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You First

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Bergmark: You First

WINNER

YOU FIRST

Jen Bergmark

Claire announces to the Frolic Room that the ceiling lights remind her of diaphragms.

“Think so, Benjamin?” she asks me. People stop talking. A guy with tattooed knuckles looks up and grunts. Everyone waits for my opinion. I’m straddling my barstool, mouth agape at the ceiling.

“They look like spaceships,” I say.

Claire laughs and tosses her head. Her platinum hair flashes. It’s pretty clear to all that I’m not her Romeo. She soon has a cluster of watered-down Screwdrivers in front of her and the rapt attention of every nightcrawler in the place.

“That wasn’t very smart,” I say afterward. We’ve crossed Vine, heading for our cars. Claire, on my arm, stops every few feet to step on a walk-of-fame star.

“Hey,” she says. “W. C. Fields.”

“Who knows where those guys have been.”

“You’re such a skinny baby.”

I’m a baby because I’m twenty-seven. Claire, as she puts it, is ‘thirty-ish.’

“I mean it,” I say. “You shouldn’t draw all that attention. I’ll get fag-bashed. You’ll get raped.”

“Been there, done that,” she says.

“What do you mean, done that?”

But she’s back at the stars, stepping on Grace Kelly.

In Saint Louis I used to cook for boyfriends. I wore a ‘Kiss the Cook’ apron, which I haven’t worn since I moved here six months ago. I thought California would be different. I imagined meeting a nice guy in the produce aisle. He’d be buying avocados. He’d be picking out

eggplants. He'd have a tan and good hair. I'd invite him for dinner and pretty soon we'd shack up and I'd host elaborate dinner parties. I'd get a restaurant gig—assistant chef.

But in West Hollywood everyone eats broiled chicken and egg whites. My craft services job doesn't involve cooking. I lug a picnic cooler filled with sandwich fixings to movie shoots. I set out plastic tubs of Red Vines and boxes of mini Twix bars. My salary just about covers the payments on the convertible I convinced myself I needed.

I was popular in Saint Louis, but now, six months in, phone calls have dwindled. I was the one who got out. I was the one with dreams of glamor. I abandoned my comfortable Midwestern life in search of that elusive more, and I suppose my friends are resentful. Soon I'll be relegated to yearly Christmas card status.

"Maybe you should eat those Red Vines," Claire tells me. "Boys here aren't interested in a skinny kid." She wants me to hire a personal trainer. I had no idea it would be this difficult.

I met Claire during a shoot for a CBS comedy special where I provided food and she designed the costumes. She hung around my table during her breaks. Every guy who approached gave her a once-over. She said she wished I served cocktails, and when I said, "I can make a mean one," she replied, "You'd probably make a mean snatchtail." She was funny. She rattled off a series of drinks I'd never heard of—could I make a Frisky Witch, a Tijuana Taxi? I'd never tended bar. How about a Velvet Crush?

"What's in it?" I asked.

"Kool-Aid and Gin."

She left the table with my phone number on a napkin and the napkin filled with M&Ms. My first date on the west coast was with a straight girl.

It turns out Claire was raped, a month ago, during a movie shoot in Barstow. After last call at the Longhorn Saloon, someone slipped a

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pill into her Margarita. She woke up in a motel bed three miles from the trailers and crew, every button torn from her blouse and a fistful of her own hair in her hand. She walked back barefoot. She tells me this at a steakhouse where she has invited me for Bloody Mary Martinis, in honor of the return of her menstrual cycle.

“Thank God,” she says. “I peed on about a dozen of those test sticks.”

“That’s horrible.”

The candle on our table goes out. Claire reaches for the sleeve of a passing waiter and asks for a new one. The waiter looks at her chest.

“And the worst of it? I almost got heatstroke from walking in the desert.”

I’m holding an olive in my cheek. It feels lewd. “That can’t be the worst of it,” I say.

“Of course not, baby. That was a joke.” She stands and tugs discreetly at the seat of her jeans. “I’ll get us another round.”

“The waiter will be back,” I say, but she’s off to the bar. I fold my cocktail napkin into a little square. I watch the people milling around. There’s a red glow to the lighting that makes everyone look sunburned in a healthy way. They all seem to know each other. Claire’s taking a long time. Her hair should be easy to find in the crowd, but I don’t see her anywhere. I’ve begun folding the napkin into a fan shape when she hustles up, balancing full glasses and apologizing loudly. A man in a sport coat follows her. I mistake him for the manager of the restaurant, but suddenly he’s sliding into our booth.

Claire rattles off an introduction—a staccato ‘Kurt, Ben, Ben, Kurt’—and I learn that Kurt directs horror films. I’ve never heard of him. “I could not get the attention of the bartender,” Claire says. “Kurt came to my rescue. We worked together on *Dread Terror* way back when.”

Kurt laughs, revealing formidable incisors. “I don’t even remember Claire!” He turns to me. “Claire tells me you work in craft services. Down in the trenches, eh?” he says. His fingernails are buffed.

Later, while Kurt's taking a leak in the bathroom, Claire says, "It would help a whole bunch if you'd do the yawn thing." Her breath smells spicy and her eyeliner is smudged.

Because I'm feeling a little tipsy myself, my first impulse is to congratulate her on her sexual prowess. Then I remember the reason for our evening. "Do you think it's a good idea?"

Kurt approaches, noticing his unzipped fly just in time. I start yawning.

The freeway is nearby. I head north, past the glow of the Capitol Records building and the angular houses protruding from the mountainside. I land in Studio City, only just over the hills, but it feels like a reprieve. The blinking neon cocktail glass outside The Oasis looks promising.

The Oasis is aptly named. Here are guys like me, who skirt the edges of Santa Monica Boulevard. There's a refreshing lack of muscle tone; some have even given up entirely, the curve of love handles above their waistbands. They're gathered for a night of camaraderie—the ones who are too old, who are losing their hair, who aren't butch enough or femme enough, who dress like leather daddies but drive Saturn station wagons. They're assembled around a baby grand, where an ancient-looking, heavily rouged queen is playing "At Long Last Love."

There is one wearing a dress shirt tucked into belted jeans. He poses as though he knows people are watching him, and at first I think he is pure West Hollywood. But when he turns, I see how average his face is, undefined jaw and close-set eyes. As I watch, he begins to unveil the strain of his effort. He exhales. Rounded shoulders. A slight paunch. I feel an affinity with his doomed aspirations. I sidle up next to him at the piano.

His name is Frank. He won't tell me his job or his age. We comment on the piano player's choice of music. We take turns buying rounds. After closing we head down the street to a rectangular stucco building where he rents a studio apartment. I sit in a computer desk chair and wait while he spends an inordinate amount of time lighting votive candles.

“May I have a glass of something cold?” I ask. My mouth feels like it’s been blasted with a hairdryer.

A match sputters between his fingers. “In the kitchen,” he says.

I grope my way, finding the refrigerator by the gleam of a nightlight above the sink, a plastic Jesus figurine pressing his finger to his venous knob of a heart. Taped to the refrigerator door is a calendar with a photo of a baby dressed as a pea pod. On the lone refrigerator shelf I find a withered lime. I was hoping for Pepsi. I fill a glass with water from the tap.

When I return I see that Frank’s got a cardboard storage box open on the bed. He’s pulling things out: a bungee cord; something small, flat and square I can’t identify. His hands are deep in the box and the stuff inside clanks. I take a gulp of my tepid water.

“Where is it?” he says softly. He looks much handsomer in the candlelight, the shadows giving him a sharp jaw line. Then he says, “I need to turn on a light.”

Illuminated, the studio is more dorm room than apartment. Frank’s desk is dust covered with a clean-looking spot here and there where something was moved. His shirt has a stain on it. The small, square thing on the bed is green and rubber. He puts the box in the corner, snaps off the light. “Ta da,” he says, holding up another bungee cord.

“What’s that on the bed?” I ask.

“Dental dam. We don’t need that.” He tosses the square over his shoulder.

Apparently Frank likes to be latched to his headboard. I hook the metal ends over old grooves and scratches. Frank lies on his stomach, his arms dead weight, bouncing a little in the elastic cords. His body is spongy, and unresponsive. “Condoms in the nightstand,” he says into the pillow.

It’s difficult with his body so limp. For him, this is part of the appeal. He mutters encouragement while I arrange his legs and shift his hips. Then, when the whole thing becomes perfunctory, a little boring, with me pushing slowly into him while his arms sway in the bungee cords, he rears up, grabs the headboard and begins to buck violently. His back thumps against my chest. The struggle, the quick

rhythm of it, sends me up and over into that haze just before orgasm where I lose track of myself. I grapple to seize Frank's shoulders before it is too late—but it is too late—and when my head clears, I find I've been thrown off the bed and I've spunked on the bedspread. The open end of the condom is peeking out from Frank's ass.

A few awkward apologies and we lie next to each other. There's a large framed print over the bed, a reproduction of Hopper's *Nighthawks*, with Marilyn Monroe and Humphrey Bogart at the counter instead of the usual couple, and Elvis tending bar. The picture makes me uneasy, like Los Angeles makes me uneasy, with the ficus trees and shrubbery on people's lawns wrestled into shapes, trimmed to look like lollipops or strings of pom-poms. Fakery for no particular reason other than to alter things. Frank dozes off. I wake him to say that I'm leaving, and we exchange phone numbers. He hesitates before writing down the last two digits. On the sidewalk below, I look up at his apartment window, watch the light dim by degrees as he blows out the candles.

Early the next morning Claire calls and asks me to come with her to her rape crisis meeting.

"It's tonight. You'll be my sponsor."

I'm groggy, lying on top of my blankets with my shoes on. Somewhere down the street there's a car alarm trilling. I must have left food from my last job sitting out. The apartment smells like garbage.

"Do they have sponsors for rape crisis?" I say. "Wouldn't I have to be someone who—?"

"Just come." She lowers her voice. "I only go because my shrink says to."

"You're whispering."

"Kurt's making coffee in the kitchen."

"Everything okay?"

"Fabulous. He was a handful." There's a rustling sound and muffled laughter. She is covering the mouthpiece with her hand. "I'm being beckoned," she says, and I hear her giggle before she hangs up.

The meeting is held in an elementary school classroom. There's a circle of diminutive yellow chairs set up. Claire explains to the group's moderator that I am "a great source of moral support," and that's why she brought me unannounced. The moderator is wearing a skirt suit and beige pumps. She arranges pamphlets on a desktop and lowers her glasses to look at me. I wonder if she's a psychiatrist. I crunch on an oatmeal cookie by the table of snacks and feign interest in a construction paper depiction of the landing on Plymouth Rock.

My hunch is right. There are no rape sponsors here, and worse, something that didn't dawn on me until I got here—it's really not cool that I'm a man. As the women relate horrible experiences of forced sex, I picture Frank bobbing in his bungee cords. A dramatically thin girl meets my eyes while she tells her story. I start sweating. During the moderator's turn, while she talks about rage and forgiveness, tapping her pumps on the linoleum, I inappropriately think, *Why did I ever leave St. Louis?* When I'm not idling in traffic, I spend my days stacking cold cuts in a picnic cooler, or tiptoeing around sullen famous people. And I'm starting to suspect that my closest friend here is crazy. Then I feel like a jerk. These people have real problems. The woman to the left of me was attacked by a security guard in her office building. A *security* guard.

It's Claire's turn to talk. She seizes my hand. "The blinding light in the desert—I didn't know where I was." She has a strange smile on her face, like she's thinking of something else.

I murmur, trying to sound especially sympathetic. Claire looks at me and snickers. I get a sickening rush of adrenaline, prickles all over my skin. The moderator stands and asks the group if my presence is disruptive. The women stare us down.

"So that wasn't so bad."

I open the passenger door of my car for her. "Are you kidding?" Claire sighs and settles into her seat. "I don't need those meetings, you know? It's just what you're supposed to do."

"Is that what your shrink says?"

"It's implied. My shrink understands me. He knows I'm still young," she says.

I'm angry and don't respond. I turn the radio on and adjust the air conditioner vents. The edge of Claire's skirt flutters.

"He told me I shouldn't stifle myself. It's okay to 'sow my wild oats.' He's very intuitive."

"How do you pay him for his advice?" It should be a joke but doesn't come out that way.

"What does that mean?" she says. But then she reaches for my hand on the steering wheel. "Thanks for coming along. You're my guardian angel."

"I haven't done anything."

She turns in her seat to face me. "You're always here for me."

"Where else would I be?" I say. We've stopped at a red light. "I'm here for you because there's nobody else to be here for."

Claire turns back and stares out the window. Now I've done it. "I'm sorry," I say. "I'm homesick."

"It's okay," she says quietly. "You love me."

I suppose I do.

Not a week later, after the *Severed Head in a Suitcase* premiere in Westwood, I pull her to the sidewalk, out of the path of an oncoming bus.

"See!" she wails, throwing her arms around my neck. "See that?" she yells to the women in strapless gowns. "He just saved my life!"

I'm surrounded by an applauding crowd. The paparazzi even take photos of me.

It gets lonely, cooking for one. At California Chicken Cafe, I'm overwhelmed by the dazzle of the guys stocking up on skinless breasts. All that muscularity. The tank tops and brawn. I order a leg and mashed potatoes, take my food to the patio and watch the traffic idle at the intersection. There's a crossing signal that chirps like a bird when the light changes.

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JEN BERGMARK

Most of the guys sit by themselves. While I bus my tray and scrape the remains of my potatoes into the garbage pail, I can feel one of them watching. Here goes. Nothing ventured, nothing gained. He looks up when I approach like he's been expecting me. Immediately after I introduce myself, he says, "My place is right around the corner."

I'm standing in front of his table, still holding my tray. "I was going to invite you to dinner," I say. "I'm a really good cook."

He leans forward, and in a stage whisper says, "I have a boyfriend for that."

Maybe I don't have it in me. I find Frank's phone number in my wallet and punch the digits into my cell phone. It's a wrong number.

Claire insists I attend the dancing extravaganza at Cherry. There are all kinds of boys there, she tells me. Anything goes. We wait in a long line, the nighttime desert chill all around, girls shivering in skimpy dresses. The doorman stamps the back of my hand and wraps my wrist in a plastic strap.

I immediately lose Claire. The dance floor is jammed with people. The club's long windows are cloaked with purple velvet, and a machine out of view belches fog. There are professional dancers positioned on blocks: a woman with a red wig and short, vinyl nurse's uniform; a guy wearing a silver leotard. I try to get comfortable. I have a drink and exchange glances with a cute guy. Claire eventually appears.

"Buy me a snatchtail, honey." Her eyes look glassy. "Get me a Pink Pussy Cat."

"They won't know how to make that."

"A Little Devil."

"Claire."

"A Wiki Waki Woo." She shakes her hips at the guy who's been flirting with me. "If nothing else, a Gin and Sin."

The bartender makes a face when I order. We settle on a Gin Fizz.

After jostling my way back through the crowd, I find Claire has jumped up on one of the dancing blocks. She's no longer wearing her blouse. She's pale—her skin glows. Her breasts have a gentle slope on top and full curve on the bottom with hard pink nipples smack in the center. For a moment I just watch her. People gather around the block. Then a bouncer marches up to holler at Claire, followed by the disgruntled hired dancer, now blockless.

There's a scuffle, everyone pushing. I try to get Claire's attention. But her eyes are closed; she's caught up in the music. She snaps to attention only when the bouncer grabs her ankle, and then she loses her balance and pitches off the block. I chase her as she's swept away by the throng, Gin Fizz slopping on my shoes.

In the morning I bring her coffee. She buzzes me in and I find her in bed, looking very Monroe in her red sheets. "Hand me my bathrobe," she says.

"You're covered with bruises." I point. "That one looks like a handprint."

"All in the line of duty." She rolls her eyes. We sit and sip our coffee. Claire looks out the window. I notice the picture frame on her dresser contains the sample photo that frames come with when you buy them. "There's been a hawk circling my apartment complex," she says.

I pretend to look out the window. "I don't see anything."

"You don't think it's strange?"

"No stranger than coyotes eating my garbage."

"It's an omen." She draws a red pillow to her chest. There are pricks of stubble up and down her calves. "I'm aging." She points to the skin under her eye with a fingernail.

"Stop being dramatic," I say. It's really not aging that has me worried.

The following weekend I convince her to stay home for an evening. I think she agrees only because she's waiting for a scratch on her cheek to heal. I arrive with the ingredients for scaloppini—veal cutlets, capers and lemon, a block of parmesan, the best tomatoes and arugula from

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the produce aisle, and a bottle of Chianti. Claire makes a big show of putting a jazz CD into the player.

"The music doesn't matter to me," I say. I am happily chopping tomatoes.

"We can't do this dinner-at-home-thing without Billie Holiday. And we're going to need more wine." She's at the liquor store for the remainder of the chopping, finally returning with a bottle and a phone number on the back of a receipt. "This," she holds the receipt up, "is why a girl should always have a lipstick."

I'd like a tablecloth to add a little elegance to the meal, but after a search through the cabinets it's obvious that Claire's not much of a hostess. I arrange a couple of straw placemats.

She starts the second bottle of wine before I've finished a glass, but I'm so thrilled to be presiding over a big Italian dinner that I don't notice until she topples from her seat.

"Whoops." She tosses her fork into the air. I gather her from the floor. When I lead her down the hallway, she gazes at me. "Why hasn't a cute boy like you found someone?"

I help her regain her footing. She puts her head on my shoulder, turns and presses her lips against my neck. I manage to get her into her bathrobe. All the while she giggles and tugs at my belt. And then in one yank she tears open my shirt. The buttons ping across the floor. She bites my chest. I try to hold her back. "Claire," I say. She is surprisingly strong. Then we're tangled in the sheets and kissing and her tongue is tracing a line down my stomach to my navel and then lower. "You don't know where that's been," I say.

"Oh, please." Her voice is muffled against my hipbone.

"You never know." My heart is pounding. In a sweep of terry cloth robe, Claire's off to the bathroom.

For a moment it's quiet. I lie in her bed with my jeans crammed to my ankles, staring up at the blinking light on the smoke detector. There's a pleasant after-dinner smell of garlic. Billie Holiday's wistful voice is coming from the living room.

“This should do the trick.” Claire’s back with an economy sized jar of Vaseline. She abandons her robe in the hallway. I suppose in the dimness, at a certain angle, lying on her stomach with her platinum hair hidden by the red sheet and with my eyes half-closed, she almost looks like a boy. This is what I tell myself to keep the mood light.

The Gateway Arch is one of my favorite places. I’m biased – it’s in my hometown. I’ve brought dozens of people there, and sometimes have just gone alone to watch the Monument to a Dream documentary again, sit in comfortable silence with the others in the capsule train as we climb toward the view.

“You should go home, Ben,” Claire says when we wake up in her bed. Her makeup has worn off. I’ve never before seen her without lipstick. Her skin looks ashen, but her face is serene and childlike. I sit up to find my jeans and t-shirt. She laughs, kind of sadly.

“Sweetie, I don’t mean now.” She gestures toward the window. I catch a glimpse of a yellowing bruise on her ribcage. “I mean that I don’t think this place is for you.”

It’s a relief that we’re not discussing what happened last night. There’s another feeling, too. It really might be okay to leave. It hadn’t occurred to me as an option until Claire said it out loud. I lie back and look out the window, where I can see the turquoise sky.

Then, suddenly, she is dead.

It’s a blur, the whole thing. I’ve let days go by without returning her phone calls. I’ve been thinking that we’ve irreversibly crossed the line, squandered the casual camaraderie. You don’t sleep with your friends. At least I don’t. Certainly not with one of the opposite sex. I’m afraid to find out what she thinks, maybe that’s why I don’t call, because truth is, I’d like to. I’m lonely and I miss her.

I know something bad has happened the minute I hear a strange man’s voice say, “Do you know Claire?” It’s her landlord, who found the napkin with my phone number on it. He tries to feel me

out, determining how to break the news—am I her boyfriend, her brother—while I wait, nauseous.

“That’s not true,” I hear myself saying. Then I find I’m sitting on my kitchen floor.

“I’m sorry,” he says. “I’ve never done this before. Your number was by her phone.”

My thoughts veer crazily. I’m surprised she needed the old cocktail napkin. Who calls who more frequently—is it me? I have her phone number memorized. Do I know her number by heart because I’m the one with more invested in this friendship? All this time I thought it was the other way around.

“I’m going to be sick,” I say. The landlord won’t let me go until I promise to call back. I don’t get the chance. The horror of his experience has dissolved the lines of decorum. He calls me over and over to unburden himself.

Claire was dead three days before a neighbor asked questions, he tells me. No one knows what happened—an accident, an overdose. He found her on the sofa, a half-empty glass of wine on the coffee table and a bagel with a bite taken from it. The television was playing—music videos. Her door was unlocked. Her medicine cabinet had several varieties of sleeping pills and pain killers.

“She wasn’t wearing clothes,” the landlord says in a dull voice. “She was naked.”

“Don’t say that,” I say. “I don’t want to hear about that.”

“How about the smell?” he says, his voice breaking. “After three days, how about the smell? Do you want to hear about that?”

“Fuck you,” I say. “Fuck you for crying. You didn’t know her.”

I sit on the edge of my bed until the room darkens.

Her parents arrive from the East Coast to gather her things. When I show up at the apartment, neighbors are milling around the carport, peering into the U-haul for salacious details. But there’s nothing to see, just generic furniture and knickknacks.

The landlord has lugged out most of the big stuff. He is panting and his t-shirt is soaked through. He rushes in and out of the apartment with boxes. The parents stand in the hallway. They are older than I expected, befuddled and stunned. I try to talk to them. "She was a good girl," I say, stupidly. "Everyone loved her."

I bend to pick up a box but the mother gets it first. "Let me help," I say. I reach for the box. It's filled with stuffed animals. In my attempt to take it, I jostle out a tattered beakless duck, which tumbles halfway down the stairs. The mother sighs and stares after it as though it's gone forever. She looks like Claire. Same light hair and narrow, arched eyebrows. But she has pillows of fatigue under her eyes, and deep grooves beside her mouth.

"Claire was my best friend," I say, looking into the mother's face.

The father pats his shirt pocket and takes a long time extracting a piece of notebook paper. "I found this," he says. His hands tremble a little. "Maybe you can arrange a service here." It's a list of names and telephone numbers, most of them nail salons. I turn it over. Blank on the other side.

"There must be more numbers in her cell phone," I say.

The mother and father stare at the list, consulting it like a map, looking up at the walls as though they're at the wrong train stop. I'm about to mention Claire's phone again, but the landlord is lurching toward us, heaving a microwave, and he needs my help.

There aren't many people to call. I try to track down Kurt, but he's on location shooting a slasher movie. Claire's body is flown back home, and her parents drive away in the U-haul.

It's over in a matter of days.

I phone the craft service company after-hours, so I don't have to speak to anyone. I'm sorry about the video shoot, I say. Something came up. Then I phone my building manager to break my apartment lease.

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You'd think I'd get a tan driving cross-county in a convertible, but it rains the whole trip. Until I cross the border into Missouri and then the sky clears. It gets sunny. Big cumulus clouds drift by. I could hug them.

These days, when I ride the tram to the top of the Arch, I imagine Claire with me. We are a team, the two of us—the blond bombshell and the sidekick. She chats up the other people in the tram. *Isn't this the craziest place*, she says to a Midwestern couple examining a camera, or a woman holding a kid's hand. No one answers her. During the shuddering ascent, she slips her arm through mine. Her mouth is against my ear, but I don't feel her breath. *Nine hundred tons of stainless could make a lot of frying pans*, she jokes. But she is afraid. We are finally at the top, and there is the shock of the narrow observation room, every time smaller than I remember, and Claire, too, suddenly smaller. Competing with the view, she leans into one of the slanted window ledges and announces, *Imagine my feet up in stirrups in this thing*. I can barely hear her voice. I try to draw her back to the important matters: the Arch's impossibly curving steel skin; the expanse of the city below; the room's reverent hush.

"Look," I say. "It looks like a spaceship." I wait for her to agree.