinking them with ice cubes which results in soda that is more watery than fizzy. (At least in your head you said "half-full.")
4. The woman who is at the gym no matter what time of day you choose to go and always changes the one working television to the cooking network so you have to watch the preparation of gourmet chocolate-filled croissants as you simulate cross-country skiing.
5. Miss Cooking Network who never ties back her long blonde hair and never breaks a sweat while next to her you are dripping like a wooly mammoth in the Amazon.
6. Miss Cooking Network who sits her cell phone in the tray of one of two working elliptical trainers and doesn't notice when it rings (loudly) because she has her headphones on and is busy learning how to bake a croissant until it's golden like her skin in the wintertime.

Fact: ringtones are commonly analyzed by doctors to determine a person's level of psychopathy.

Fact: you can plead insanity and be found innocent of first degree murder if your ringtone is the theme song to any sitcom from the eighties.

Things to Do:

- cut down on how much you tip the evil baristas, which shouldn't be hard to do since the only time you tipped them over fifty cents was because you forgot to take your change
- insist that Kate spend more time at An-DREY-uh's (re: take some juice boxes from the fridge without asking, poke the straws through the tinfoil openings and leave them under a bed in the guest room)
- buy chocolate croissants, eat them in furious succession, watch your stomach turn into a crescent roll
- bake skin until golden brown
- change ring tone from silent to vibrate and leave your phone in the tray of your elliptical trainer with a handful of pennies; hope someone calls you

Three weeks after the funeral you see Jerry at the gym you both still belong to. Neither of you canceled your respective halves of the “couples’ membership package.” After the divorce you thought about making and giving him a schedule of “your” time at the gym versus “his” gym time, but the thought of operating on a schedule brought on a two-day wave of nausea. Also, considering you subscribe to the once-a-month fitness regimen, running into your ex hasn’t been an issue.

Today, however, you decide once-a-month just might not be enough to counterbalance the whip cream you’ve been consuming daily as if it is your job (a part of you has started believing it actually is your job and you’re great at it), and because you were apparently a serial killer in a past life, this week the universe made sure Jerry would pick the exact same hour to spend at your mutual gym. On the other side of the room he and Miss Cooking Network are straddling side-by-side stationary bicycles. You dismiss this as a coincidence. You disregard the fact that Miss Cooking Network usually refuses to partake in any cardio activity that does not involve one of the two working elliptical trainers. You temporarily forget that your ex-husband shuns all forms of cardio activity, and (any other day) would rush toward the free weights to begin training for some bodybuilding competition he has never entered. You even count this as your lucky day because you can actually choose, without interruption, the television channel which you will watch, also uninterrupted, for the next forty minutes.

But then you see her head turn his way. You catch an exchange of wide smiles. You eye her fetching purple outfit with light blue racing stripes down the sides of her long legs. There is a sliver of her stomach showing. It is, as you expected, a pancake golden brown. You look down at your skin, white and bumpy like the uncooked batter

left over in the bottom of the tupperware bowl. You regret the baggy t-shirt you are wearing, a relic of one of Kate's old softball teams. You are not sure if the yellow sweat-stains under the arms are yours or hers.

To keep your mind occupied you invent dialogue any time you see one of their mouths moving.

"I have a moronic idea! Let's pretend we're bicycling through the south of France!"

"How romantique!"

"I told my ex-wife I would take her to France one day, but I decided to spend all my money on a high-end sport utility vehicle because I didn't care enough about her or the planet."

They dismount their stationary bicycles in unison.

"I'll see you in five minutes when I get out of the locker room—make that ten; I usually need an extra five to stare at myself flexing in the mirror."

"I'll miss you."

"I'll miss you more."

You wish the gym permitted smoking.

Miss Cooking Network ducks into the women's locker room while Jerry heads for the drinking fountain, which is conveniently located within spitting distance of your machine. You pick up the pace on the elliptical and pretend to be very focused on the television program playing above your head. Maybe he won't see you if you don't make any sudden movements. Don't look at him, don't look at him, don't look at him—shit, why did you just look at him? He definitely saw you looking at him. Great, now he is

looking at you and smiling. Stop looking at him! Perfect, he is walking your way. Concentrate on the TV—how long have you been watching the cooking network?—look interested, maybe he won't want to distract you from— a commercial break.

“Hi Carrie.”

“Oh, hey there, *you*. Fancy meeting *you* here!” Why are you being weird? Stop being weird. You increase your pace again in an attempt to prove you are just as fit as Miss Cooking Network.

“I haven't seen you here lately.” Jerry grabs the handle bar of your elliptical trainer for stability and begins stretching his hamstrings. He and your armpits are in dangerously close quarters. You wonder how bad you smell on a scale of one to blue cheese.

“That's weird, cause I'm here *all* the time. Our schedules must be conflicting.” You have trouble getting the sentences out between gasps for oxygen, but nonetheless you increase your pace again. You catch Jerry stealing a glance at the display screen on your elliptical: 7 minutes and 43, 44, 45 seconds.

“Oh are you not working 9 to 5 anymore?” Jerry has apparently appointed himself Gym Police. 8 minutes and 3, 4, 5 seconds.

“No—I'm still 9 to 5—but I usually work out when the gym's really quiet—like 3am.” You have to break every few words or you may stop breathing altogether. Jerry shows no signs of leaving.

“Well, good for you. You look great.” He actually looks like he means it, though he did perfect the art of lying while you and he were married.

“Gotta stay healthy!” you say and follow it up with a fit of smoker's cough to

prove your point. 8 minutes and 38, 39, 40 seconds. Someone has lit the backs of your thighs on fire. Instead of leaving, Jerry begins doing some sort of lunge routine and you wonder why his knee caps aren't making the loud popping noises that yours do.

“Say hi to Kate for me and tell Ben I'm going to take him up on his offer.”

“His offer?” Perhaps you misheard. This level of strenuous exercise is making you delirious.

“Yeah, he asked me to be the fourth on his golf team this spring. Unless you have a problem with—”

“Of course not!” Why would you have a problem with your ex-husband out on the green with your current boyfriend? Why would it be strange for them to wear matching pastel golf shirts and visors, share a golf cart and a high five, look into each other's eyes and for a moment feel as though they were looking into a past or future version of themselves?

“I'm happy for you. Ben seems like a great guy.”

“The best!”

“Yoo hoo!” Miss Cooking Network is now waving Jerry over to the juice bar.

“Take care of yourself, Carrie.” He gives you the same look of pity he did when he slammed the church door in your face. That door was definitely a metaphor and you wish you were the one slamming it.

What You Want to Say to Jerry But Can't Because You've Prioritized Breathing over Speaking:

1. Can't you see that I *am* taking care of myself? I *am* at the gym, aren't I?
2. Okay, I admit I haven't given up smoking, but you clearly haven't given up wearing tank-tops. We're so even!
3. I look great you say? Is it my pit-stained softball tee that's turning you on?
4. Sure, Miss Racing Stripes runs on the treadmill like a gazelle but look at how fast I can awkwardly simulate cross-country skiing!
5. I am not a charity case! But if you would like to donate, I won't stop you.

Fact: Gazelles are consistently nature's hot body contest winners.

Swear off the gym for life and stop by the front counter to cancel your membership, turn to page 45. Hit up the nearest tanning salon and stop wearing "hand-me-ups" from your daughter, flip to page 67.

Pro's and Con's of Indoor Tanning:

Pro: You will achieve that “healthy-looking, bronzed glow” (according to sign on window of accredited tanning salon, Sun Spot, in the basement of your gym)

Con: “People who frequently expose themselves to UV rays are 75% more likely to be diagnosed with melanoma, the most deadly form of skin cancer, at some point in their lives” (according to accredited medical magazine in the magazine rack next to the stationary bikes)

Pro: Indoor tanning provides you with essential vitamin D (according to flyer on counter of accredited tanning salon, Sun Spot)

Con: “Two of the greatest causes of wrinkles are smoking and UV exposure” (according to page 2 of accredited medical magazine)

Pro: Indoor tanning is much safer than outdoor tanning (according to fifteen-year-old girl behind desk of accredited tanning salon, Sun Spot)

Con: The lid of the tanning bed could lock in the “down” position, while the wiring malfunctions causing the bed to remain running, frying and bubbling your skin like bacon, while the fifteen-year-old attendant tries to open the door, which you obviously locked and triple-checked because you didn't want anyone to “accidentally” wander into your room and see you lying there naked, but now the firefighters have to come and axe down the door and will see you lying there naked anyway (while you haven't yet completed your regimen of 2-3 weekly sessions of approximately 8-15 minutes in length and are still Casper pale) (according to your own common sense)

Pro: . . .

Con: You will die and even after numerous skin grafts will have a closed-casket funeral

(your eyes definitely also closed)

Pro: You can pass Poncho, the family inheritance, onto your so deserved sister

Con: . . .

The practically prepubescent salon attendant suggests that perhaps you are slightly “too paranoid” to tan here, and says she would appreciate it if you did not “freak out” the other customers in line, who are now mumbling to each other about the likelihood of the bed locking while the bulbs continue to fry their skin. She firmly suggests buying a “self-tanning product.” She also firmly suggests a lifetime ban from Sun Spot Tanning Salon. Perhaps a bit too firmly.

“Indoor tanning isn’t for everyone,” she says, making lying motionless in a bed for fifteen minutes sound like going to accounting college.

You pick up the first bottle of self-tanner you see at the drugstore down the street from the gym. A generic-looking blonde in a white bikini promises you a “natural-looking, bronzed glow.” You are not sure whether you want to “glow.” You associate someone who is “glowing” with someone who has fallen into a vat of radioactive waste, or someone who is pregnant, though not a single person described you as “glowing” back when you were pregnant with Kate. However, looking “bronzed” would be nice, as would looking “natural.” You also consider buying a nicotine patch, but before you can make it to that aisle you calculate that a cigarette would improve your current situation by 56.7%. Majority rules.

You pull into the driveway five minutes later. You light a second cigarette on

your way from the car to the house. Kate meets you at the back door with a purring Poncho in her arms. You wonder how Kate could possibly be holding a cat that weighs an estimated two hundred pounds, and how much wet cat food Kate must have fed him in order to elicit purring from a cat who normally only breaks his silence to pass gas. Kate begins rubbing her face against Poncho's and yet there is no projectile vomit. How she can stomach that smell is beyond you. She must be sick: a serious sinus infection, complete nasal cavity blockage.

“Mother,” Kate says, “I really think you should stop smoking, it isn't healthy—”

“I know, I—”

“For Poncho to be breathing all day,” Kate continues, “Oh, and Jerry called. He wants you to call him back.”

You wonder why Jerry would be calling after you just spoke to him at the gym. Your heart feels as if it has congealed inside your body. Is there such thing as heart cancer? You should've picked up that nicotine patch. In other news, if cats could fake cough that's what Poncho would be doing right now.

Thinking about cancer always makes you think about your mother.

Things That Make You Think About Your Mother:

1. Poncho.
2. The inflection in Kate's voice when she calls you "Mother," though at least she inherited *something* from you.
3. Poncho's breath.
4. Reading the newspaper in the coffee shop, which used to be for circling appropriate Classifieds, but let's face it, there is an astonishingly low number of jobs for your unique skill set, so you have started reading obituaries instead, comparing all the deceased women in their sixties to your mother using a rating system based on career, mother-like interests, and community service. Deceased women: 17, your mother: 0.

To make Jerry think you have a life, you wait until 8:30 that evening to return his call. You get his impersonalized voicemail greeting which sounds like the woman from Movie Phone except there's no prerecorded list of showtimes. You don't leave a message.

While Ben is away teaching a night class, you strip down in your bedroom, pop open your golden pancake paint, and slather it on every epidermal surface you can reach. You are brainstorming ways to apply the tanner to your back (the best option so far being taping a sponge to a backscratcher), when you hear Kate in the hallway.

“Kate, Honey. Can you come in here and rub some self-tanner on my back?”

“Are you naked?”

“Maybe. . .” You stare at your naked breasts and slightly sagging belly in the mirror.

“Gross!” You are inclined to agree with her, but your back still looks like the iridescent parts of sliced ham.

“You came out of my Goddamn uterus, Kate. You're the one who stretched out my belly when you were a selfish fetus kicking your selfish fetus feet. Now get in here!”

You hear her run up the stairs. Fine. It's March; no one has to see your back anyway. The rest of your skin is already browning up and feeling fruit roll-up sticky. To dry yourself you begin skipping around your room, violently backstroking and jumping-jacking.

Three thoughts occur to you as you interpretive dance in the buff:

1. You really have done a lot of physical activity today.
2. You deserve to reward yourself with two sleeves of Oreo cookies.

3. You should probably close the blinds.

When Ben gets home from work that night he does not immediately compliment you on your sun-kissed glow. Instead he says, “Carrie, now I don’t want to offend you, but your face is looking a little. . . well, dirty.” He says you might want to wash it. The blonde in the white bikini did not warn you about looking dirty. You run to the mirror affixed to the hallway wall. Your face now features “natural-looking, bronzed” zebra stripes.

“It’s just that stupid self-tanner,” you say, your hands frantically rubbing your cheeks. Ben takes this as his cue to erupt into a fit of his signature silent laughter, which has become increasingly less endearing since the first time you witnessed it.

“Kate, get down here and look at your mother!”

Predictably Poncho also comes to witness the freakshow.

You manage to escape to the bathroom before your loving family decides you must be sent to the care of Barnum and Bailey, to take your rightful place next to the bearded lady. You should’ve faked leprosy. Under your sink there is (a) rubbing alcohol, (b) hydrogen peroxide, and (c) make-up remover. To combat your zebra condition you use (d) all of the above. After fifteen minutes of scrubbing the stripes are sufficiently less noticeable— enough that you would be content to go out into a public place with very poor lighting. On the down side, you’re fairly sure your skin cells are now just kindle for the bonfire that is your face.

On the fifth day of your sabbatical Ben confronts you as soon as you open the backdoor.

“Carrie, come in here. I need to talk to you.” He’s chopping some sort of purple vegetable in the kitchen. It is either eggplant or cabbage; you’re no vegetable connoisseur. He stops chopping to looking at you sideways and narrows his eyebrows. Ben is the only human being you know who can will his eyebrows into a unibrow. Only in disapproval. Only at you. You knew you were coming home too early and should’ve driven around the block a couple of times, but you can always tell him you ducked out of work early. You apparently had a habit of doing that.

“Is there some news you want to share?” You really wish he’d put the large knife down on the cutting board while you have this conversation.

“News? I’m not sure that I know what you’re talking about— ”

“C’mon Carrie, I’ve been thinking about it for days and now I’ve got it!”

While his enthusiasm over the loss of your job is rather puzzling, his brandishing the knife around like that is altogether frightening. *Play dumb, flip to page 102.*

“And what exactly is that?”

“You got that raise didn’t you?”

“What?” You are no longer playing dumb.

“The raise you told me you were going to ask your boss for. You got it, didn’t you? That’s why you’ve been in such a good mood for the past couple days?” He puts down the knife and wipes his hands on the front of his pants. His unibrow dissolves into two separate entities.

“I have?”

“Completely. You’ve even been nicer to Poncho!”

“????”

“Yeah, I knew something was up. You’ve been so happy lately. The shower incident considered, you’re like a new and improved Carrie!” He puts his arms around your middle and squeezes. Your arms hang limp at your sides.

You stop yourself from asking why it was that you needed improving. What was wrong with the old, unimproved Carrie?

“Do you want to get married?” you ask.

Things You Would Expect Ben to Say When You Accidentally Proposed to Him:

1. “Did you just start your period?”
2. “Seth fired you, didn’t he?”
3. “The purple bottle of pills is for Poncho’s heart, not for your hangovers.”

What Ben Actually Said When You Accidentally Proposed to Him:

1. “City Hall or something bigger?”

Like clockwork, immediately after you accidentally propose to Ben, Kate returns from walking Poncho who is both leashed and purring, though you adamantly warned her against spending her babysitting money on a cat-leash for a haughty, melodramatic cat. Kate and Poncho (still leashed) both saunter, noses in air, to the living room, while you

whisper to Ben that Kate and Poncho have been ganging up on you.

“Poncho is a bad influence on Kate.”

“Yeah, because *he's* the one smoking and drinking in front of her daily.” Ben is becoming more sarcastic every day that he is with you. You're oh so very proud of yourself.

Later, you catch Poncho deriding your cooking ability, from atop the kitchen counter while you attempt to prepare a wholesome dinner, the likes of which you've deprived your family for weeks because you've been “just too damn swamped at work” to have time for anything but Chinese takeout and pizza. You start to wonder if there will ever come a good time to tell Ben and Kate that you were fired over a week ago.

Over a year ago. Over a decade ago.

Ben moseys up to your side while you stand over the stove, puts his mouth next to your ear, and in a whisper you can only assume is supposed to be romantic, asks if you are making a “celebration dinner.” You lose your appetite. Poncho makes a sound you assume to be cat laughter.

During dinner, Kate complains that her pork chop is dry and her mashed potatoes runny. You glower at Poncho who is now perched on the top of an extra chair, pushed against the wall across from you in the dining room. You are now positive that the two of them are in cahoots. Ben clears his throat and announces without warning, “Kate, your mother and I have some important news to share with you.” Your runny mashed potatoes somehow configure themselves into a hard clump at the back of your throat which

prevents you from breathing. As you gasp for air you hear Poncho purring wildly.

Perhaps your choking might distract Ben from announcing accidental wedding plans to your daughter, so although your airways are now perfectly clear, you begin waving your arms frantically and grunt the word “choking” in Neanderthal without opening your mouth. You figure that now would be a good moment to fake your own death.

Ben jumps up from the table and rushes to your side with his glass of water and begins pounding—pounding—on your back. Kate chirps, “Give her the Heimlich!” too enthusiastically, clearly interested not in its lifesaving purposes but its sheer entertainment value. You want to tell her to get the camcorder and put your near-death experience on YouTube. As Ben is about to wrap his arms around you and break a rib or two, you figure he has been sufficiently red-herringed to announce any “important news” to Kate. You’re also sure Kate won’t bother asking what that news was. He did say it was “important” after all. So you begin breathing quickly, reassuring them, through artificially deep, spastic breaths, that you’re now fine. You take several sips of water, and pretend to get your breathing back on track to prove that you do not, in fact, require the Heimlich.

Kate looks at her potatoes wearily, prodding them with her fork, like you might have poisoned them and not been smart enough to steer clear of them yourself. You see her look to Poncho and smirk. Ben, not missing a beat, says, “Kate, as I was saying, we have some important news for you. I think you’ll be really excited to know—”

“We’re taking you to Disney World!” you exclaim. You hate Disney World. You have always hated Disney World. You hate no place on the planet as much as you

hate Disney World, with the exception, of course, of Disney Land. But if you know Kate, you know that Kate would never want to go to Disney World. Unless, of course, it was the EuroDisney in Paris (Kate has told you on many occasions that she wishes she had been born to Parisian art dealers). You are preparing to be ridiculed for being “ultra family sitcom lame,” a fate you would today gladly accept, when she says, “Can ANDREY-uh come with us?” You haven’t seen her look at you like this in a long time, possibly since you could win her affection by buying her chicken nugget Happy Meals.

“Sure she can. The more the merrier!” you say somehow, though you don’t even recall having opened your mouth. You don’t dare look at speechless Ben. Instead you busy yourself rearranging the food on your plate and wondering where you are possibly going to come up with the money for a vacation now that your savings account has been squandered away on funeral flowers, potato salads, and one-part coffee, one-part Irish Whiskeys.

“When do we leave?” Kate draws her cell phone from the pocket of her thrift store cardigan (wearing someone else’s trash is apparently the rage these days), and begins punching numbers you assume are the first half of Andrea’s phone number. You wonder if she always brings her cell phone to the dinner table.

“Oh not for. . .” You begin, *thinking of finishing the sentence with “a lifetime,”* when Kate’s face sags like a wet paper bag. Who is this person sitting at your table?

“Well, let’s say. . . Soon. . .” you say, hoping you will never have to define “soon.” Maybe Kate is on to you. Perhaps she is calling your bluff. That, or she is on some seriously mind-altering drugs. Ones that will need to be confiscated. And experimented with. To ensure there will be no lasting damage. On Kate’s brain.

As soon as she leaves the dining room Ben hisses, “Disney World? What’s going on, Carrie?” You don’t answer, because you can’t answer; you have stupefied even yourself. You begin clearing the table, chiseling away with a butter knife at all your uneaten, possibly fatal, redskin potatoes, flinging them into the garbage can under the sink.

“I mean I love Disney World, but. . .”

Of course he loves Disney World. His heart is as pure and innocent as Snow White’s and he is equally naive. How did he survive without you? Take the other day for instance, if it weren’t for you scaring the Girl Scout off the porch he would have bought four ludicrously-priced boxes of cookies *and* made a donation to the troop in exchange for nothing edible whatsoever.

Poor, Ben. You picture him wearing a fanny pack, tube socks and running shoes, maybe even one of those mouse-ear-hats. He would be even more excited than Kate and Andrea to ride in a giant, bright pastel teacup. They would spin and laugh and yell for you to take their picture while you hold everyone’s bags and souvenirs and sport a bad sunburn because you were banned from getting that base tan, standing with the expectant (and naturally glowing) mothers behind the metal gate that doesn’t look strong enough to protect anyone should a teacup spontaneously derail. Undoubtedly, you will feel a wave of nausea encroaching from merely watching the spiraling teacup-shaped death machines through the viewfinder of your digital camera.

“Seriously? You want to go to Disney World?”

You choose not to answer. Who knows what might come out of your mouth should you open it.

Ben is gingerly packing up the leftovers into tupperware containers though he must know that what was barely edible tonight is going to be completely unfit for consumption tomorrow.

“Why didn’t you want to tell Kate we’re getting married?”

Silence.

“What’s going on, Carrie?”

Silence.

“Answer me.”

You have started to feel like a) a dead body that Ben is poking with a stick and b) seventeen again sitting on your couch at two in the morning as your father asks you where you were all night, who you were with, and why you smell like booze and cigarettes.

Well, Father Dearest, I wasn't at the bowling alley, and I wasn't really just 'holding' a cigarette for a friend, and the punch didn't really get 'spiked without my knowledge.' Instead I was severely intoxicated and thought it might be fun to climb into the back of Christopher's parents' station wagon to conceive a child. You remember Chris, don't you? You don't? No matter, none of us will actually see him again anyway. Oh, and by the way, you and mom get a divorce in two years and you die of a heart attack in six.

You have no intention of answering Ben when the words begin to stream from your mouth like drool does whenever you fall asleep on public transportation.

“I was thinking we could have one of those Destination Weddings, you know? Like get married in Cinderella’s castle or something? Don’t they do that there?” You hear these words come out of your mouth, but don’t remember thinking them.

“Sure, if that’s what you want. . . but why not tell Kate? I mean, I feel like we’ve been getting along. . .” Ben takes the pot you’ve been holding in your motionless hands, hovering over the sink, and begins to wash it.

“I was thinking that we could do one of those surprise weddings too. Like just ask everyone to come take a vacation and then all of a sudden we’re at the altar! Surprise! I thought about not even telling you, ha, ha.” If you had an “off” button, you would have pressed it two minutes ago. And a minute and a half ago. And every four seconds since.

“Don’t you think you should at least run it by Kate?”

“No! I mean, you *never* let the maid of honour in on the surprise. If you’re going to tell anyone, it *can’t* be the maid of honour.” Suddenly you are *Surprise Destination Weddings for Dummies*. Have you seen some sort of television special about them recently? On the Cooking Network perhaps?

“That’s sweet Carrie, but how are we going to pay for this? There’s the wedding. . . then the vacation part? And Andrea? I thought you didn’t even like Andrea, and now you want to bring her on a trip? And to our wedding?”

“Yeah, well I want Kate to have someone there when we wanna— y’know— be alone.” You give him an overly dramatic wink and suddenly feel like a cast-member of a reality show. You are playing yourself and doing a terrible job. Yet your so-called “loved ones” seem to be doing the same. Why would Ben agree to this crazy Surprise Destination Wedding? Why would Kate rather go to Disney World than stay at home, throw a keg party, and watch someone put his fist through your bedroom wall? When did your stomach decide to take up breakdancing? A cigarette would make things 82.6%

better.

“Well, Seth *did* give you that raise. That’ll help. Sorry, here you are planning this elaborate Surprise-Destination-Wedding surprise, and I’m harping on about the cost. If this is what you want to do, we’ll make it happen.”

Oh yes, the raise. If you had not thrown away all traces of your attempt at mashed potatoes you would stuff them down your throat and hope to really choke on their red skins. You decide you need something that will cheer you up; accordingly you decide now is the perfect time for Poncho’s biweekly bubble bath.

Things Poncho Would be Doing if He had Opposable Thumbs:

1. Calling both your ex-husband and ex-boss on a conference call so they could congratulate each other on abandoning the sinking ship that is your life. He would kindly put the call on speaker phone so you could listen in.
2. Telling Ben about the time you were so terrified riding Disney World's Splash Mountain that you peed your pants and claimed it was just water from the "Splash," though Jerry and eleven-year-old Kate were on to you.
3. Making himself a bologna sandwich.
4. Murdering you in your sleep.

Things Poncho is Doing Because He is a Cat:

1. Taking a bubble bath.
2. Trying to simultaneously amputate your limbs and scalp you.
3. Wishing he had opposable thumbs so he could make a bologna sandwich after he murders you in your sleep.

Giving Poncho a bath has put you in such a good mood you figure you can stomach calling Jerry again.

“Hello?” A woman’s voice.

You hang up because you are apparently in the sixth grade at a slumber party.

The phone rings before you can completely set it back in the cradle.

“Hello?”

“Hi, Carrie.” At least it’s Jerry and not his croissant-baking hussy.

“Jerry, what a pleasant surprise!” There is a block of note paper and a pen next to the phone for exactly such situations. You uncap the pen.

“You just called me.” You make the outline of a woman with long hair and longer legs.

“No, I didn’t.” You begin stabbing the silhouette in the stomach area with the tip of the pen.

“Then you hung up.” Stab, stab, stab.

“That’s preposterous!” You give your drawing two eyeballs. Then a third.

“You do realize I have caller ID.” Then you stab the eyeballs.

“I-I thought I had the wrong number. I just assumed that wasn’t you, but I forgot how high-pitched your voice can be.” You go for the throat.

“That is actually what I wanted to talk to you about, so I’m glad you called.”

Take out the knees.

“I really don’t think I’m the best person to be talking to about the problems you’re having controlling the pitch of you voice. Maybe you should call your doctor or—”

“Carrie, I want to talk to you about the woman who answered the phone.” You begin stabbing in the vicinity of what would be the heart.

“Or we could talk about something else, like the rare amount of humidity that’s been in the air lately. Can you believe—” Stab, stab.

“We’ve been dating for awhile now and she’s really great.” Everyone is just so great: you, Ben, Miss Cooking Network. Stab, stab, stab.

“That. is. just. so. exciting. Don’t you agree that it’s abnormally humid for this time of year? The weatherman says—” You rummage through the drawer for a red pen.

“I haven’t introduced her to Kate yet because I wanted to make sure she was going to be around for awhile.” You find one and uncap it.

“That. is. just. so. thoughtful. But this humidity, it’s really—”

“So I want to ask you if it’s okay for me to invite Kate to have dinner with the two of us so they can meet each other.” Red pen all over.

“Hm. So she’s going to be around for awhile then?” Your paper figure bleeds profusely.

“Yes. We’re. . . . Well, I’ve asked her to marry me.” You rip the notepaper from its block.

“Huh. What a coincidence! That makes two of us.” You’ve stabbed so hard the paper is pock-marked with what feels like braille.

“Sorry? You asked her to marry me too?” You tear her in half.

“What I mean is, I’m getting married again myself. Ben and I are planning an elaborate and very expensive Destination Wedding in Disney World, Cinderella’s castle, the works. So yeah, introduce Kate to whoever you want. Listen, I’d love to chat but

I've got to meet with the caterer tonight and do extensive taste-testing. So busy with wedding plans!"

"How are you meeting with the caterer if it's in Disney World? And you hate that place. Remember when you peed yourself on Splash Mountain?" She is an ant-hill of paper bits on your counter.

"Like I said, really busy. Got to go." You scoop her up and watch her flutter into the trash.

The next day your sister calls while you're in your office (namely, that money-sucking coffee shop you cannot seem to live without) watching YouTube clips on the new widescreen laptop you bought with your severance pay.

"A Surprise Destination Wedding, Carrie? That is so unlike you—I love it! I've already called the people at Cinderella's castle, but some bad news: there aren't any openings for almost five years. How do you feel about Snow White?"

"She was a little polygamous, don't you think? I mean seven men—"

"You could still be a princess in Snow White's cottage and they have an opening in a couple months. What do you think?"

"Izzy! I think it's not a surprise anymore, so better just cancel the whole thing. Darn! Besides, how could I ever decide who's going to marry us: Sleepy or Sneezzy?"

"It'll still be a surprise. No one knows except me and I'm apparently not the Maid of Honour so no big deal. I understand. I'm really not upset... well, I was a teensy bit hurt when I first found out, but Kate *is* your daughter. So fine. I mean it's—"

"Izzy, please. I can't believe you even know about this. Do you have Jerry on

speed dial? Cause you really should have warned me that he was engaged.”

“Jerry’s engaged? Wow, what are the odds of. . . Okay, I’m confused; why would *he* know about your wedding?”

“Not answering that.” You are in the process of blocking that phone call from memory, a process that includes excessive amounts (even by your standards) of red wine.

“Then how *do* you know about the wedding?”

“Ben, obviously. He called me this morning because he knows how terrible you are at organizing these things—”

“Oh really? I’m terrible at organizing surprise Destination Weddings in Disney World? Funny, I don’t remember ever organizing one before. Must have slipped my mind because it was so awful. Hm. . . Let me think. . .” You wonder why you are getting so worked up about a wedding that is obviously not happening regardless of who plans it.

“Carrie, c’mon, you know what we mean.” Your boyfriend and your sister have somehow transmuted themselves into a cohesive, thought-sharing “we.” You make a note to buy the two of them a tandem bicycle for Christmas.

“I dunno Iz, I actually didn’t mean to—”

“Also, it’s funny cause Ben mentioned something about you getting a raise at work. I went along with it cause maybe he thinks *I* don’t know you were let go, or something. But *he* knows. . . obviously.”

“Why does everyone feel the need to phrase being terminated as being ‘let go’?”

You restart your YouTube video. A baby panda sneezes.

“Okay, if you prefer ‘fired’ then you did tell him you got *fired*, right?”

“‘Fired’ sounds so harsh. I guess I really do prefer ‘let go.’”

“Carrie!”

You begin biting the nail of your right index finger.

“Carrie!!”

Switch to the middle finger.

“Carrie!!!”

Pinky finger.

“If you weren’t planning to tell him you got fired, why would you tell him you got a raise? That’s insane!”

You mark this as the most appropriate time to hang up the phone. Two minutes later there is a new email in your inbox. From: Izzy. The subject line reads: “Get your act together. Stop lying. Don’t be such a fetus.” You delete the email without opening it.

You realize it is quite pointless to wake up at eight every morning since you are no longer a card-carrying member of the real world. You begin sleeping in until ten, eleven, noon, explaining to Ben that management is in the process of testing various start times in an effort to increase productivity. Inexplicably you are also always home by five.

“You know Seth, always trying to push the manilla envelope.”

Is there any way to make lying a profession? It’s fast becoming your number one asset.

Possible Careers for a Compulsive Liar With Over 16 Years of Experience:

1. Motivational speaker on high school tour circuit.
2. Infomercial salesgirl pushing the latest innovation in abdominal exercises—
specifically a device for the above-the-naval muscles only.
3. Representative for experimental drug companies seeking approval from the FDA.
Many meetings in alcohol-serving coffee shops to contemplate whether or not death
can be categorized as a side-effect.
4. Writer of self-help books, parenting books, the labels on the bottles of self-tanning
lotions.
5. Your old job (“I absolutely one hundred percent love my job!”).

The next week you also forgo making yourself workplace presentable each morning.

“The dress code? Seth finally came to his senses after I staged a naked sit-in. As long as I’m wearing any sort of clothing these days he’s happy.”

Similarly, driving to the coffee shop to half-heartedly flip through the Classifieds, and whole-heartedly read the obits, loses its appeal. You convince Ben that you are so far ahead in your work that Seth has agreed to let you work from home.

“Seth recognizes that I’m one of those self-motivated people who don’t require the constant supervision and the confines of a stifling office setting.” This way you will also have time to work on planning the wedding, you tell him. “And I’ll finally have time to read all the wedding magazines you’ve been buying!”

Lost: Integrity.

If Found Please Return to: The woman in the supermarket’s twelve-items-or-less line (though she has thirteen) who is hesitantly picking up wedding magazines, before being overcome by what looks a violent bout of the stomach flu, and shoving them behind the less offensive magazines with nearly-naked, large-chested women on the front covers.

You spend the weekend converting your den into a home office, creating the perfect place to concentrate on your work (re: page 67 of the Ikea catalogue). It proves itself to be quite a conducive work environment (re: your Free Cell statistics instantly improve). 89% to win.

When Ben comes home Monday evening he says he has some “news.”

“I can’t wait to tell you, but it’s so good I almost think I should save it for a special occasion, like date night.” He joins you in the living room where you are flipping through television channels. He has yet to take off his coat. You don’t remember ever having “date night.”

“That’s perfectly fine. Let’s wait until Christmas. I don’t know how much more ‘news’ I can handle.” Speaking of which, there are far too many news channels. You wonder if Ben took it upon himself to order some special world news cable package.

“You’re not at all curious?” he pouts.

“Nope! I will wipe my brain clear of the fact that you are sitting on potentially catastrophic news and will not be telling me for months. There is still some wine left isn’t there? That should do the trick.” You head for the kitchen.

“Christmas? I was thinking a romantic dinner.” He follows you.

“What’s more romantic than Christmas dinner? With the whole family? Of course, my mother won’t be able to attend this one.” You actually manage one tear. Your tear ducts are apparently not paralyzed after all.

“Okay, I’m going to just go ahead and tell you.” Ben is such a great listener.

“I’ll give you Thanksgiving.” You take out a bottle of white wine. You are not particularly interested in what kind of wine it is.

“I’m just too excited. I—”

“Fine, Labour Day. Can it wait until Labour Day?” You edge past him to the drawer where you keep all your tools. Inside there is a rusty can opener, a bottle opener, and three corkscrews.

“You know how I’ve always been really interested in art?”

“No, I thought Kate was the only abstract, grey-scale painter in this house. Is there a holiday in August? You could save it for—”

“Well, you know how I’m always drawing, doodling all over anything I can get my hands on?” You viciously stab the cork and begin your attack.

“*Everyone* doodles while they’re on the phone.” Your voodoo doll masterpiece makes you picture Ben attacking his own art, probably of something symmetrical, drawn to proportion using formulas and rulers that he would then attack systematically, perfect square by perfect square. “Doodling on the phone is the only way to get through conversations with one’s . . . sister. Fourth of July is only a few months away. You could tell me during a firework show.” The cork pops its way out of the bottle. “How special would that be?”

“I’m not talking about doodling on the phone. I’m talking about taking a more creative path in life.”

“Teaching art at the community college is a great idea! Knock yourself out!” You squeeze past him to the cabinet and take out your favourite mug.

“You’re not listening, Carrie.”

“Well, I was under the impression you were going to wait until—”

“I want to make art my full time profession.” You put the mug back in the cabinet and raise the bottle to your mouth. You are very thirsty.

“Just out of curiosity, how many organs does one actually need to remain living per say? My liver might only be worth a buck-twenty-five but I bet one of my kidneys would fetch a handsome profit.”

“Look, I wouldn’t be seriously thinking about quitting teaching if it wasn’t for

your work bonus. We can live off your salary until my painting career takes off.”

“My, um, work *bonus*?” You are very, very thirsty.

“Izzy just called me on my way home from work to tell me the great news. First the raise, then the bonus. Congratulations, Employee of the Year!” There is not enough wine in the world.

“Just out of curiosity, does this mean that the college will be looking to hire a new math teacher?”

“I guess they will be after this semester.”

“And are they dead set on hiring someone with a math degree or is there some flexibility with that?”

Ben’s unibrow grows back as he stares at you intently. For a moment you have the impression that he is reading your thoughts. However, he doesn’t immediately call you a she-devil and storm out of the house so your thoughts must be safe.

1993: the year both you and your mother had respective buns in your respective ovens: yours a long-limbed fetus you would name Kate, your mother’s a group of rapidly multiplying cells she would name Herby. You did not know about Herby. She did not know about Kate. You guarded your respective buns with respective fervour.

“Carrie, I’m a little concerned.” Your mother said one day during Jeopardy’s second commercial break. Your mother watched Jeopardy, not because she was remotely adept at trivia but because shouting insults at Alex Trebeck in the form of questions rejuvenated her spirits in a way that a brisk walk or a cup of tea might for someone more sane than she.

You crossed your arms, lacing them through the front pocket of your oversized, hooded sweatshirt, guarding your stomach in a way that was becoming habit. At least your father was out somewhere getting drunk and forgetting he had a family. Maybe you could convince your mother to keep your secret from him. Maybe he would never come out of his whiskey-induced stupor long enough to even notice a diapered baby scampering around on his oriental carpets.

“There is no easy way to say this, so I’m just going to say it: you look fat. Real fat. Especially in the middle. Frankly, you look like one of my garden gnomes. The especially pudgy one. You know the one with the blue overalls? The one I named Mervin. Well, you are—”

“Really, Mother? There’s no easier way to say that? Pick a euphemism for ‘fat.’ Any one.” You wished you were the older sister, away attending a liberal arts college, majoring in women’s studies like Izzy, experimenting with drugs and same-sex relationships, not that Izzy had time between student council meetings for either. In fact, you would have rather been anywhere than at home and been anything but pregnant, and with anyone but your mother. A more fun scenario: having a mute Siamese twin attached to your hip who could only communicate by licking your neck for “yes” and biting it for “no.”

“I’m just looking out for your well being. That’s what mothers do. They tell their daughters when they look like they’ve shoved a pork roast up their blouse. Maybe you need to cut back on the burgers and the chili cheese dogs. Get out for a brisk walk. Watch less TV.”

“How many times do I have to tell you that I’m a vegetarian?!” you shouted on

your way to the pantry to grab a bag of Cheetos which you shook like a tambourine up the stairs to your room.

“Who are people with higher I.Q.s than Alex Trebeck?” From your bedroom you heard your mother settling into Double Jeopardy. You thought about congratulating her on becoming a Grandma after she awarded herself a daily double for “What are things Alex Trebeck has suppressed deep within his subconscious?” But then you chickened out and instead began doing crunches on your bedroom floor, rewarding yourself Cheetos for abdominal crunches in a ratio of 2:1.

You fall asleep thinking about the months you spent alone in your bedroom, furiously doing abdominal exercises even though you could no longer find evidence of muscles no matter how hard you poked. In a dream you give birth to Kate who emerges from the womb a fully formed sixteen-year-old, permanently folded in half at the hips, her face the colour of Cheeto dust. Covered in embryonic fluid she’s yelling at you, blaming you for her bad posture and the kids at school who chase her around chanting, “Hi, I’m Kate and I’m an Oompa Loompa.”

Fact: Oompa Loompas have been fighting for a workers’ union since 1971.

You wake to a scratching noise below your headboard and check the bedside clock. 9am. Your alarm isn’t set to go off until noon. You reach for Ben’s therapeutic foam pillow and smother yourself with it. You can still hear the scratching.

“Poncho! Quit scratching or it’s dry cat food for a week!”

The scratching stops. Then starts, stops, starts again.

“Poncho, I mean it! What are you scratching at?” you ask, before realizing that Poncho is hogging the covers and, contrary to the laws of physics, occupies more of the bed than you do. For some reason your mind goes from Poncho to a radioactively enlarged cockroach as the culprit of the scratching. You hoist Poncho up around the belly and lower him behind the headboard to investigate. A viscous, brown something scurries across the hardwood and disappears into your closet.

“Sic it, Poncho!” you scream, now standing tip-toe on your duvet, pointing to your closet, as if Poncho could see you. As if Poncho could see you and was responsive to any of your commands. As if Poncho ever took a break from impersonating an elderly sloth with arthritis to partake in any form of physical exertion.

“Good for you, Fatty. You just missed your breakfast.”

“What to do About Mice in Your House”

Written by: Various Internet Bloggers

1. “Buy mouse traps. One type is the humane trap which detains the mouse inside, but does not kill it. You will then have to release it into the wild (where it will most likely find its way back into your house) or remove the mouse from the humane trap to kill it yourself. Common ways to kill mice that have been caught in humane traps are with a hammer, by drowning, or by suffocation in a plastic bag. The other type of mouse trap is the snap trap which is supposed to kill the mouse the moment it contacts the spring, but these often go wrong, leaving a partially dead mouse with one limb snapped open. Again, you may have to use the hammer, the bucket of water, or the plastic bag.”

Posted by: DrX

2. “Buy mouse poison. Mouse poison comes in the form of blocks, or small, clear, plastic bags filled with pellets. Place the poisonous bait near suspected nests and feeding areas. When ingested, the poison should kill the mouse after one to twenty feedings. The poisoned mouse will then find a place to die, typically in the nest, usually located inside the wall. The decaying mouse carcass will only smell for a few weeks, but may be especially pungent if the mouse has died in close proximity to a vent. Poisonous mouse bait should not be used in a house with small children or pets as the poison is potentially fatal for them as well.”

Posted by: DrX

3. “Get a cat. Preferably one that is not overweight and lazy, with a cataract in one eye. You may want to check its background to ensure that its mother was an avid

mouse-hunter. Also, spoiled cats will often feel that mouse-hunting is beneath them, so you will want to avoid catering to your cat's every plea for more teriyaki-flavoured beef jerky. If your cat is already spoiled try not giving it food for a few days. That should renew its fighting spirit!"

Posted by: CatLover

4. "Forget the expensive traps and poisons. I have a solution that works every time and uses what you have lying around your house. Here's what you do. First get an old bathtub. Place it where you know the mice like to spend their time. Fill it half-full with water. Get a strong wire and attach its ends to each side of the bathtub so that the wire runs taut, lengthwise across the top of the tub. Now wrap a slice of processed cheese around the wire in the middle and coat the wire in bacon grease. Lured by the smell of bacon and cheese, the mouse will climb up the tub to the wire and run across to the cheese. The bacon grease will cause the mouse to slip into the water where it will drown in less than an hour. Every morning I wake up to five or six drowned mice in the bathtub. It's great! As easy as bobbing for apples!"

Posted by: Johnny Norfolk

5. "Place saucers filled with fizzy, sugary soda around mice feeding areas. The mice will drink the soda for the sugar and then will literally explode from the carbonation. Kind of messy, I admit, but works every time!"

Posted by: Tinkerbel9

6. "Or just grill them."

Posted by: Mike17

How do you deal with the recent infestation of your house by filthy rodents? Call a costly exterminator, flip to page 74. Buy cheap mouse traps from Dollar Town, turn to page 56. Decide it is time for Poncho to begin a week-long fast in order to get him nice and hungry for the mouse hunting business, proceed to page 2.

You take a break from working in your home office (re: reading a Wikipedia article on house mice) to have a cigarette. While you're enjoying your company-approved-and-encouraged smoke break Izzy calls for the fourth time. Unlike like the three other times, you decide not to press "ignore." Many she can offer some insight into your problem.

"Iz, I think there might be mice in my house."

"Why do you think that?"

"My horoscope warned me a mouse infestation was on the horizon."

"Seriously?"

"No, Iz. I saw one."

"What did it look like?"

"I dunno, typical mouse. Big black ears, gloved hands, red shorts—"

"Oh, funny. Is this your way of telling me something about your Disney World wedding? How fun! Let me try to guess. . . Okay so something about your wedding and Mickey Mouse. . . Let's see here—"

"Yes, I've decided on a new locale—The Mickey Mouse House has everything I've ever dreamed of in a second-wedding venue. Where better for that cute, cozy, cottage-vibe we're craving? The bridesmaids can dress up as Mouseketeers and—"

“So it’s not about Mickey Mouse and your wedding?”

“I can’t believe this conversation is taking so long.”

“You’re eating Oreos by the sleeve in bed again aren’t you?”

“No.”

“Leaving glasses of Diet Mountain Dew on the floor?”

“Negative.”

“Hoarding gummy bears under your pillow in case you wake up in the middle of the night and need a sugar fix to carry you back into dreamland?”

“You know me so well, but no.”

“Huh. I’m surprised that with Poncho around you’re even having this problem. I thought even the smell of a cat drives mice away.”

“Well, I *have* been bathing Poncho.”

“He smells *that* bed?”

“Yes. He’s peeing on himself just to torture me. I’ve also been using bathing as a disciplinary tactic.”

“Maybe if you treated him better he’d be more inclined to do you favours.”

“I’m not asking for *favours*. I am simply expecting him to follow his instinctual nature! I can’t have Ben finding out that my house has a mouse infestation. He’ll think I’m not clean.”

“Well, ‘clean’ isn’t exactly a word I would use to describe you anyway. But maybe it’s just that one mouse. You’re probably overreacting. I’m sure it’s nothing a trap won’t solve. Oh, and I hope you finally told Ben you got fired once he congratulated you on being crowned Employee of the Year.”

You light another cigarette.

“Carrie?”

Inhale, inhale, inhale.

“Carrie!?”

You buy a set of three traps from Dollar Town and break two of them after snapping your fingers inside and wailing your hand down on the ceramic counter to free yourself. Takes you half an hour to set the third trap, but you still have your fingertips. You load the trap with peanut butter bait, make yourself a peanut butter sandwich, and place the trap in the back of your closet where you hope Ben won't later notice a rotting mouse carcass.

The next morning, while Ben is at work, a whole litter of mice play a game of tag on your bedroom floor. Seemingly, the mice are no longer solely nocturnal or mind in the least that there is a giant, hungry cat lying on the bed or that you are shrieking profanities in your highest-pitched voice, in an attempt to match the frequency of their hearing. In other news, later that day you find Poncho in your closet happily devouring peanut butter off traps that apparently only serve the purpose of de-fingering humans and feeding oh-so-greedy kitties.

The House Mouse: A Guide

Carrie A., House Mouse Expert

Characteristics:

The house mouse, or *Mus Musculus*, is a rodent of small and slender stature with a pointed nose and virtually hairless tail. However, its small stature does not imply that the mouse is meek, timid, and/or non-threatening. Its eyes are beady and black, and protrude from its head menacingly. House mice are usually greyish-brown with a grey or tan belly, but may vary in colour from light brown to black (black mice being an omen that death is imminent). Mice can fit their bodies into tiny spaces, like cracks in walls, that are only 1cm (1/4 in) wide, which means there is virtually no way to barricade yourself in the bathroom to sleep peacefully in your bathtub. Due to such characteristics, house mice are a close second to the cockroach for animal/bird/insect most likely to survive a nuclear holocaust, and are classified as an animal of “least concern” on the conservation status chart. Following their arrival on colonists’ ships from Europe, house mice migrated across North America and now can be found in every state including coastal areas of Alaska, and in every room of your home. Their droppings are black (until they eat the poisonous blocks you bought, which did not kill them but instead turned their droppings a vibrant shade of emerald), about 3 mm (0.12 in) long, and have a strong, musty odour. Vacuuming droppings from carpeted surfaces, which is highly recommended, results in deeply satisfying clicking noises as droppings reverberate down the length of the vacuum hose.

Communication:

Mice are virtually colour-blind and instead rely on their keen senses of smell, touch, and

hearing. Their voices can be heard by humans as high-pitched squeaks, but they also communicate with each other in the ultrasonic range, as well as through sign language and telepathy. Their long tails may be used, like antennae, to transmit warning codes amongst the mouse population.

Food Habits:

House mice primarily feed on plant matter, such as grain, but they will also consume human flesh, dairy products, and their own droppings (meaning you will not succeed in starving them to death). High-fat and high-protein foods, as well as sugar, are usually preferred even when grain and seed are present. A common meal consists of forgotten, day-old restaurant mints found at the bottom of new your leather purse. Feeding time is demarcated by the insistent wrinkling of wrappers. An impossibly fast metabolism keeps the house mouse healthy regardless of its diet, and keeps your floors resembling the tops of chocolate-sprinkle cupcakes. Do not, however, mistake your floors for chocolate-sprinkle cupcakes, as mice droppings can carry and spread the following diseases: Cholera, Influenza, Pneumonia, Yellow Fever, Hay Fever, Scarlet Fever, Rheumatic Fever, Rocky Mountain Spotted Fever, Syphilis, Tuberculosis, Meningitis, Hepatitis, and Athlete's Foot.

Activity:

Mice constantly explore and learn about their environment, memorizing the locations of pathways, obstacles, food and water, shelter, and your pillow while you're sleeping. They can sense surfaces and air movements with their whiskers. Mice are well adept at many activities such as climbing, jumping, deactivating mouse traps, swimming, and reading minds.

When Ben gets home from work he commends you on how clean the house is looking.

“I vacuumed!” You say beaming like you’ve aced one of his math tests.

Fact: The only class you aced in high school was English. Your teacher said you had a most developed sense of irony.

Ben plants a chapped-lip kiss on your forehead and calls you the “best fiancée ever.” If only he knew there were green blocks of poison tucked in the corner of every closet and cupboard of the house (despite the very overt label on the box warning against using said poison blocks should you have a pets). If only he knew you didn’t just vacuum *that* morning but you spent *every* morning for the past four days, against your will, vigorously vacuuming emerald mouse turds so he wouldn’t notice the potentially radioactive colony of superhuman mice invading the inner workings of your walls, waiting for the right time to feast on your brain matter.

“I want my future husband to have a clean and tidy house to come home to!” *And not think I am a feral urchin content to live in squalor among diseased vermin.*

“You’re going to be home during the day tomorrow right?”

Of course I am going to be home tomorrow. I now truly do work from home: tirelessly researching house mice and planning their demise before they can establish squatting rights. “Yes, I’m swamped with work. I’m going to lock myself in that office all day long and—”

“Great. The exterminator will be here at 11:30.”

You almost think you heard the word “exterminator.” Maybe it was “terminator.” Yes, it is definitely more likely that a fictional Hollywood cyborg would come to your house. Maybe he can even help with the mouse problem.

“The what?”

“The exterminator I called to get rid of the mice.”

“We have mice?!”

Kate, the miracle worker, walks in the back door before Ben can question you as to who land-mined the house with mouse traps and blocks of poison if you were, as you claim, oblivious to the problem. You shift your attention to your favourite daughter.

“How was your day?” you ask before she can wiggle her way out of one knee-high, black, leather boot.

“Since when do you care how my days are?” She shrugs out of a black leather jacket and you wonder when it was exactly that she joined a bike gang.

“Since always.”

She snorts.

“Humour me, Kate. How was school today? Which mother accidentally packed marijuana cigarettes into her daughter’s gym bag?” Arms crossed, you bar her entrance to the dining room. Ben, standing behind you, lightly lays a hand on your shoulder.

“Maybe we should let her get settled in before we bombard her with an interrogation,” Ben suggests. You should’ve known he’d side with Kate.

“Why does asking my daughter how her day was make me the Spanish Inquisition?”

Maybe if you pick a fight with Ben he will forget you’ve inadvertently welcomed a mouse colony to inhabit your walls and then didn’t warn him that he was in danger of contracting several serious diseases. You turn around to face him.

“And remind me again, how many children *you* ’ve raised?” This is getting fun. “So tell me Kate, what happened at school today?” Your tone has lost its sing-song intonation. Poncho waddles his way between you and Kate. Great. Three against one.

“You really want to play house right now?” Kate asks, scratching Poncho between the ears to thank him for his loyalty. Is that what you want? To play house? Maybe some high-stakes poker sure, but house? Definitely not.

“Yes, let’s play functional mother-daughter. I’ll be the fast-talking, sweet Gilmore Girl and you be the fast-talking, whiny one.” She isn’t getting off so easy.

“Well, I started my period—” Ben heads to the kitchen at the mention of the “p” word. “—between second and third and had to ask my Biology teacher for a tampon—” Ben begins rummaging through the silverware drawer at “tampon.” “—because none of my friends are speaking to me. Then I ate lunch outside—”

“A picnic!” you interrupt.

“— Alone. It was sort of raining. My hair got poufy and everyone called me ‘Poodle’ in fourth and fifth.” Poncho is rubbing the length of himself against Kate’s ankles and glaring up at you.

“They’re just giving you a nickname. That’d what friends do,” you offer. She ignores you.

“Andrea *accidentally* elbowed me in the back on the bus and I fell into the lap of this smelly ninth grader.” Kate called her An-DREE-uh, not An-DREY-uh.

“Maybe she’s trying to play matchmaker?” Kate pushes past you to join Ben in the kitchen.

“What aren’t you getting? Everyone at school hates me.” She opens the refrigerator and removes a jug of Ocean Spray.

“Ahh, high school. Makes you nostalgic, doesn’t it, Ben?” This provokes Kate to smack a glass down hard on the counter. Maybe it’s a good thing her peers don’t want to socialize with her. You remember that, for awhile, you were far too popular in your last months of high school. . .

“This is why you wanted to hear about my day? So you could mock me? Why can’t you ever be a normal mom? Why did I have to get the defective mom?”

She scoops Poncho up like a pile of fresh laundry and heads for her bedroom. The Ocean Spray and an empty glass remain on the counter. Her door slams for dramatic effect.

“Am I bad mother?” you ask Ben, as you pour yourself a glass of CranRaspberry. Ben hesitates. He should not be hesitating. As the new boyfriend/fiance/step-father-to-be there is only one answer for him in the script.

“No. . . But you could have asked her why none of her friends are speaking to her.” He is far too logical to properly deal with teenagers. Or to follow a simple script.

“She’s just being dramatic. Tomorrow they’ll totes be BFF’s.”

“Have you been reading her text messages again?”

Text Messages from the Outbox of Your Daughter's Cell Phone

(because the inbox was mysteriously wiped clean)

To: Jake

<<4sure! see u @ 8>>

To: Andrea

<<OMG Jake just asked me to hang out 2nite!>>

To: Andrea

<<R U CRAZY? im obvs not gonna tell Braydon!>>

To: Andrea

<<i dont care what she thinks... she broke up w him... like 4ever ago>>

To: Andrea

<<just dont say anything to her. its not like Jakes gonna tell her>>

To: Braydon

<<no i have 2 much hmwk 2nite>>

To: Braydon

<<ya ill see you 2morrow. goodnite xoxo>>

To: Andrea

<<hes not gonna find out!>>

To: Andrea

<<hey do u need ur parents permission to go on the pill??>>

To: Andrea

<<no my mom would never take me... but maybe ill ask Jerrys new gf.>>

To: Andrea

<<no shes cool... ill just say shes my stepmom>>

“Izzy, my daughter is a lying, cheating, teenage slut.” You confess over Saturday lunch with your sister. Izzy has recently “gone vegan” and dragged you to some new restaurant that specializes in soy. She thought you’d like the place, citing the time you “went vegetarian” while you were pregnant. You inform her that your stint as a vegetarian was only a cover so you didn’t have to explain to your mother why the meatloaf you were once so fond of now sent you reeling towards the toilet.

“Kate’s a good kid, Carrie. What are you talking about?” Izzy squeezes a lemon into her glass of water and then steals the one from the rim of your glass. You nab it back from her glass.

“You could’ve sprung for a lemonade.” You search the menu for something with imitation bacon on it.

“Certainly not! Too much sugar. Plus, that’s how restaurants make all their money. Pop costs them virtually nothing. It’s pretty much just all water. Did you know that if you only order water at restaurants you can save four hundred dollars a year?”

“It seems like you should save more than that. Let’s see. . . two glasses of wine for every dinner out. . . at three times a week. . .”

A teenage boy, with a name-tag that reads Treven, interrupts your mental math to take your order. You wonder if Kate will give her baby a made-up name when she gets knocked-up. She should count herself lucky you didn’t follow your seventeen-year-old instincts and name her “Morrisey.” You decide there is nothing edible on the menu and opt for a liquid lunch.

“How much money would I save per year if I *only* ordered drinks?”

“Taking into consideration the cost of a new liver or—”

“Kate wants to go on the pill.”

“Oh my.” Izzy suddenly avoids making eye contact and instead starts trying to pick up her ice cubes with her chopsticks. “Well, I guess it’s a good thing she came to you about it.”

“Not exactly.”

“Carrie, what do you mean ‘not exactly’?” She has a habit of lowering her chin into her neck when she chastises you. She appears to be burrowing her chin into her esophagus as she taps her chopsticks on the table and waits for you to answer. You wish she was still interested in the ice cubes.

“I may have *accidentally* come across a text message or two.”

Your margarita arrives with an abundance of citrus fruits decorating the rim of the glass. This might just be your healthiest meal of the week. You still don’t offer Izzy a lemon slice.

“I can’t believe you read her texts!” Izzy hisses before Treven is out of earshot. He freezes in place, his head cocked in your direction like he wants to join the conversation. Conveniently, the table next to yours needs wiping. Very slow wiping by the looks of things.

“*I’m* the bad guy? She’s the one who’s sixteen and tramping it up all over town!” Treven has given up the wiping-the-table illusion altogether and is now staring at you, wide-eyed. You meet his stare. “You want her number? Huh? Do you?”

He turns abruptly on his heels and flees for the kitchen without answering.

“You should take it. She’ll probably do you too!” you call after him. Then you turn causally back to your sister. Izzy’s chin is pressed so hard into her neck that she

looks like she's playing that game where you have to hold an apple under your chin and pass it to a member of the opposite sex without dropping it.

“What is wrong with you?” Her whisper is barely audible. As if being as quiet as possible could make up for your outburst.

“She's only sixteen, Iz.”

Always the supportive sister, Izzy reminds you that you were pregnant at seventeen and convinced your parents you were just bloated until month seven.

“At least I wasn't two-timing the baby daddy!” Of course as you say this Treven has returned to drop off Izzy's plate of weeds, fungus, and squishy things. His face turns bright red, bright red and fleshy, bright red and fleshy like raw meat. Your stomach growls. On the bright side Izzy will be too embarrassed to ever invite you to this restaurant again.

“I know that she lies to me and that's okay—”

“It is?” Izzy knows nothing about teenagers. Izzy doesn't even know anything about *being* a teenager. She asked your mother to write “23” on her cake when she turned thirteen.

“Yeah, it'd be weird if she was honest with me all the time. And if she's going to have sex, well okay, but not with some guy she's seeing behind her boyfriend's back. Not with a friend's ex-boyfriend. I knew that girl in high school and I didn't think Kate could be that girl.”

How to Talk to Your Kids About Sex

Start Early:

Teaching your children about sex demands a gentle, continuous flow of information that should begin as early as possible. (*A “gentle, continuous flow”? You couldn’t make this stuff up.*) For instance, when teaching your toddler where his nose and toes are, include “this is your penis” or “this is your vulva” in your talks. *You envision that going over well in preschool: “Head and shoulders, knees and penis, knees and penis, knees and penis. . . .”*

Take the Initiative:

If your child hasn't started asking questions about sex, look for a good opportunity to bring it up. Say, for instance, the mother of an eight-year-old's best friend is pregnant. You can say, “Did you notice that David's mommy's tummy is getting bigger? That's because she's going to have a baby and she's carrying it inside her. Do you know how the baby got inside her?” Then let the conversation move from there. *Move to where? Informing the eight-year old of what happens when condoms break?*

Talk About More Than “The Birds and The Bees”:

One aspect that many parents overlook when discussing sex with their child is dating. In movies, two people meet and later end up in bed together, whereas in real life there is time to get to know each other—time to hold hands, go bowling, see a movie, share a root beer float, or just talk. Children need to know that this is an important part of a caring

relationship. *If Kate happens to ask, you did not take Ben home immediately after meeting him in line at the grocery store. Instead, it was months (and months) of talking, holding hands, bowling, and float-sharing before you and Ben “ended up in bed together.” Kate never asks.*

Communicate Your Values

It's your responsibility to let your children know your values about sex. Although they may not adopt these values as they mature, at least they'll be aware of them as they struggle to figure out how they feel and want to behave. *Next step: get some values. Izzy seems to have plenty you could borrow.*

Listen to Your Child

Listening to your children and taking their feelings into account also helps you understand when they've had enough. Suppose you're answering your 9-year-old's questions about AIDS. If, after a while, he says, "I want to go out and play," stop the talk and re-introduce the subject at another time. *What if, after a while, she stops to say, “I want to go out and have unprotected sex”?*

Turn to page 78 to have “the talk” with Kate or flip to page 132 to film the delivery of the newest addition to your family.

Kate's room is upstairs, next to a small bathroom and down the hall from the guest bedroom you turned into an office for Ben when he moved in; you really never had many guests, anyway. Kate's bedroom door is closed. You try the knob; it's locked. You bought her a locking doorknob when she turned fourteen but didn't tell her you kept an extra key for "emergencies." Instead of fetching the key like you would were she not home, you knock gently. Who knows what she might doing in there—or who.

"Kate, can I come in?" You hear rustling on the other side of the door: no doubt the rustling of a strange boy who climbed into Kate's room via the window and is now trying to conceal himself as a pile of clothes in your daughter's closet. You make a mental note to have the tree outside her window converted into toilet paper.

"One second!" she calls. More rustling. Maybe there is more than one boy in there. Or a really big boy. A really big boy who's almost a man.

It takes Kate almost a minute to unlock the door; you know because you are counting your Mississippi's. When she finally does open the door her hair is askew and her clothes look as though they were sitting in the dryer overnight. You have seen this fashion style in the mirror and pause to acknowledge the uncanny mother-daughter resemblance.

"Kate what were you doing in here?" You push past her and begin the investigation. She was clever enough to re-lock the window.

"Getting dressed." Kate doesn't even ask why you're on your belly looking under her bedskirt. She is busy tracing and retracing her eyelids with black liner .

"Of course you were getting dressed. But why were you undressed to begin with?"

Kate's reflection rolls her eyes at you, explains that she was changing for dinner at Jerry's house.

"Again? That's the second time this week," you say with your head in her closet.

"Mom, are you looking for Poncho? I really don't think he needs another bath."

"No. . . I actually wanted to talk to you about something." It might be easier to have this conversation without making eye contact. Correspondingly you decide not to remove your head from the closet.

"It won't take long, will it?"

"No, no. . . I just wanted to talk about. . . well, we never really had the talk about—"

You are interrupted by someone knocking on your front door—not a normal knock, knock, but an annoying knock-n-n-knock-knock—Jerry.

"I take it you don't need a ride," you say, more to yourself than to Kate, as you follow her down the stairs. Kate opens the door for her ex-stepfather, and to your surprise, Miss Cooking Network follows him into your living room.

"Hi, Carrie. Here to pick Kate up for dinner."

You try to make your mouth work while Miss Cooking Network, who will certainly be cooking up something delectable for dinner, strips off her coat and plops it down on the sofa. You didn't realize she'd be staying for any length of time necessitating the removal of outerwear.

"Sorry, I almost forgot to introduce you two. Carrie this is Svetlana. Svetlana, Carrie." It would be sacrilege for her name to be anything other than Svetlana. You curse your mother for not naming you something exotic. In other news, your tongue still

appears to be out of commission so you reach out to shake. Svetlana hesitates for a moment, seems to be examining your hand for signs of rabies or avian flu, then gives you her limp hand in return. You resent having to do all the work.

“Lana insisted on coming in to see where I used to live,” Jerry explains like it is the cutest thing he ever heard, not the crazy psychobabble that it is.

Predictably, Poncho waddles his way into the meet and greet.

“Oooo, who is this little kitty?” Svetlana could not be bothered to give you a proper handshake but Poncho gets a full-on rubdown. Her use of the word “little” confirms your suspicions about her lack of sanity.

“Do you guys want something to drink?” Kate asks, smirking wider than Poncho is. Jerry also takes it upon himself to remove his coat and throws it on on your couch. How did you forfeit your right to decide if and when layers of clothing were to be taken off and flung onto your furniture?

“Yes, make my drink strong, please.” You hope Kate has enough sense to also poison Svetlana’s.

“Do you have Perrier?” Svetlana asks to which Jerry adds that he’d like one as well. They are making themselves quite comfortable. On the loveseat.

“Sorry, Mom only drinks Diet Mountain Dew or anything alcoholic. We have tap water if you want.” You wonder what your daughter has the nerve to say when you’re *not* around.

“Tap water will be fine, Kate. Lana, would you like a tour?” Is this really happening? Jerry is going to show his new girlfriend where he used to sleep with his ex-wife and where she now sleeps with her new boyfriend/fiance who looks strikingly

similar to her ex-husband? Lana, again displaying overt warning signs of insanity, claps her hands together in excitement about the tour. . . until she eyes something along the baseboard.

“What is *that?!?*” she asks, jumping into Jerry’s lap and pointing at the baited mousetrap in the corner of the living room. If you had known you would be entertaining company this afternoon you would’ve cleaned up a bit. Maybe also moved the pile of laundry Ben folded, with your bras and underwear on top, from the chair in the living room to your dresser drawers. Maybe. But definitely hiding the mouse traps would’ve been priority number one.

“Oh, the mouse trap. . . well, I guess the fact that it doesn’t have a rotting mouse squished inside is a good sign,” you offer, “though I wouldn’t leave your purse open or you might be adopting a new pet.” Lana wrinkles her nose and perches herself on the very edge of Jerry’s knees, no doubt contemplating exit strategies should an army of mice come marching in through the vents.

Fact: Mice yearly kill an estimated 3 people worldwide.

Fact: Eastern European blondes yearly kill an estimated 30 people worldwide.

“I guess I should congratulate you in person,” Jerry says, changing the subject from your squalid living conditions. You shake your head vigorously in response.

“Sounds like it’s going to be quite the wedding,” Jerry continues just as Kate enters the room carrying a glass in each hand. Thankfully, she appears not to have heard or else assumes Jerry is talking about someone else’s wedding, most likely his own. Svetlana takes her glass from Kate and you notice she doesn’t take even a small sip

before placing it down on your coffee table without a coaster. You don't actually own coasters, but you at least would've expected her to use a magazine or one of Ben's students' tests, like you do.

Jerry, however, is happily consuming tap water, contaminates and all. So happy in fact he decides to announce a toast as soon as Kate returns with the next two glasses and shoves one into your hands. You cannot think of words fast enough, but you do wave your arms as if your new profession is air traffic control.

“To the happy couple, Carrie and Ben, on their engagement!”

Kate looks at you, then at Jerry. You again, Jerry again. Then she walks to the centre of the living room, brings her glass high above her head, and smashes it down on the wooden floor.

Game Over.

Sorry, you lose. There are no more legal moves.

Do you want to play again?

Y/N?

Perhaps it is all your fault, even though there was nothing else you could do. Marrying Ben would've been unfair to Kate. The monotone of his voice would've certainly driven you both to either sharing a white, padded room or a pitcher of magic kool-aid before you retired for a long nap. You *had* to box all of Ben's clothes and books and antique radios and store them on the front lawn until he could come claim them. Surely, no one could have expected you to sit quietly in the corner with your hands in your lap, watching him meticulously fold each argyle sweater and pack each of his six radios in bubble wrap and quadruple check every drawer. At least not after you slept with Jerry. For the second time after the split. During which Ben came home from teaching early, walked in on you and said, "Oh dear." "Oh dear, oh dear, oh dear." You certainly didn't ask for rain thirty minutes after everything he owned was on the lawn; it wasn't even cloudy that day.

And why would you tell Jerry to leave Miss Cooking Network, the goddess of all that is golden, for you? You can't cook and had no plans to dig out your monogrammed "Jerry & Carrie" towels. At least Kate is happy that she won't have Miss Cooking Network as her pseudo-step-mommy. Any sane parent would agree that you *had* to do something about the birth control issue and admitting to her that you'd read her text messages would have ensured she no longer referred to you as "Mother" but "my mother from whom I've been estranged." So naturally you had to blame Miss Cooking Network for breeching Kate's trust. "I'm sorry you thought you could trust her with this. If only her mouth was as small as her waist. It's probably best if you don't confront her about it and just never speak to her again. Ever. People like her just want attention."

Izzy, for one, is proud of you. For some reason she thinks breaking off the accidental engagement with Ben is a step forward in your grieving process. She has

started going to an expensive shrink in an attempt to “unblock her subconscious.”

You’ve assured her that you are engaged in no such progress, but she insists the next step involves “sharing built-up feelings.” A thoroughly gag-inducing prospect.

“Do I have to share them with *you*?” you asked.

“Well, no, I guess not. Who do you want to share them with?”

“No one.”

“Then it’s not sharing.”

“Okay, then myself, I guess.”

“Fine. But you have to write them all down.”

The next day you sit in front of your laptop and stare at the blank word processing document, the first of which you’ve ever opened on this laptop. You begin chain smoking your bag of baby carrots, which, curiously enough, do not make satisfying substitutes for glorious nicotine. Poncho, after somehow defying gravity and jumping onto the desk, waddles his way over to your computer and plops himself onto your warm keyboard. Of course Poncho would have no faith in you to write anything. You shoo him off and then check to see how many letters you can no longer use thanks to Poncho’s belly fat. Your keyboard sustained no lasting damage. Shocking. Baby carrot, baby carrot. You check your email: a message from Izzy pleading you to be on time for the job interview she has set up for you this morning. How did she find out that you discovered and deactivated all four of the alarm clocks she set to go off in five minute intervals starting at 9am and hid under your bed? You stare at the white page again. Baby carrot, baby carrot, baby carrot. Then you check your email again: no new messages in the last

thirty seconds. You begin to type. One word. Two words. Baby carrot. A sentence.

Baby carrot. Two sentences.

Tuesday your mother died. Ovarian cancer.

Artist's Statement

So You Wrote A Novel. . .

You first started this thesis project as a short story in Dr. Nicole Markotić's third year creative writing class. You were inspired by one of the assigned readings for the course: the short story "Grasp Special Comb" by Stephanie Rosenfeld, from *What About the Love Part?* You were immediately struck by the narrative form of the story. Written from a second-person point-of-view, "Grasp Special Comb" reads as mental musings to oneself fragmented by to-do lists and excerpts of the narrator's attempts to compose a guide for dealing with head lice: "Head lice is a scourge from hell that will temporarily ruin your life and possibly damage it permanently./ Kind of strong. Stick to facts" (30). The story is about a character who – like your own protagonist – juggles motherhood, divorce, her own mother, and various domestic crises.

What you found particularly intriguing about this story is that although Rosenfeld invests in a second-person perspective, she does not do so to address readers in an effort to position them in the role of the protagonist, as is the case of many second-person texts. For example, in Margaret Atwood's short story "The Tent," the second-person point-of-view draws the reader in, to make her or him a part of the story. As such, the "you" is never ascribed characteristics, thereby allowing any reader to easily slip into the role of protagonist:

Some of the howling is coming close to you, in your tent, where you crouch in silence, hoping you won't be seen. You're frightened for yourself, but especially for those you love. You want to protect them. You want to gather them inside

your tent for protection. The trouble is, your tent is made of paper. . . . You know you must write on the walls, on the paper walls, on the inside of your tent (144).

The story, about a character who takes shelter in a tent to protect his/herself from the outside world full of vicious “howlers” who wish the you-protagonist and his/her loved ones harm, is an allegory: the howlers outside the tent and the tent itself are symbols. Atwood is describing through metaphors what it’s like to be a writer, and you can easily position yourself as her “you,” identifying with the feeling that you *must* write, that there are no other options for you, even if the result is futile: “. . . you can see the eyes of the howlers, red and shining in the light from your burning paper shelter, but you keep on writing anyway, because what else can you do?” (146). However, you wonder if every reader is like you, if every reader can as easily slip into the role of protagonist in this story. Even in this short (four-page) allegory the “you” takes on at least one specific characteristic: the need to write as a way to make sense of the world. You realize that Atwood’s “you,” although never characterized, does not represent all readers, but instead all writers; it would be near impossible to sustain a completely generalized “you” for a text of any extensive length.

Monica Fludernick seems to agree. In “Second-Person Narrative as a Test Case for Narratology,” she observes that “many second-person texts start out with a passage of what initially appears to be a generalized or ‘generic’. . . ‘you,’ a ‘you’ with which the reader in the role of ‘(any)one’ can identify.” However, such a generalized “you” is often not sustained throughout the length of the narrative, instead narrowing into a very specific “you” with very specific characteristics “so that the reader has to realize that the ‘you’ must be an other, or the protagonist” (452). Whereas “The Tent” leaves the “you”

largely un-described, allowing for reader to become protagonist, “Grasp Special Comb” instantly makes the reader aware that the “you” describes another. James Phelan explains that “the fuller the characterization of the ‘you,’ the more aware actual readers will be of their differences from that ‘you,’ and thus, the more fully they will move into the observer role, and the less likely this role will overlap with the addressee position” (351). Such is the case in Rosenfeld’s story, in that because the “you” is characterized from the very onset of the story—given a name and gender, for example—the reader is never allowed to become an actor in the narrative, only an observer.

When you began researching how to write extensively in second-person, the first novel you read was Italo Calvino’s *If on a winter night’s a traveler*. The novel consists of a series of chapters, each one the opening to a book that, frustratingly for the unnamed “you” character, does not continue into the second chapter. The first chapter opens with a passage in which the protagonist could indeed be any reader: “You are about to begin reading Italo Calvino’s new novel, *If on a winter’s night a traveler*” (1). Here the “you” is universally applicable to whoever holds and reads the book, and thus readers can easily position themselves as the protagonist. However, you began to notice the narrowing from general to specific (that, according to Fludernick, inevitably occurs) by about page 7, where certain specifics about this reader-protagonist emerge as possibilities. Calvino’s novel continues: “Perhaps you started leafing through the book already in the shop. Or perhaps you were unable to, because it was wrapped in its cocoon of cellophane? . . . Or perhaps the bookseller didn’t wrap the volume; he gave it to you in a bag.” These possibilities allow for the reader, whoever s/he may be, to continue identifying with the “you” as the specifics surrounding how s/he obtained the book remain in the realm of the

hypothetical, thereby acknowledging that the reader may have obtained the book in any other fashion. These specifics presented as hypothetical possibilities, indicated by the word “perhaps,” exclude no one reader; the only certainty presented thus far is that the reader is reading *If on a winter's night a traveler*.

However by page 32 the “you” has narrowed its scope. The protagonist is now certainly male: “You can leave the bookshop content, you, a man who thought that the period when you could still expect something from life had ended.” Female readers, yourself included, can no longer position themselves as the protagonist. Irene Kacandes points out that the novel in its original Italian would feature the masculine form of the second-person pronoun and thus would marginalize female readers from the onset. She argues that to identify with the “you,” the female reader “would have to read as a man” (148). However, the “you” can also have the opposite effect. Brian Richardson observes that “a number of feminist writers have moved beyond the I to the more fluid, interactive, and destabilizing technique of second-person narration” (314), noting examples such as Edna O’Brien’s *A Pagan Place* and Jamaica Kincaid’s *A Small Place*. You believe this discrepancy between second-person perspective as both marginalizing and liberating for women exists, in part, due to the different ways in which second-person perspective can be used by writers and thus interpreted by critics such as yourself. Though Rosenfeld and Calvino both employ second-person perspective, the reading experiences for you were vastly different. While Calvino’s “you” narrows from generic to specific, Rosenfeld’s protagonist is a distinct character from the very first page in which she writes her name under the title of her work-in-progress: “Pediculosis: Identification and Treatment by Abigail Randall-Hillman” (27). This leads to another difference:

Rosenfeld's "you" is both narrator and narratee (which Gérard Genette defines as the embodied or unembodied character to whom the story is addressed)¹. Moreover, Brian McHale maintains that, "The second person is par excellence the sign of a relation. Even more strongly than the first person, it announces the presence of a communicative circuit linking addressor to addressee" (223). In essence, the protagonist, Abigail, is addressing herself, narrating her story, imploring herself, giving herself instructions, directions, orders: "Anyway, if you write a guide put this in it" (53). She is, in McHale's terms, both addressor and addressee.

Darlene Hantzis argues that "second-person perspective" only truly exists "when the second-person pronoun simultaneously houses the narrator, actant, and narratee(s) in a narrative text" (77). This limited view of what truly constitutes a second-person text would eliminate any narrative in which the "you" refers to a character other than the narrator—be it the reader or a separate character in the text. Uri Margolin agrees; he posits in "Narrative 'You' Revisited" that there are certain characteristics a text using second-person perspective must feature in order to be considered a distinct variety of narrative discourse. One of these defining characteristics is that "the events/actions/states involving this 'you' are specific and individual as regards their time and space, as opposed to the purely typical or recurrent (generic you, 'you' as equivalent to 'one' or 'everyone')" (6). Rosenfeld's short story embodies both Hantzis's and Margolin's definitions of second-person narrative. Rosenfeld's protagonist, Abigail, who is rather distraught over head lice, speaks to herself: ". . . Lice can be used to measure many

¹ See also Gerald Prince's "Introduction à l'étude du narrataire" (Introduction to the Study of the Narratee) and *Dictionary of Narratology* for an in-depth look at the concept of narratee).

things: the shortness of a day; the ferocity of your instinct to kill things that attack your child; the natural amounts of pessimism and optimism you possess; the number of days remaining in your life” (32). There is no outside narrator telling Abigail how she feels about lice; she tells herself. Moreover, her actions are specific and individual. Unlike the hypothetical possibilities that may or may not be true of Calvino’s you-protagonist, Abigail and her actions are described in non-negotiable certainties.

However, Mary Francis Hopkins and Leon Perkins, as well as Monica Fludernick, diverge from Hantzis and Magnolin’s limited view of what can truly be considered a second-person text. In “Second-Person Point of View” Hopkins and Perkins offer a more encompassing definition of a “pure second-person text,” arguing that like first- or third-perspective, second-person perspective may be subdivided. They suggest three categories for subdivision: “second-person-limited omniscience,” “second-person-personal,” and “second-person-impersonal centre of consciousness” (119). To this end, both your and Rosenfeld’s use of second-person perspective are emblematic of only one category, that of “second-person-personal.” Similarly, Fludernick would term your novel manuscript, as well as Rosenfeld’s, “a reflector mode narrative in the second person.” She defines this “reflector mode” in “Second Person Fiction: Narrative ‘You’ As Addressee And/Or Protagonist” as a narrative in which the “you” is an experiencing self, a character who is active in the narrative (222).

Conversely, the use of second-person in *If on a winter’s night a traveler* could be categorized as “second-person-impersonal centre of consciousness” (as per Hopkins and Perkins), since the “you” does not encompass both the narrator and narratee; Calvino’s “you” only refers to the narratee, in this case the reader-protagonist. Instead of housing

the narrator and narratee within the second-person pronoun, there further exists an omniscient narrator mediating the story. This narrative structure becomes evident when the narrator addresses the narratee on page 32: “Who you are, Reader, your age, your status, profession, income: that would be indiscreet to ask.” It is clear here that the narrator is not addressing himself, but a separate character. This is further complicated by the fact that there exists a different narrator for each opening chapter of each of the ten books which the reader-protagonist begins reading, while the original, omniscient narrator continues to narrate the reader’s reading process and the events that surround his reading experience.

While you cannot deny the novel’s genius, it seems unlikely that Calvino’s complicated narrative strategy could be employed in a context other than within a work of metafiction. Marilyn Orr agrees that *If on a winter’s night a traveler* should be considered metafiction as the subject of Calvino’s novel is reading itself. In “Beginning in the Middle: The Story of Reading in Italo Calvino’s *If on a winter’s night a traveller*,” Orr writes:

Reading, the Readers discover, is a dynamic activity performed together with other readers and with writers and with a book that is itself the product and producer of many readings. The text is an amalgam of many texts and only readable in the context and intertext of world and books. (218)

As a metanarrative, what Calvino wants his reader-protagonist, along with his actual readers, to take away from the novel cannot be found in the plot of the layered and fragmented narrative but instead in the experience of reading the novel. The point, Orr argues, is that “there is no pure text, no innocent reading” (217). Thus, in reading the

layers of novel openings, the reader-protagonist, and Calvino's actual readers, come to an understanding about linear narrative, mediated through an omniscient narrator who controls the structure, if not the plot.

C. Nella Cortupi escalates *If on a winter's night a traveler* from the realm of metafiction to that of hypermetafiction and explores the connection between hypermetafiction and second-person perspective. She writes, "In metafiction, a reader is either explicitly or implicitly appealed to as the terminal point or receiver in the communicative chain that is admitted, by definition, to be envisaged by the speech or narrative act" (283). However, though the reader is appealed to and envisaged by a metafictional narrative, the reader remains absent in the text. In other words, the reader is projected from the narrative and integral to it, but is not an actant within the plot. This is not the case, Cortupi argues, of *If on a winter's night a traveler*: "Calvino's hypermetafiction moves beyond this recognition or confession of textual status to a radical, fictionalized thematization of this very metafictional principle through the construction of an actantially discrete protagonist-reader" (283). In other words, second-person perspective helps the novel achieve its hypermetafictional aim. By having the narrator refer to a "you" who is both passive reader and active protagonist, Calvino is able to put into fictional play the relationships between reader and writer and reader and text, while problematizing the theories at the heart of metafiction. To that end, Cortupi writes,

the effect of having such a reader-made-protagonist through second-person narration is not the identification of the actual reader with such a protagonist but rather a backhanded and humorous display of the ontological distance that

separates the verbally constructed world of fiction and its fictitious reader from the actual world with its actual readers. (285)

While this “second-person-impersonal centre of consciousness” form of second-person narrative has achieved Calvino’s goals, you are not attempting to use second-person perspective to construct a hypermetanarrative. Instead, like Rosenfeld in her story, you, in your novel, use the second-person perspective to create a deeply fragmented and yet reflective main character who appears to be narrating her story to herself. Carrie, in an effort to avoid confronting her grief over the loss of her mother, divides herself into a narrator and narratee character: one part actor and one part commentator. While desperately detaching and alienating herself from her own experiences, she can be freed of the responsibility of being the force of action in her own story:

You have no intention of answering Ben when the words begin to stream from your mouth like drool does whenever you fall asleep on public transportation.

“I was thinking we could have one of those Destination Weddings, you know? Like get married in Cinderella’s castle or something? Don’t they do that there?”

You hear these words come out of your mouth, but don’t remember thinking them.

As evidenced in the excerpt above, the narration is a reflection of the protagonist seeing herself as a disjointed “you”: both narrator and narratee, rather than a harmonious “I.” Traditionally, an “I” protagonist only takes on the role of the narrator-character, chronicling a story for an imagined reader (narratee). But as it would be unlikely for Carrie to imagine a narratee outside herself, the novel’s narrative structure suggests that she is her own audience, and that the reader is merely listening in, rather than being

addressed. Such a structure, then, posits the reader as an unintentional observer.

Carrie also frees herself from the responsibility of her actions in the segments written as Choose Your Own Adventure narratives, in that they allow her to justify the decisions she makes. For example, in the following passage the novel proposes that Carrie has a choice in how her own life will play out, depending on which “page” she turns to: “Swear off the gym for life and stop by the front counter to cancel your membership, turn to page 45. Hit up the nearest tanning salon and stop wearing ‘hand-me-ups’ from your daughter, flip to page 67.” Such passages play with the conventions of a junior fiction genre in which second-person perspective is the norm, in order to provide ironic commentary about the autonomy of the protagonist. In such novels the reader, who becomes the protagonist, is afforded the opportunity to choose which direction the plot will take. Readers are meant to feel as though they have ultimate control over the narrative, yet they are most often presented with only two choices, then must flip to the corresponding page to await the consequence of that choice. Thus, in your novel these passages represent the lack of control Carrie feels over the unfolding plot that is her life.

The Choose Your Own Adventure genre is also subverted by the page numbers that are arbitrary and lead nowhere, similar to the way Carrie feels about many aspects of her life, such as her job she describes as “inputting random numbers into arbitrary spreadsheet boxes.” The genre is further subverted by the fact that there is often no choice at all, only a direction or a command: “Flip to page 56 to avoid informing Ben and Kate that you, the employee-of-the-year, have joined the ranks of the unemployed. Continue to get ready for work in the morning, preparing a ‘workplace appropriate’ outfit that does not include sweatpants or jeans.” However, it is important to remember that as

both narrator and narratee, Carrie has put these restraints on herself. By giving herself only one possible choice, or making it seem necessary that she do a particular thing, she feels she cannot be held accountable for the outcome. In her mind this outcome is inevitable, much like the outcome for the reader-protagonist once s/he chooses option A or B in a Choose You Own Adventure novel.

This refusal of the narrator to accept responsibility for her own actions is mirrored in another second-person text, Jay McInerney's *Bright Lights, Big City*, which you did not begin reading until you had written the majority of your novel. Stephanie Girard writes that McInerney's unnamed "you" protagonist developed his identity when he wasn't looking, blaming not himself for who he has become but cocaine, or as the narrator calls it "The Bolivian Marching Powder." Girard writes: "That the narrator speaks of himself in the second person is evidence of his split consciousness, of his inability or unwillingness to locate himself within an identity" (169). You were surprised at how similar Girard's notion of "split consciousness" is to how you've thought about your own protagonist as a disjointed, fragmented "you." Like Carrie, McInerney's protagonist is narrating his own story to himself. McInerney has said that his use of second-person point-of-view is actually "a very common form of interior monologue" (qtd. in Girard 170). Girard furthers that although second-person narration may be common in that sense, "it is not a common literary form. . . . On the level of form, it is the mirror image of free-indirect discourse; rather than creating identification within a detached mode of narration, it creates detachment within a mode of identification" (170). Girard recognizes that apart from attempting to draw the reader into the role of protagonist (as in "The Tent" and *If on a winter's night a traveller*), second-person perspective can also be used to convey a

character's story as he or she narrates it to his or her self: "You are not the kind of guy who would be at a place like this at this time of morning. But here you are, and you cannot say that the terrain is entirely unfamiliar, although the details are fuzzy"

(McInerney 1). John Kirby further contrasts *Bright Lights, Big City* and *If on a winter's night a traveller* in terms of how the reader responds to each text. Kirby writes,

The reader [of *Bright Lights, Big City*] knows that he or she is extradiegetic, outside the narrative, and only assumes identity with the main character as part of the act of play in which reading consists. Calvino's sophisticated strategy [in *If on a winter's night a traveler*, alternatively] is to catch you the extradiegetic reader, off guard, and make you the subject of diegesis, thereby spiriting or abducting you into the narrative. (qtd. in Richardson 321).

In both your novel and *Bright Lights, Big City* the "you" houses the dual character of narrator and narratee, and thus, as Girard posits, "the narrator is simultaneously outside and inside himself; he is both the seeing subject and the object seen" (170). Being both observer and observed accounts for Carrie's often distorted sense of reality. She cannot at once be the acting subject and a reliable narrator able to objectively comment on her actions. There must necessarily be a discrepancy (of which the structure ensures that the reader becomes aware of this discrepancy) between what is happening in the "reality" of the novel and what Carrie is telling herself is happening. Such a discrepancy is evident in the following passage of "Things You've Inherited From Your Mother": "There is only one black item in the box: a figure-flattering skirt that falls just above the knee. Funeral perfect. Kate eyebrows your outfit as you climb into the car. It's been ages since she saw you look this good. You'll have to hide this skirt when you get home so she doesn't pilfer

it to wear it to school.” Carrie has deluded herself into thinking that her mini-skirt is not only appropriate funeral wear, but that her daughter’s expression means she covets the skirt. Readers, however, will have no trouble discerning Carrie’s unreliability as narrator in this scene.

This discrepancy culminates in Poncho. The cat Carrie has inherited from her mother serves as the ultimate embodiment of Carrie’s very subjective reality. As the receptacle of Carrie’s neuroses, Poncho is ascribed human-like qualities and behaviour: “. . . you whisper to Ben that Kate and Poncho have been ganging up on you. ‘Poncho is a bad influence on Kate.’ . . . Later you catch Poncho deriding your cooking ability, from atop the kitchen counter while you attempt to prepare a wholesome dinner.” As Poncho becomes more and more human-like in his perceived chiding and criticizing of the protagonist, he in a sense fills the role left vacant by Carrie’s mother: “it’s just as likely your mother began to indoctrinate [Poncho] years ago.” Transferring some of the qualities of her mother onto Poncho allows Carrie to avoid dealing with her grief altogether. The conflicted ways she felt about her mother become embodied in Poncho, and thus she can refuse to feel a sense of loss by ascribing her mother’s criticisms of her onto the cat. In doing so, she does not confront the loss of her mother, but rather perpetuates their strained relationship. Carrie cannot recognize that her own version of reality is skewed, as she is (as Girard would point out) simultaneously outside and inside herself.

Another point of connection between your novel and *Bright Lights, Big City*, and in fact “Grasp Special Comb” as well, is that all three protagonists are writers in some sense of the word. The unnamed narrator of McInerney’s text is an aspiring writer

employed as a fact-checker at an also unnamed magazine. Your protagonist, like Abigail of “Grasp Special Comb,” is not a writer by profession but is engaged throughout the novel in various acts of writing. Lists such as “Things You’ve Inherited From Your Mother”; “People You’re Sure Your Mother Hired From Beyond the Grave to Drive You Insane”; and “Things You Can Get Accomplished while Driving to Work” permeate segments of linear narrative, but rather than interrupt the story, many of these lists work to continue or further the narrative. For instance, following the list of pro’s and con’s of indoor tanning, it becomes clear that the “con’s” are actually part of Carrie’s conversation with the salon attendant:

Con: the lid of the tanning bed could lock in the “down” position, while the wiring malfunctions causing the bed to remain running, frying and bubbling your skin like bacon. . . .

The practically prepubescent salon attendant suggests that perhaps you are slightly “too paranoid” to tan here, and says she would appreciate it if you did not “freak out” the other customers in line, who are now mumbling to each other about the likelihood of the bed locking while the bulbs continue to fry their skin.

As evidenced in the above excerpt, the list in your novel becomes another way to recount dialogue, and for Carrie to tell readers her story, via her telling it to her own self. Though she may envision herself as a writer, it is clear she envisions herself with an audience of one. However, you didn’t want these lists that Carrie writes to herself to be gratuitous or to pause the narrative. Instead, you invested in the list as a literary technique in itself, like second-person perspective, a way to continue the telling of the story, perpetuating the narrative, instead of interrupting it.

More formal pieces of writing further your novel's narrative arc as well, for example Carrie pens a letter to her replacement at the office and composes "The House Mouse: A Guide." The former juxtaposes the second-person address of Carrie's letter with that of the novel, as Carrie is employing the "you" in reference to an imagined reader outside herself (her employee replacement). She writes, "So you are replacing me. Apparently you are great with numbers, enjoy mind-numbing work, and will never need to come in late or leave early. Kudos to you." Again, as in the novel as a whole, the narrator and narrate conflate: Carrie is not only writing to a future employee to give her pseudo-advice, she is also writing *herself*, commenting on her own previous flaws as an employee at this establishment.

In terms of the latter example, Carrie's "guide" to the house mouse plays with the generic conventions of a guidebook, a genre in which second-person perspective is the norm: "A common meal consists of forgotten, day-old restaurant mints found at the bottom of your new leather purse." Guidebooks conventionally employ the "you" in the most generic sense, and yet here Carrie has narrowed this "you" to a more specific reader, namely (again) herself. This scene is similar to Abigail's attempts at writing a guide for dealing with lice: "Lice might make you remember strange, unrelated things. Cooties, cootie spray, being a kid; sitting in the woods in Memory Grove with Maddy Jacobs and Jimmy Colon and taking about the ghost you're supposed to be able to see there at night. . ." (33). In both cases the "guidebooks" purposefully confuse facts about their subjects (mice and head lice) with rather hyperbolic commentary of how such subjects have affected the narrators' lives. For instance, Carrie's description of the activities of house mice is a confluence of researched fact and hyperbolic satire: "Mice

constantly explore and learn about their environment, memorizing the locations of pathways, obstacles, food and water, shelter, and your pillow while you're sleeping. They can sense surfaces and air movements with their whiskers. Mice are well adept at many activities such as climbing, jumping, deactivating mouse traps, swimming, and reading minds." The subjective commentary that infiltrates Carrie's "guidebook" as well as her other segments of writing is instantly recognizable as fiction though Carrie presents them as fact. Her writing then helps to position her as an unreliable narrator, which she necessarily *must* be since she has fragmented her identity in order to avoid facing her grief, and as a result has a skewed sense of reality. By stepping into the role of unreliable narrator, Carrie thus also vacillates between a totally trusting narrate (why wouldn't she believe her own narrative?) and a questioning reader, one who does *not* believe the narrator's claims, thus necessitating Carrie-the-narrator's continued and escalating fabrications.

How to End Essay:

1. conclude with a brief summary of everything that's been said, reiterating why second-person perspective is the most fitting narrative form for your novel's content (boring? dry? unnecessary?)
2. go on a riff so that you address your "you" (ie: yourself?) the way Carrie has been, ending with how you hope that you haven't been (like Carrie) simply talking to yourself (confusing?)
3. skip ending altogether (tempting)
4. end with a list of possible endings (oh, you're so postmodern!)

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