

# GOLDEN YEARS

by

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## ABSTRACT

*Golden Years* is the culmination of the author's studies in Creative Nonfiction writing, with attention to hybrid forms of the genre, combined with her professional background in screenwriting, and research interests in nostalgia and cultural preservation in the modern age. In the collection of essays, the author blends established forms of Creative Nonfiction, such as the braided essay, with literary conventions borrowed from other forms of written communication, such as the screenplay ("You Must Remember This," "Driver's Seat"), the cookbook ("Tip of my Tongue"), a travel guide ("A Trolley Runs Through It") and fabulist fiction ("Selkie on the Shore"). Through these hybrid forms, *Golden Years* explores the narrator's fascinations with music, cinema, and fashions of the past, with crafting the perfect pot of vegetarian chili, and with marine mammals. Through the blending of personal essay with cultural criticism, the author explores how these loves have shaped her relationship with the world around her.

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Dedicated to Yusef Malik  
“I’m cloudbusting, daddy”

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## INTRODUCTION

*Golden Years* is a collection that seeks to be many things. It's a work of nonfiction, but one in which the narrator shapeshifts into a seal on a whim. It's also a work of cultural criticism that prompts readers to question what our society chooses to remember, and chooses to forget. But readers will also come away from it knowing how to make a mean pot of chili. One essay gives readers intimate advice for visiting a town they'll probably never set foot in. In other essays there is a decided distance between narrator and reader, created by third person narration of firsthand events. This third person narration often comes under the auspices of a screenplay. For although she's never been a great conversationalist, the author loves creating dialogue on the page.

And this narrator writes frequently about the time she lived on a boat. Because, of course, she lived on a boat.

The collection opens with "Selkie on the Shore," the third-person retelling of the narrator's solo trip through California, inspired by her love of old movies, old music, and seals of all ages. It approaches real-life events through a fabulist lens, blending two genres that don't mingle often enough.

"You Must Remember This" invites readers to sit down at a little gin joint in Morocco, that perhaps you've heard of. In it, the narrator explores her love of the 1942 film *Casablanca* over the years. The movie's a war flick and a love story in one, but the narrator sees an element of mystery in it, too. What ever became of Sam, the piano player? In 75 years, has anyone tried to crack the case?

Love, exciting and new. If the hints dropped in “Selkie on the Shore” don’t convince the reader that life aboard a cruise ship is enough to make someone swim to safer waters, then “Cruising/Woman in Motion/A Supposedly Fun Thing I Did Again and Again” will make it clear. But how did she get here? Inevitably, pop culture is to blame. This time, the narrator points a finger at *The Love Boat* and John Hughes movies. Is she capable of referencing anything contemporary?

No, she is not. In “The Godmother,” the author writes about the career of Sister Rosetta Tharpe, a black, female gospel singer whose electric guitar renditions of old spirituals pretty much invented rock music. The author crafted the piece as an exploration of why the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame hadn’t recognized Tharpe’s contributions to the music world. Naturally, over the course of the year in which the author worked on this essay, Tharpe finally got inducted, before the author could broadcast her opinions on the matter to the world. Still, many music fans have never heard of Sister Rosetta, and even fewer know that without her, generations of musicians might not have had tour buses to trash.

In “Threads of Memory,” the narrator tracks her matrilineal heritage through the history and modern-day status of vintage clothing. The essay focuses on the narrator’s time working in a vintage clothing store in Central Florida, and the philosophical questions that often led her mind away from whatever inventory task her boss wanted her to complete, like, yesterday. “Threads” weaves the experiences the narrator’s grandmother and mother had in the textile world with the narrator’s struggle to balance her dream job with the writing of this very thesis.

“Threads of Memory” touches on the gentrification of the working-class Philly neighborhood from which her mom’s family hails, and “A Trolley Runs Through It” further

explores the themes of urban, or in this case suburban, renewal. Presented as a travel guide into the narrator's memory, the essay gives readers insider tips on navigating her hometown of Media, Pennsylvania. The only problem is, half the stops on this tour no longer exist.

And while a trolley does run through Media Borough, eventually, the narrator decides to take up driving for fun and profit, and as a way to hang out with her dad more often. Like "You Must Remember This," "The Driver's Seat" integrates screenplay format, to explore how the narrator's journey to a license is tied to her attempts to get her first screenplay produced.

Like a selkie shedding her sealskin, in "Tip of My Tongue," the narrative shifts shapes again, this time taking the form of a recipe collection, detailing the narrator's slow-roasted journey to a love of cooking. It's also a dead-parent essay, but the author promises that readers will laugh at least a few times.

In fact, the author hopes that the laughs will be plenty while reading this collection. And if readers come away learning something, whether it's about hyper-local Pennsylvania politics or about how seals and sea lions differ, then all the better. And if just one reader walks away questioning why Willi Smith's contribution to fashion was never recognized, then the author's work is done.



## SELKIE ON THE SHORE

She hugs her parents “goodbye” and shows the skycap her ticket for a westbound plane. She checks her suitcase, holding on to her black backpack and a toy harp seal named Softy. When her parents pull away from the curb, she hugs Softy close and heads into Philadelphia International Airport. As she queues up for her flight to Los Angeles, others in line stare, baffled by the sight of a well-dressed woman in her early twenties squeezing a ratty stuffed animal. She’s already prepared for the stares, and has come up with the guise that Softy’s plushy, tubular body makes a great neck pillow for long trips. But instead of offering this excuse to these strangers, she just holds the toy closer.

Those who stare see her as an overgrown child, or maybe just think she’s terrified of flying. But as the plane traverses the country, she sees herself as a Selkie leaving the water’s safety, shedding her seal-skin to scamper in the sand as a human. She sees her land-legs take her up the craggy bluffs once thought unreachable, she leaps from the Southern California cliffs in the sunshine.

In her seal form, she’s spent many a day sunning and surfing alongside the humans, but without much interaction. In California, she will venture ashore as a human, sporting couplings they call “ears,” and “feet” and “breasts,” and human-strangers hanging out on the coast will approach her.

She knows, from extensive research, that if she loses sight of the seal-body she’s left lingering at the base of a palm tree, someone might run off with it, and then she’ll be stuck with these feet, breasts, ears, in their world.

This thought scares the Selkie, but if the human world does snare her, she's decided that California is the place to get beached. The air is warm, the people are pretty, and even for a seal like her, this gilded coast holds a certain glory. She's dreamt of going to California since she was a pup. A few months ago, during a lunch break from her cruise ship job, she made those dreams a reality by buying a plane ticket. She started putting the money she earned from the cruise line into a bank account she named "California Fund" to pay for lodging and souvenirs. Still shaky on her feet, her seal-tail in an overstuffed backpack, she heads inland.

By noon, she finds herself in a West Hollywood butcher shop, her stomach burbling. The sun is near its pinnacle in the SoCal sky and streams through the big glass windows, casting light on maroon mounds of meat. She grabs a bag of caramel corn.

Despite her conviction that she is a seal in a human's body, she's been a vegetarian most of her life. This bag of caramel corn, which costs twelve dollars, which really should cost four, is all she can eat in the only market she's been able to find. If a seal finds its food options scarce, it feeds off its blubber and swims on. But her 120-pound human body has no such reserve, and it is starting to shake. She gets in line for the cashier with her overpriced bag of empty calories.

Seals are, of course, adept fishers. Their whiskers help them locate prey. This landbound seal has no whiskers, but she smoothly fishes her debit card out of the bottom of an overstuffed backpack that contains all the valuables she doesn't feel comfortable leaving at her hostel. The bunk she's renting for the next few nights comes with a locker, but no lock.

"Is this all you're getting?" the cashier asks.

"Unless you sell padlocks," she says. As she leaves, she rips open the bag of caramel corn. It splits down the side, so that as she drags her canvas Toms against Fairfax Avenue's dry, sparkling sidewalk, she leaves a trail of sweet little scraps behind her. She walks past the Banana Bungalow West Hollywood's front desk with a nod, and to the small computer lab on the side of the hostel's common room.

The computers are all Apples, with big, cartoony monitors that house big, cartoony interfaces. She sits down to charge her phone at one. The computer serves this purpose just fine. But then she tries to copy the hostel's contact information and paste it into an email to her mom. She can't figure out how to, and this makes her want to hurl the console across the faux-tiki room.

"It's the command key," the guy next to her says.

"Huh?"

"It's command-C, not control-C."

"Oh, thanks. I hate Macs," says the Selkie, "Want some caramel corn?"

"Sure. So, what brings you to L.A.?"

She had been quiet as a child, but if you got her talking about seals or Disney theme parks, it was impossible to get her to shut up. Of course, whenever her mom brought up planning that year's vacation, she would ramble on about how she wanted to go to California, to see what

Disney parks were like on the West Coast, and to see wild pinnipeds play in the Pacific surf. As she reached her teens, her rationales included an interest in film and fashion, and being among people who appreciated these things. But every year, she and her mom ended up back in Orlando, at the parks she loved but had seen plenty of times, with the captive sea lions who knocked their trainers into Sea World's too-blue water for laughs and a handful of stinky fish.

Her high school years were spent in a big brick building in the middle of the woods of Chester County, Pennsylvania. Her time at the boarding school wasn't bad per se, but it was heavily controlled. Her schedule was filled up with math and science lectures she didn't want to hear, basketball and tennis practices she didn't want to attend, required study times that she didn't need to excel in even the most dreadful of chemistry classes. Senior year, she was finally able to close her door during nightly study hall. Instead of schoolwork, she spent two hours each night listening to psychedelic songs off Jefferson Airplane's *Surrealistic Pillow* album or watching old films like *Casablanca*.

She knew she'd never get to truly experience the Summer of Love or Hollywood's golden years but thought that being in the places where they happened would perhaps be enough to build a life that wasn't so needlessly regimented, in a place that wasn't so cold, or so far inland. A life she didn't want to swim away from.

She disregarded her family's advice to look only at colleges a few hours from her home in suburban Philadelphia. At a family function her senior year, she told a friend of her aunt's that her first choice was Pomona in Southern California. She was going to explain that Pomona's classes were small, but the school was part of a bigger consortium that would provide a less insular experience than her current school. She was going to say that she liked that the school was close to Los Angeles but not in the thick of things. But this man, who she had never really spoken to, cut her off.

"What are you going to study, surfing?"

The Selkie was going to point out that Pomona was over an hour from the coast. But the man was by then laughing at his own cleverness.

And so, the Selkie ran down to the basement before the tears could well up. Her cousins surrounded her and recounted how stressful college applications had been for them. She waited for one of them to say that it was great that she was ready to go so far from home, but none of them did. One of them had handed her a wine cooler and suggested the pink potion might help, so the day wasn't a total bust, but the thought of going to school far away, where she wouldn't have to foot questions about her future at every birthday party and communion, became even more appealing.

Pomona waitlisted her into perpetuity. WashU in St. Louis offered her a lucrative scholarship. Missouri was cold and even further inland, but it was still a move west, so she went landlocked and chilly for four years, before fleeing for the inverse, a cruise ship off the coast of Florida, where she put her California plan into motion.

She, of course, doesn't tell the guy at the computers much of this, just says that she had some money saved up and wanted to see what it was like out here. He nods.

"Sounds like you walked the wrong way on Fairfax," he says when she mentions that she'd walked for blocks looking for food and found three florists before she found a butcher shop. He tells her, "if you go the other way, there are these amazing Middle Eastern places."

And so, the Selkie winds up eating falafel and crispy, deep-fried cauliflower almost every night in L.A. The first night, she texts her mom a picture of her dinner, to let her mother know that she'd arrived, and that the food was great. To let her know that that she'd explored L.A. all day without drowning in a water cistern, as had inevitably happened to a young woman traveling solo in California a few days after she'd told her panicked parents that she'd booked the trip.

Her mom simply replies, "You are mean!" because the meal looks so tasty and she's not there to share it with her daughter. The Selkie is spared another safety lecture.

"I don't know how I feel about you traveling alone, honey," her mom said initially. Her mom had likewise traveled alone in her twenties, from Philly up through Canada and down to the Bay Area, by train and by thumb.

"Do you know where you're staying? You're not going to Compton, are you?" asked her dad, like if she set foot in the South Central neighborhood, the riots that had taken place there twenty years before would have started again in 2013, with no provocation except her presence.

She'd sent her parents her itinerary already, and Compton was not on it. But even if it had been, the destination would have paled in comparison to some of the things her dad had seen by her age. He'd enlisted in Vietnam on his own volition as a teenager, and somehow from there wound up all over the world.

The Selkie's parents had traveled all over as young adults. War had ended the lives of many young men, and hitchhiking had ended the lives of some young women, but her parents lived to birth a daughter, to tell her their stories, with a preface that she could never take such risks. "Things are different nowadays," her parents reasoned, but she still booked her flight.

Her first full day in Los Angeles, she books a city tour. As the van heads out of West Hollywood, into Hollywood proper, the guide instructs everyone to look to their left on the freeway (a real Californian freeway!). The Selkie fixates on a Pepto-pink Corvette.

"That's Angelyne's car. You might recognize her from the 1988 movie *Earth Girls are Easy*. But here in L.A., she's known for billboards that you'll see all over town. Angelyne -"

The tour guide's words evaporate as she tries to get a better glimpse of the blonde woman in the car. She knows exactly who Angelyne is and doesn't need the explanation. At times in her life where the Selkie has felt invisible, she's thought of Angelyne, who seemingly has never had trouble getting attention. When Angelyne felt her career in entertainment was going nowhere, she made the city notice her, by plastering her likeness on billboards across Los Angeles. The Selkie was just hoping to see a few of these billboards, but now she snaps a few blurry pictures of pink-and-blonde Hollywood quintessence.

The tour group drives past the Whiskey-A-Go-Go and Rainbow Room. A Danish guy in the van suggests they all go, but they never do, at least she doesn't go with them. They drive past the balcony where Vivian and Edward rescue each other at the end of *Pretty Woman*. They stare at a lot of gates, gates that presumably guard celebrities' homes. Stars: they're just like her. They want to be left alone. Yet the Selkie is somehow bothered by the fact that these celebrities haven't made their front doors available to her camera lens. She's come all this way. She's spent all her money.

The last stop of the day is the Hollywood Walk of Fame, but there are so many feet, socks-in-sandals feet, traipsing across the stars that she can hardly see the names immortalized



on the ground she'd held as sacred. She lays eyes on the most terrifying Mickey and Minnie knockoffs she could imagine. The mice beg for *somebody, anybody* to take a picture with them. Nobody does.

"Not what we were expecting, huh?" says the Danish guy. Two Norwegian girls who spent most of the tour giggling to each other turn around, "Yeah, not really. I'm kind of ready to get back on the van," one of them says. The three of them turn around and head back to where their guide has parked, but she lingers behind.

"Are you coming with us?"

"I'll meet you back there," she says, "I'm going to see if I can get a picture of Greta Garbo's star. It's pretty close to Grauman's Theatre, I think."

At that, they decide not to go back to the van just yet. For them, Garbo is a Scandinavian icon, an actress who remained a Hollywood powerhouse in the talkie era, despite her thick, almost husky accent.

She, too, idolizes the Swedish Garbo, for a different reason – she'd achieved such schmooze-dependent success even though all she wanted was to be alone. Though many stars have retreated from the public eye, Garbo is the one who spoke those words to a Barrymore in *Grand Hotel*. The role of Grusinskaya the ballerina might not have been a big departure from the

actress's actual personality, but before seeing the movie, the Selkie had never foreseen having any kind of success by being her silent, sea-seeking self.

The Selkie and her Scandinavian tourmates find Greta's star, sparkling within a slab of sullied concrete. They find a few moments when it's not being stomped on, and they take pictures with it. The girls from Norway take a picture together, smiling, arms around each other. As the Selkie crouches down toward the pee-pungent sidewalk and smiles, she can hear vaguely spiritual chanting, getting louder and louder. The Norwegian girls look past her at something, and then giggle about the sight, together. The selkie won't remember much about the Danish guy when the trip is over, but she'll remember his contorted face as he urgently snapped a few photos of a girl and her Garbo, before gesturing for her to get up.

And as the Selkie rises, she discovers that she is in the path of some sort of procession, with a Korean man holding a cross and a huge group of followers in tow. She leaps out of their way and crashes into some sort of malformed version of the red Angry Bird. He tells her to watch where the fucking hell she is going (at least he is in character). She then watches as Garbo gets trampled first by the procession, then by the tourists who'd cleared the way for the group. She supposes this is exactly how Garbo felt during the years she lived in Hollywood—maybe it is this terrible tourist trap, not the sporadic sight of Angelyne, that's most emblematic of this place.

As she eats her falafel that night, she listens to Fleetwood Mac through earbuds and writes in her journal, staining the pages with grease and chickpea crumbs. She writes about the jubilant tour guide, his story of moving from Germany, all the cool celebrity encounters he

talked his way into since coming to L.A. She wishes that she could have a personality like his, just for a few days, so that she, too, could make the most of her time in this city.

Tonight, there's a scheduled outing a nightclub, with a pregame at the sister hostel near Hollywood & Vine, near where knockoff cartoon characters walk the streets for money. The Selkie really wants to pull a Garbo, to commend herself for making an appearance on the shore before retreating to her sea of comfort, but she came here to experience a city, not to sit on a bunk bed watching old movies.

She goes to the other hostel, makes the requisite small-talk, takes the requisite shots. She agrees to leave her sealskin at the foot of a palm tree and go dancing. She doesn't go to the club that the Hostel has forged a partnership with, as some guy from Thunder Bay, Ontario says he's heard that it's "lame." Thunder Bay instead leads her, some guy from Utah and the two Norwegian girls from the tour to a repurposed Deco movie house, which in the present day features poor acoustics and impossibly beautiful people dancing to what seems to be the same dubstep song all night. They almost don't get in, because the bouncer doesn't know how to validate Norwegian IDs, but eventually he caves and opens the door for them, even for the teenage girl from Oslo who's carrying her older cousin's license.

The drinks are overpriced. None of them know how to dance to the music, least of all the Selkie. Seals hate *clubbing*.

Thunder Bay buys the Selkie a gin and tonic that would have cost three dollars in her ship's crew bar. He talks to her about the empty roads he took between Las Vegas and here in his rental car. He probably says his name at some point, but he remains "TB" in the Selkie's mind. It starts off standing for Thunder Bay but eventually becomes "Top Bunk."

Most selkie myths come from Ireland and Scotland, but stories of seals shedding their skin on the shore, dancing as people dance, have arisen in many countries with North Atlantic coastline. Some believe that selkie legends originated not with the Celts but in Scandinavia. When Garbo did socialize, she's said to have been fond of skinny-dipping with friends.

For whatever reason, selkies tend to make very bangable humans. Selkie men use this to their advantage, snaring the lonely wives of fishermen. Selkie women, of course, get the short end of the stick. Many legends involve human men stealing and hiding their sealskins, so that they are trapped in human form, half-happily inhabiting the world, and the homes, of the skin-stealers, while quietly longing for the sea.

She wakes up in a top bunk at sister hostel in the heart of Hollywood. Voices she doesn't recognize are ringing over the sound of a running shower. The voices are working together to recall some drunken mishap from the night before. It sounds like these strangers went to the nightclub the hostel recommended, and it doesn't sound like their night was "lame." She suspects

that Top Bunk suggested the other club so that he could get away from these people for the night.

Top Bunk drove to L.A. alone, and got placed in a room with seven people who all traveled to L.A. together for a conference, something involving a health food pyramid scheme. They've preached to Top Bunk all week about staying healthy with their wonder-product, but they've smoked and drank nonstop.

The seven roommates begin talking over each other until one screams over the rest,

“Where is my phone?”

“It's behind you,” another says.

“Where is it? Where's my fucking phone?”

“I said behind you! No, not there. Behind you...”

“Like, your other left,” says another voice, “I didn't say the phone was on your left!”

Up in her top bunk, she coughs to keep herself from laughing.

“Looks like our roommate's victim is awake,” one says, and the Selkie pretends to go back to sleep. In the end, she had come here with the guy completely willingly, even accepting that he slept in a top bunk. For one, Earth girls were supposed to be easy, she supposed, like in that movie with Angelyne. More than that, this guy had shaggy hair and a nice smile and had been all over the world and had even done some acting.

The night before, she had thought about the invitations into various top bunks she'd rejected on the cruise ship. In the shipboard months leading up to her California trip, The Selkie had watched her coworkers pair off night after night. She watched the actress who played Cinderella leave the crew bar with ten different lifeguards. The Selkie, meanwhile, drew inspiration from Princess Belle, rejecting any advances that came her way, retreating to her bunk alone to submerge herself in a book.

She'd thought that her behavior in the bar had gone unnoticed, just like the work she did in the kids' club went unnoticed while more outgoing counselors got name-dropped in the guest satisfaction surveys every week. But one of her supervisors, Kevin from Liverpool, must have noticed her slipping out of the bar every night. He approached her one day at work, and she immediately wondered what she was doing wrong. Was she slouching against the wall? Had the Bahamian sun tanned her skin and blanched her hair to the point that she'd naturally broken the Disney Look's "natural appearance" clause? If so, pasty Kevin was one to talk—he'd been put on administrative leave after getting a sunburn while leading a teen snorkel expedition.

She'd smuggled food from the crew mess to Kevin's norovirus-quarantined ex-boyfriend a few nights before; was he now going to write her up out of spite?

"Everything okay on the washroom front?"

"Yeah, Kevin, it's fine."

“Okay, that’s good...But, hey, I have a question. How many sexual relations have you had since getting on the ship?”

She choked a little on her spit. She looked around to make sure there were no screaming children or parents around, then said, “Zero.”

“Why not? Like, half the crew would go for you.” The Selkie often struggled to understand Kevin’s scouse accent, but his diction, of course, remained clear during this particular conversation.

“Really?” she said, and when the brief self-satisfaction wore off, she gave him some non-answer or another.

“Yeah, if I were you, I’d be bonking everybody, living it up,” he said as he walked away.

As per usual, in the hours after the conversation, she thought about the things she could have said to Kevin, and what might have happened, had she said them.

If she’d responded, “Does the half the crew include the guitar player on the lido deck?” would Kevin had said “yes,” and would she then have approached the man and said, “It was really clever how you changed the lyrics of ‘Piano Man’ to ‘Guitar Man’ at the pool last night.”?

If she’d said, “Well, Kevin, If I were *you*, I wouldn’t have treated Lee like shit. He’s a great guy,” would things have turned around, so that Lee didn’t dread coming into work every day and seeing him?

And if she’d reasoned with Kevin, and said, “After a 12-hour work day and three hours at the crew bar, nothing gets me off more than the thought of not being around people,” would he have just let the whole thing go?

Not being around people sounds pretty nice after a night of dancing and a morning listening to someone else's screaming roommates. When Top Bunk drops the Selkie off at her own hostel, and she just wants to pull her sealskin on and sleep. But she thinks about the mall and water park invites she turned down while on the ship, so she could work on her California itinerary. She'd planned every day, often to the minute, not allocating time for random trysts. She had to wash the cigarette smell out of her hair, put some concealer under her eyes, and get back on schedule.

On today's schedule: shopping. She's followed the weekly Melrose Trading Post flea market on Facebook since she first read about it in some *Teen Vogue* issue in high school, and largely planned her trip around having a full Sunday to spend there. She booked this hostel, not the one in Venice Beach with a view of the Pacific, so that she could wake up and walk across the street to the flea market right when it opened in the morning.

She instead arrives at 1 PM, during the market's busiest hour. The first kiosk she heads to isn't one of the ones with iridescent moonstone pendants or vintage dresses flapping in the breeze, but the one selling locally-roasted coffee drinks that cost more than a huge plate of falafel.

"Get to the Trading Post early for the best selection, and to beat the crowds," her guidebook had said. Indeed, at midday, there seems to be a Sargasso Sea of people blocking the Selkie's way no matter where she wants to go. The currents that help the itinerant Sargasso Sea keep its form in the Atlantic also make the floating region vulnerable to pollution, and that's how she views the crowds that keep her from walking up to many tents. She sees that these people buy nothing and leave their coffee cups on painstakingly-merched tables.



Then, hanging up high over the crowd at one booth is a red sleeveless daisy-print dress that buttons in the front. The type of dress she'd been searching for in the racks of Forever 21 and Charlotte Russe for years, the type of dress she'd come close to finding plenty of times, but it always turned out to be a romper, or to have some sort of extraneous ruffle or high-low effect. This dress appears to have no such piffle. Knowing that there's a chance the dress won't be her size or that it'll be spoken for, or \$100, she begins shoving through the people toward the vendor.

“Can I see that dress, please?”

It's in her size, it's \$20, and it's SOLD to the seal with Greta Garbo's name tattooed on her back.

Quiet as she's always been, she's never really gone unnoticed. Clothes have always been a big part of that. She's never really known how to initiate conversations with strangers, but inevitably someone always comes up to her, with a complement on something she's wearing. This is typically her chance to tell them all about the bargain bin/secondhand store/boutique in another country where she nabbed said item for a steal. And so, they'll begin chatting.

There have been no such conversation starters these first few days in California. It is a given that people in Los Angeles wear interesting clothing, and plenty of people pass her by.

After shopping until the market's 5PM closure, she waddles back to the hostel, arms buckling under heavy plastic bags. She'll lose most of those clothes, books, and tchotchkes within a year, except for the dress, which she'll wear even as the colors fade. She stows the bags under her bed, takes a bus to the nearest Target, and returns with a second suitcase that she'll

need to lug up to San Francisco, and then back to Philly. She makes a mental note to set aside an extra \$25 to check the bag on Virgin America.

She goes to be early that night, while her roommates are still out, alone, holding Softy the seal, supporter of necks and grand travel plans, close to her.

At breakfast the next morning, the Selkie sits in the hostel dining room with her marmalade toast and fruit rations (hostels always seem fanatical about guests only taking one apple or banana per day). She gets into a conversation with a woman from Dublin who has come to L.A. to meet with a few talent agents and has filled up her downtime working as an extra on film sets.

“It’s a lot of standing around, and they don’t feed you as well as the credited talent,” the woman says, “but you always meet some interesting people.”

Later that morning, she once again fumbles with the computers in the tiki room, searching Google Drive for headshots her photographer friend had taken of her the year before. When she finds the picture, she sends it out in response to a few “Extras Wanted” postings on Craigslist.

She makes tentative plans to grab dinner with Top Bunk, but later that night, when she texts him from Playa del Rey, saying that she’s freezing on the beach, waiting for a costumer to okay her outfit for an M83 music video, he says that it’s totally fine—he’s been there before, and being a film extra sucks. He understands if she’s there all night.

She hadn't yet concluded that being an extra sucked, though it sure had been a lot of effort already.

With no bus routes going to Playa del Rey, she'd taken a fifty-dollar cab ride on the freeway at rush hour.

She'd given the driver the address in the subject of the production company's email.

The driver had left the second she got out of the car. There'd been no cameras, or actors, or people, really, except twin sisters about her age, wandering in the distance.

She walked, and they walked in the same direction, paused at about the same times. Their paths eventually crossed in the wind-chilled sand, and one of the twins asked, "Are you looking for the video shoot, too?" They had also gotten a ride to the location and hadn't bothered to open the attached "Parking Instructions.pdf" in the email, which had specified the exact meeting point. The Selkie and the twins walked on, together, passing beach campers huddled around bonfires, splashing dogs, kite-flyers, and they eventually found a line of extras waiting for their Hollywood ever after.

The costumer evaluated the clothes that everyone arrived in. The Selkie had on an embroidered shirt from the flea market, and a teal polyester skirt.

"Very cute," the costumer said, "but you're going to freeze."

And now she is, in fact, freezing. The extras keep getting yelled at for huddling around the bonfires meant for the scantily clad firedancers that somehow play a role in the video's already convoluted narrative. She wishes she had a seal's blubber, although she knows that then the casting director would never have invited her on set.

Playa del Rey is just over some palisades from LAX and the extras get yelled at for looking up at the low-flying planes every five minutes. They get yelled at for trying to eat some dried edamame meant for the paid talent. The selkie doesn't care about all the yelling, because she is freezing on a real music video set in California. She suffers for hours through the brisk breezes of authenticity. She doesn't make it into the final cut. One of the twins does. She's not sure which, but she is happy for whichever one.

In some schools of animistic spirituality, a seal totem denotes imagination and creativity. It is the challenge of those with a seal as their totem to find outlets for these traits, so that they don't fall victim to the boredom already associated with an affinity for seals, and the ensuing longing to always be somewhere that one is not, doing something that one is not.

Her seal totem has manifested itself in the boxes of subpar pottery cluttering her mother's basement, VHS footage of the solos she misguidedly signed up for in grade school choir, the high school playbills crediting her for shitty little roles, and now in a lofty cab bill and cold, snotty nose.

At the end of the video shoot, a recent WeHo transplant offers her and the twins a ride back. On the inland trek, they all vow to never to take unpaid extra work again. The Selkie has been with people all day. Nothing is going to get her off more than being alone, so she cancels on Top Bunk that night. They don't wind up seeing either other again.

Another night, she's supposed to meet up with a former colleague from the art museum in St. Louis. The Selkie cancels those plans, too. She instead winds up at the Kibitz Room on Fairfax instead, a dimly lit bar connected to the famous, all-hours Canter's Deli. Tom Petty plays from the jukebox all night.

She helps a blonde woman clad in black lace queue up some songs from *Damn the Torpedoes*. She confides in the woman, saying that she doesn't want to leave L.A., ever.

"Why don't you just stay? I did."

"My mom and I have Fleetwood Mac tickets for an upcoming show in Philly."

The fact that the woman accepts this as a valid reason makes her want to stay even more.

Her sealskin remains close to her that night. A grad student latches on to her at the bar. He's from UChicago (where fun goes to die, WashU students always said) and he spends the whole time bitching about the music, and about classic rock in general.

Maybe Top Bunk Tenant hates classic rock, too. She hasn't asked him.

On her last night in Southern California, she is supposed to get dinner with a ship friend who lives toward San Bernardino.

Around the time that she should be switching buses in some East L.A. neighborhood her dad would not want her to visit, the Selkie is instead marveling at the sight of the feet she's sprouted, chipped toe polish and all, propelling her parallel to the pink horizon.

Those feet, human feet, have been taking her back and forth between the alabaster shorefront condos of Santa Monica and the bikini-clad dogs and sparse-toothed dog owners of Venice Beach. After a refreshing but too-chilly dip in the Pacific Ocean, she's decided to really enjoy her time on land, renting a recumbent tricycle for the afternoon.

It wasn't like she was invited to her friends' beach houses all the time in high school, but on those few occasions, she always dreaded the family planning a bike ride. The thought of beaching their plans because she couldn't ride a bike made her seasick. Her parents had tried to teach her when she was little, but she could never find her balance on two wheels, and this usually didn't matter much to the Selkie. Unless there was a beach or a pool involved, she never saw the appeal of being outdoors.

While working on the ship, she tried to teach herself how to ride a bike. On days when she didn't have anything good to read, she'd take a bicycle from the rental kiosk on Disney's private island – the vendors always winked and said that, “for her, it was free.” She would walk to the end of the island's scrubby trail, try to mount, and fall over gracefully, repeatedly.

In Spain senior year of high school, she discovered a love of people-watching when her classmates had rented bicycles for the week. Her peers rode them all over Seville after school each day while the Selkie sat with her journal under an orange tree by *La Giralda*.

But today is not a people-watching day. Today, her feet pump the pedals of a tricycle. Back and forth, as the sun blanches her hair and her nostrils fill with salt. She imagines that

somewhere off the coast, another selkie is peering just above the water-line, watching her, and feeling inspired to come ashore.

An older, leather-skinned surfer-type compliments her Led Zeppelin shirt—he says she must have awesome parents if she knows the band.

“I do, but I got into Zeppelin on my own!” she says as she pedals past him, making sure her batik skirt doesn’t snare in the gears.

Okay, the compliment is really for her parents, but someone in L.A. has noticed her clothing—what a day!

She thinks back to the man at the computers her first day in California. When he asked why she was in L.A., she should have told him, “I came looking for a place where people would know me for my taste in music and clothes, and not just for keeping to myself all the time.” It was the less desirable type of attention she’d attracted at Disneyland the day before her tricycle excursion. After a perfect morning of short waits in the single-rider lines of California Adventure, she headed over to Disneyland, the smaller, shittier version of Disney World just to ride the Roger Rabbit ride. There was no single-rider line, as was common for dark rides.

“How many?” the cast member asked.

“Just me. Just one.”

“Really. Really?” The cast member sneered at her. She wasn’t sure what he meant. Was she the first person to go to Disneyland by herself in six decades of operation? She spent the rest

of the day very aware of the fact that she was alone, and wondered what all the families fighting over souvenir purchases thought of her. As if they thought anything of her.

But now the L.A. portion of her trip is ending on a high note as she pedals. She'll venture to the Bay Area tomorrow, on a train route supposed to be the most beautiful in the country.

The Selkie's mom told her about the Amtrak Coast Starlight which runs between Los Angeles and Seattle daily. The moment the train leaves the Valley and begins to hug the untouched aqua coast in Ventura County, she vows to return one day and take the second leg of the trip through the Northwest.

She calls her best friend, Lydia, back in Pennsylvania to tell her how beautiful the waterfront is. Lydia doesn't care much for the beach. The Selkie was adamant about taking a trip by herself, like her mom had, but thinking of her time in Hollywood with the Norwegian girls, and the twins at the shoot, she wishes Lydia were here. She hopes she'll say something clever to her friend back home that'll pique the interest of the studious-looking young man, about her age, who sits beside her, so she can start talking to him when she hangs up with Lydia.

Instead, the conductor comes on and reminds passengers to keep their cell phone conversations short and to a minimum.

"I have to go, Lydia," she says, "The conductor just told me to shut up over the intercom. It was, like, the most passive-aggressive thing ever."

Her seatmate musters a laugh at this, and she hopes it'll spark conversation, but instead he dozes off.



There's a gray-haired, long-bearded man sitting in front of her, talking at a white-haired lady a few decades his senior. The old woman is wearing an Amtrak hat, but he is seemingly the one *loco* for locomotion. He talks nonstop about the chassis designs of Superliners, when he is not musing about just what makes the Simi Valley so *simi*. The name of the city comes from an indigenous word referring to the clouds that become increasingly dense as one travels up the California coast. She could easily look this up on her phone, tap the man on the shoulder, and give him an explanation, but instead she listens in on the rest of his musings.

"You're really a strange fellow," the older woman says at one point, cutting him off.

Eventually, the conductor comes on the air and introduces the two of them—the woman is retired but worked for Amtrak from its founding in 1971. She is traveling with her nephew.

People then approach the woman and remark, "You must have so many stories."

She manages to ask the pair if they think she'll see any seals while on the train. They don't think so, but say she'll definitely see some in San Francisco. She wants to know all about the woman's life, and wants the nephew to tell her every boring detail about how trains operate, but she can't think of what exactly to ask them, so she pulls out her journal and writes about Top Bunk and secondhand dresses, and about how fun it could be to write a magazine exposé on the fascinating people in front of her.

When the Selkie admits to herself that she's not actually going to interview them, for a publication or for her personal enrichment, she instead walks to the concession car for a beer.

On her way over, she falls in love.

He is sitting in the glass-walled observatory car, reading the *Tao Te Ching* and looking out at the quickly-evolving landscape as they travel northwards. He is wearing a blue paisley shirt. A floppy hat sits atop his long brown hair. He is beautiful. After a few beers, maybe she'll find a way to introduce herself.

But it's ten bucks for a Corona. Approaching a god among men is not in her budget, so she chugs one beer there, takes her second to the observatory car and writes in her journal and occasionally peers up at him. The only sight that can take her away is the train's brief passage through the Vandenberg Air Force Base, pristine coastline, untouched save a few missile silos.

What is she supposed to do?

What if he doesn't like being bothered by strangers any more than she does?

And if he doesn't mind her approaching, are they supposed to bang in the train lavatory or something?

If they really hit it off, should she abandon her plans and debark the train wherever he does?

And wouldn't it be funny if his stop was Salinas and she let him slip away, like Bobby McGee in that song?

Well, shit, he actually does get off the train at Salinas. It surprises her. He doesn't seem like the Salinas type. He is probably traveling onward to the seal-dotted shores of Monterey Bay, she tells herself, and from there returning to the ocean. He's too beautiful for this world.

Some selkie stories originated to reason away a lover who left in the night, not even leaving in a note. The saga this Selkie crafts about her Bobby McGee doesn't make her feel any better as she watches him and his hat and his guitar (of course he has a guitar) slip away toward the horizon.

She thinks about those years before her parents met and birthed a fluffy pup. Back in the '70s, when her mom took that trip across North America, she spotted a hippie guy, a med student from Maine, going to California on a break from school. He was eating bread. The Selkie's mother had a container of sprouts. She approached the man, suggesting that if they put their culinary possessions together, they might eat a semblance of an actual meal.

They wound up traveling to California and back east together.

Their fling didn't last, but it at least happened. For them, it was that easy.

The Selkie hears the voice of the man in Venice Beach come back to her, reminding her how cool her parents are.

The Selkie soon caves and drops another ten dollars on a Corona. The bartender has run out of limes, so it doesn't even taste good. The train stays inland until it arrives in the Bay Area. Outside, the Central Valley landscape looks just like a Steinbeck novel, in that she hates it. She wants to take the moment when she let Bobby McGee leave without knowing she existed, and throw it across the room like she threw her copy of *The Red Pony* in middle school when the stupid titular horse croaked at the beginning of the book.

Somehow, everything looks grayer, foggier, now. More *simi*. She's sure this has something to do with topography, but she can't help but blame herself for the bleaker outlook. "It's all well and good to click a few buttons on a computer and make a trip happen," she thinks, "but getting there is only half the effort."

For the duration of the trip, she retreats into the water, seal-tail between her legs.

The route may be beautiful, but the Coast Starlight is also notorious for its 2% punctuality rate. She didn't believe this statistic before, but her midnight train pulls into the station at 2AM.

Her mom had looked at the California itinerary and had decided her daughter would not travel from Emeryville into San Francisco in the middle of the night, and used her Marriott points to book the seal pup one night in a hotel by the train station.

The Selkie picks up the room key and falls asleep right away on a big, memory foam mattress. Nobody is yelling about a missing phone.

She wakes up and takes a warm shower in a bathroom that is, until the noon checkout time, all hers. She wishes she didn't love the luxury of the hotel as much as she does. She's spent the past nine months serving vacationers on the ship, and this morning she basks in the hospitality that's come her way.

She goes to the bar and orders French toast and a mimosa.

Her debit card declines. All those 70-hour workweeks on the ship earned her half a vacation. Maybe she shouldn't have bought as much at the flea market. Maybe she should've gone and talked to that guy, instead of running up a bar tab.

Never mind, her hostel and all her tours in San Francisco are already paid for. She still has a Whole Foods gift card her cousin gave her the Christmas before. She's sure that in San Francisco, there is a Whole Foods on every block. She'll charge the rest of the food. She still has her veg-friendly caramel corn, some still in its plastic casing, and the stale stuff that has leaked into the floor of her backpack. With a stomach full of empty carbs, she pays her bill by credit card and heads to the City by the Bay.

Scott McKenzie has told her how to dress in San Francisco, with a flower in her hair.

Journey has gotten her excited for the lights going down in the city.

Tony Bennett told her she just might give her heart away there.

Nobody has prepared her for the smell. The bad parts, the few that still exist in this gentrification Mecca, smell like Garbo's star in Hollywood, like hot piss.

The good parts all smell like a hotboxed Volkswagen.

No matter where she goes, *eau de San Francisco* has base notes of old fish, the likes of which one might feed to captive sea lions when they properly perform.

She takes a cable car to see the free sea lions at Pier 39. She sort of loves closed-in spaces—she loved the solitude of her tiny bunk bed on the ship—but this crowd of tourists makes her want to hurl. The afternoon sitting and watching the pinnipeds scream at each other,

watching them shove each other off of little jetties, makes the trip worth it, though everything is gray, and she'd always thought San Francisco would somehow have more trees.

At one point she takes a break from the sea lions, whips out her credit card, and charges admission to a room full of mirrors on the wharf, which is fun, but would have been a lot more fun with Lydia there, or maybe if acid was as easy to find in this city as she thought it would be. She looks around at all the groups walking around together. She returns to her group, with their big flippers and earnest faces.

On the bus back to her hostel, a man with dirty, frayed jeans keeps trying to talk to her. She doesn't know how to respond. Toward the end of her bus ride, he says something like, "I know you're really from here. Not a tourist." People on the ship were always telling her that she didn't seem like she was from Philadelphia, but rather from San Francisco. Now that she's been here, smelled here, experienced for herself Gertrude Stein's lack of *there* here, felt the coldest winter that Mark Twain ever saw, in the middle of March, she is worried that her colleagues weren't commending her for her laid-back and creative nature.

Someone at her hostel recommends a walking tour led by a longtime Haight-Ashbury resident who maintains that she was never into the sex, or the drugs, or really the rock 'n' roll, she just liked the clothes. She imagines that if she'd had the fortune of living through the summer of love, she probably would have appreciated it all, but mostly the clothes as well. She imagines that she and the tour guide could have been best friends and experienced that place and time together.

But they didn't, and the Haight-Ashbury the Selkie sees today is full of both crumbling people and crumbling Victorian architecture that probably still costs a mil a pop.

When the tour is over, she day-drinks in the Castro, by a window that lets her watch the people walking past the multimillion dollar property where Harvey Milk's camera shop used to stand. Sipping her sangria, she opens her journal. She realizes she hasn't written in it since the train ride, and that she stopped writing rather abruptly once the guy got off the train. She writes about the people she sees in the Castro, tries to distinguish between locals and tourists, writes about Victorian architecture as if she knows anything about it. But she keeps interjecting thoughts about Bobby McGee, and about how not talking to this one person, out of all the people she's passed by in California, has meant that she's failed at her time on land.

When she's not kicking herself in her journal, the Selkie spends her time at the Wharf, listening to the sound of screaming sea lion harems. Whenever she went to Sea World Orlando as a kid, she did always prefer the quiet harbor seals who waited patiently for her to throw them a few fish. But the sea lions in the Bay have made themselves available, so she hides among them.

There are quite a few differences between seals and sea lions, who probably diverged evolutionarily about 33 million years ago. Sea lions are more agile on land, able to walk gracefully on their flippers. Seals slowly scoot on the beach but can weave through the water stealthily. Seals' streamlined bodies have no external ears. Thus, compared to sea lions, the seal totem is more associated with one's relationship to the inner voice, the inner self.

The day after the Haight-Ashbury tour, she takes what feels like, to her brain and her credit card, the longest cab ride ever. She's headed to the outskirts of Sausalito, on the other side of the Golden Gate Bridge. The cab waits at the mouth of a one-way tunnel for ten minutes each way as the meter runs.

But when she gets to the Marine Mammal Center in Sausalito, meets the other people who tour the rescue facility with her, people who know the differences between a seal and a sea lion, she doesn't regret spending the money she doesn't have. The facility helps all types of marine mammals, from otters to whales, but mostly houses young seals who washed ashore without their families, without hostel reservations or Whole Foods gift cards to sustain them. They wear not cute sunflower dresses, but instead tracking devices that'll let the center keep tabs on them when they're released into the wild. The Selkie realizes how lucky she is to be able to shift shapes, to travel this coast with a human's freedom.

After the tour, she browses a gift store full of pinniped souvenirs as "Landslide," the studio version she recognizes from Fleetwood Mac's 1975 album, plays. She wants one of the glass displays to tumble on her, suffocating her with stuffed seals, so that she can die in this perfect moment, and not have to spend another night by herself in the hostel, where none of her roommates have said a word to her.

No shelves fall, though, so she buys a bookmark and a pillow with a harp seal embroidered on it. She again goes to bed early that night, around 9PM, she and Softy snoozing the second their heads hit the new pillow.



The morning of her last full day in California, she contemplates skipping breakfast – the cereal has been staler by the day, the people in the hostel haven't been particularly friendly, and she hasn't felt much like putting herself out there and introducing herself.

But today is Easter Sunday, day of rebirth, so she goes, and sits with a group of people her age, all traveling on their own.

They invite her to a Hunky Jesus pageant in the Mission, followed by a concert that features Jane Wiedlin of The Go-Go's. Both get rained out, but she and the day's travel buddies get to see the opening event, an outlandish hat contest. The winner with a big papier-mâché ant on her head. As even organizers run to cover the A/V equipment in tarps, as those in flashy paper hats run their creations back to their cars, a pair of drag performers take the stage and say that the day's activities will continue somewhere in the Castro, indoors.

The Selkie and her hostelmates go out for burritos, and then most of the group wants to head back to home base. A guy from the Netherlands with curly blonde hair and a goofy smile takes the Selkie aside and asks her if she wants to try to find where the drag shows are happening, "It's your last night here, after all," he says, "let's live it up."

So, she doesn't go back to the hostel yet. The two of them walk the wrong way and get lost in the Tenderloin District for the rain for a stretch (they know they're in the Tenderloin because of the pee smell that never washes away), but eventually they duck into enough bars to find the show. They stay for its duration.

They grab a quick dinner and he doesn't seem to mind her babbling about seals.

And then back to the hostel. They linger in the lobby for too long, looking at each other.

“Okay, have a good night, bye!” she says, her foot ready to pivot.

“Okay, bye,” he says.

She scuttles back to her room. Nobody else is back yet. She and her seal-companions get ready for bed, ahead of a long day of travel. She wants to take all their seal-skins collectively, braid them, and hide them somewhere under Pier 39 for the night. But instead they sleep under a Californian sky, one last time.

The word “protean,” changeable, derives from Proteus, who in Greek mythology tended to Poseidon’s flocks of seals.

She wakes up the next morning reluctant to leave, but accepting of her fate, to shift back into the roles of Philadelphian, worker, daughter, ticket-holding Fleetwood Mac fan. She’s ready for her earflaps to recede.

She eats stale, bottom-of-backpack caramel corn for breakfast, and boards her eastbound flight, her eyes still glued westward as the plane slouches toward the steel stacks of Bethlehem, Pennsylvania.

When she gets home, her mom will look at her pictures and ask, “why are you alone in all of them? Didn’t you meet anyone out there?” But this won’t phase the Selkie.

As her feet give way to flippers that her sandals slip away from, as fish-seeking whiskers spring from her face, she smiles. She hasn’t had some sort of life-changing journey. She’s still loose-walleted, tight-lipped, and less cool than her parents. She does have slightly better clothing than she did before, so there is that.

For now, it's time to swim home, but now that she's learned to plant two feet in the sand, she knows it won't be long until she comes ashore again.

## YOU MUST REMEMBER THIS

*You, Rick, left your cushy life, your palm tree-lined vistas, your agreeable Mediterranean climate. Detractors view your tearful goodbye to Ilsa in the fog as your story's vulnerable jugular, saying a Moroccan "desert" would never look so dramatically misty. You and I know that Casablanca's climate is more coastal Cali, and less Phoenix. But did your beloved's eyes really sparkle so under a Vaseline gauze that night?*

*You, Rick, you left a booming business behind, to risk it all and fight fascism. A laudable cause. Your business model was predicated on getting stressed-out refugees drunk, but that is neither here nor there.*

*Everyone in your adopted home knew you, Rick. They respected you. Seventy-five years later, I know you. I respect you. Local merchants whose camel-skin wallets thirsted after the touristic ignorance of your ilk, you brought them to their knees – you always got the local discount. A well-traveled man in a well-traveled fedora, you had stopped pledging allegiance to anyone long ago. When asked about your nationality, you'd only identify as "a drunkard." Ah, a citizen of the world, they'd say. Your neutrality was, for a time, met with congeniality. So long as you kept the drinks flowing.*

*But in early December 1941, you, Rick, you sat up one night, imagining the night sky cradling your native USA, the burgeoning, sprawling, center of the world resting easy, from sea to shining sea. There was no sleep for you that night, just heartbreak, but there was also gin and the company of your good friend, Sam. You didn't know it, but in a few days, America would wake up a very different country. There would be no sleep for any of you. There would certainly be no sleep for Sam.*

*Confronted with the realities of the time, you left your life, your bar, your one true love, your pax casablanca, and once again took a stance. For that, I commend you.*

*But really, Rick, what about Sam? You didn't just leave Ilsa; you also left the one person who would follow you around the globe.*

*In 2017, the film of your life turned 75. Plenty of publications put out articles to commemorate the occasion. One author claimed that in the political climate of 2017, your story has become more relevant than it has been since WWII ended. And it's true; you had no patience for people who remained neutral when there were fascists roaming the streets. And for that reason, you have once again become the hard-boiled hero we need.*

*So, it is with all respect that I say this, and maybe some tunnel-visioned millennial worldview is at play here, but what the hell were you thinking, leaving your black friend alone in a city that was being inundated with Nazis? When you walked off into the fog with Victor Lazlo, celebrating the start of a beautiful friendship, another beautiful friendship was being left behind.*

\*

The first time I heard of *Casablanca*, I was six years old. A pink Minnie Mouse watch around my tiny brown wrist, I held my mom's hand walking down Disney's version of Hollywood and Vine. It wasn't until I was 23 and traveling alone through the real thing, that I truly appreciated the Orlando replica. The park then known as MGM Studios was a version of Hollywood where there was only one Mickey Mouse, and he had proper costume licensing. This Hollywood smelled not of human shit, but of the popcorn and Belgian waffles whose scents were pumped through the parks, nutrition-barren foods that tourists were subliminally goaded into

buying. At six, I didn't appreciate just what a Walt-washed feat this Hollywood and Vine was, but I knew that I never wanted to leave. Grauman's Chinese Theatre, or at least the Disney replica of it, stood in front of me, and my color-changing Keds carried me through the double doors.

We'd spent the day before at Magic Kingdom, where my mom had begrudgingly waited to climb the mountains Space, Splash, and Thunder with me, despite hating roller coasters. The two of us had flown to Orlando without my dad. His PTSD prevented him from getting on a plane, and his back problems would have barred him from getting on most of the rides. As my mom and I headed into MGM Studios for the second day of our trip, he was probably at home watching Turner Classic Movies.

That second day was much less dizzying for me and my mom – fewer crying tots, shorter queue times for attractions with much longer durations. Steven Tyler had yet to authorize the Rock n' Roller Coaster, had yet to throw obscene hand gestures in its pre-ride video. So, there were no roller coasters to toss my mom around; just studio tours, Muppet-Vision 3-D, and the Great Movie Ride.

Despite the terrifying room where Alien stuck his head out of the ceiling and drooled on us, it was that day that I knew what I wanted to do with the rest of my life: I wanted to grow up and work on the Great Movie Ride! I'd learn to deal with the scary thing in the space station; it would be worth it to go into work every day with Busby Berkeley's kaleidoscope of beautiful showgirls, as bubbles gently rained down on me, to work with Gene Kelly swinging on a lamppost, with Dorothy and her ruby slippers, with Rick and Ilsa, who finally got to be frozen in time, together. I didn't know what I was watching, but I knew that it was a special moment, and

a fleeting one. But not too fleeting, because we'd be back at the Great Movie Ride before long. My mom promised me so, when I started crying because I never wanted to leave Disney World.

\*

The first time I saw *Casablanca*, I was in high school. I watched it after another trip to Disney World. It was the first visit my mom and I had paid the Mouse in years. For one, the Twin Towers had been struck down as I started the sixth grade, and I'd refused to fly throughout my early adolescence. I would flip out when my mom boarded a plane for work, even though those trips were funding our yearly, car-facilitated vacations. My parents had split by then, and my mom, her new husband, and I, would typically go to the Jersey Shore for a week, definitely nowhere further than the Carolinas.

As time went by, I became less interested in Disney princesses, and more into Hot Topic hoodies and Led Zeppelin records. I wouldn't let on to how excited I was when my aunt gave us a timeshare in Orlando during that summer in high school, but I found myself wishing that I still had that Minnie Mouse watch. It had rained all day in EPCOT. A hot, plasticky poncho stuck to my skin all day, the unpleasant feeling on top of the menstrual cramps that decided not to respond to ibuprofen. But our day in MGM (probably called Hollywood Studios by then) was perfect (as perfect as a July day in inland Florida could be).

At that point, I was certain that I'd go to college out in California somewhere, and would be discovered as an actress and, once my looks went downhill, I'd dazzle the world with my screenwriting talent. In the meantime, I'd do the Disney College Program and aim for a Great Movie Ride assignment. I considered this day in the park I still called MGM, hopping between

the Tower of Terror and the Great Movie Ride, to be as much research for my future as it was vacation playtime.

That time around, I didn't weep as my mom and I rode the MCO tram so that we could fly back to Philly. Rather than fixating on my return to a place with no palm trees, no Mickey and Minnie, and no 22-minute journeys into film history. I gave myself a mission. Between then and the day I went back to school, I would learn everything I could about the classic Hollywood era; the public personas and private lives of the stars, the politics of the studio system, the legacies of the most successful films.

My friends rolled their eyes. I already listened to their parents' music; now I was into their grandparents' films. My celebrity crushes had been on old people; now they were on dead people. For that summer, Jimmy Stewart replaced Jimmy Page; Marlene Dietrich replaced Joan Jett. Chad Michael Murray, Pete Wentz, Usher? Nope...I wanted Humphrey Bogart and Paul Henreid to fight over me in some far-off land. That was what *Casablanca* was about, right? I wasn't sure. By the end of the summer, I knew everything I needed to know about old Hollywood; there was just one problem: I still hadn't actually seen most of the movies. I hadn't even seen *Casablanca*. I had meant to turn on Turner Classic Movies a few times, but as September neared, my priorities shifted to finishing my neglected summer reading assignment. (I'd eschewed the required Joyce to read Tallulah Bankhead's memoir, a choice I still stand by.)

When I'd finished reading *Dubliners*, my focus was then on deciding what I was taking to my new dorm – my school required all juniors and seniors to board there, even those of us who lived down the road. There was no cable at Westtown, except for a few TVs in common areas, and I doubted I could get anyone to sit down and watch old movies with me. Not that I



saw my friends all that often, despite living with them. No longer under their parents' roofs, they all paired off while I stayed single. We were all active in the school's theatre program. My friends and their new mates were cast in increasingly primary roles in productions, meaning they spent more time in rehearsal together as I sat in my room, rehearsing my two or three lines, even if my delivery of them was inconsequential to the play's success. These afternoons spent in my dorm were on top of our required study periods, five nights a week, from Sunday through Thursday nights; seven-thirty to nine-thirty. I'd enrolled in this rigorous school to challenge myself academically, but I still found myself bored, and finished my homework in thirty minutes on most nights.

My friend Helen told me about Netflix, so I signed up, and when I was next at home for a weekend, grabbed my portable DVD player and a pair of headphones. And then I retrieved my copy of *Casablanca* from the school mailroom and took it out of its little red sleeve. This time, Ilsa and Lazlo got on the plane, leaving Rick in the coastal fog. My mascara, whose pink and green tube promised waterproofing, rolled down my cheeks. On weekends, I would go home, and often, my mom, stepdad, and I would head toward our favorite Asian fusion restaurant on Philly's Main Line. I wanted nothing to do with the Moroccan man, many years my mom's junior, that she'd quickly married, but I didn't mind these dinners. The Bryn Mawr restaurant had the best spicy eggplant I'd ever had, and we sometimes spotted local newscasters and philanthropists at the next table over. Before my mom met my stepdad, much of her knowledge of *Casablanca*, the city, had come from the movie, and before he moved to the States, American films like *Casablanca* had largely informed his idea of the culture. I suppose they both entered the marriage with unrealistic expectations of life being like the movies. They divorced my freshman year of college, but I still have fond memories of those nights at Yang Ming in Bryn

Mawr, challenging the kitchen to make the eggplant just a little spicier each time, listening to the elderly piano player perform all the old standbys. We would always request “As Time Goes By.” He’d always oblige.

\*

The second time I saw *Casablanca*, I was twenty-one and about to start my senior year at Washington University in St. Louis. The Tivoli Theatre in St. Louis’s Delmar Loop was showing it as part of a midnight series. I really don’t remember much about the night; it started with eating macaroni and cheese with crispy breadcrumbs somewhere on the Loop; then subpar beer somewhere, then more subpar beer elsewhere and I think a joint was passed around someone’s apartment. As the movie played on a screen at the Tivoli, it crossed my mind that there was a lot more to the film than the love story that had snared me in high school – Rick was obviously a foil for isolationist America, and why were black people in old movies always lounge singers, like Sam? Mostly, though, my mind was on that mac and cheese, and how to get more of it.

\*

I saw *Casablanca* for the third, fourth, and fifth times at different points in my early twenties. Late at night on TCM, had it on as background noise while I sat on my mom’s couch, which I was also sleeping on, having seen one centipede too many in the bedroom my mom had let me move back into. Still a good movie; the scene at the airport got me every time. I’d graduated college not in California, but in landlocked Missouri, and without taking part in the Disney College Program. I’d spent some time working on Disney Cruise Lines after graduating, but our cabin televisions mostly showed Disney-affiliated channels, not Turner Classic. Between resigning from the cruise ship and moving back home, I’d taken a trip to LA and shivered on the

beach one night, as an extra in an M83 music video, but while hitching a ride back to my hostel with some Hollywood hopefuls, I realized that I didn't talk about acting in the impassioned way that they did. I was mostly mad that they didn't let the extras huddle around the Playa del Rey bonfires between takes. I ruled acting out as a career path, but I had written a feature-length screenplay that had caught the interest of a local filmmaker. The story focused on a modern-day driving instructor, but this character, too, had a fascination with the past. We shot a few scenes in the Philly area, and I had started dating the sound guy.

Early into our relationship, we purchased a Groupon for a dueling piano bar in Center City. The night was largely a disaster. Dave and I got into a petty argument on the way over. It was January in Pennsylvania and the bar's heater was busted (the establishment gave everyone a free shot of tequila for their troubles). The dueling pianists, a young guy in a white Polo shirt and a middle-aged man with messy hair, would play anything for a cash tip, but the drunken chilly audience, kept throwing joke songs their way, the like of "Big Balls" by AC/DC, which the pianists would then pissedly bang out on the grimy, frigid ivories. The Groupon entitled us to food but didn't make clear that it was for a limited appetizer menu. Pretty much everything had cheese in it. I got some cold-cored mozzarella sticks while dairy-allergic Dave took his free tequila on an empty stomach.

At some point in the night, I recalled the piano player in Bryn Mawr. The restaurant had since shut down, after one roach sighting too many. The pianist had passed away; my mom had sent me the obit from the *Inquirer* while I was in college. I told Dave that he always played "As Time Goes By" for us. He said he'd never seen *Casablanca*. I was sure he knew the song. I took the last two dollars out of my wallet, walked up to the older of the two pianists, and asked him to

perform “As Time Goes By.” I didn’t tell him to “play it again, Sam,” because Ilsa Lund doesn’t say those exact words in the movie. Unlike Sam, he immediately took my request to task, and wasn’t scolded by the bar’s owner for obliging. Just like I’d hoped, he’d performed the song solo while the younger pianist chugged a cheap can of beer by the bar. I cheered enthusiastically as he finished the song, and then he gave me a nod, as if to thank me for letting his talents come through. (Likewise, once former bandleader and Broadway actor Dooley Wilson was cast as Sam in *Casablanca*, the studio replaced some songs written into the script with more challenging ones that would show off his voice.) Of all the freezing-cold piano bars in all the town in all the world, I’d walked into that one, and I like to think that I redeemed that pianist’s night as much as he’d redeemed mine.

\*

The sixth time I saw *Casablanca* came after two or three years of badgering Dave, a film industry professional, because he had never seen the work commonly acknowledged as the second-best film ever made (after *Citizen Kane*. Which I’ve never seen.) Dave had spent time in film school, with professors who showed their students avant-garde films, European films. Apparently, film scholars aren’t big on sensationalist American wartime flicks. But this wasn’t any wartime flick. Dave and I had by then lived together for a year in the Philly suburbs, and then had moved down to Orlando together so that I could start graduate school. I came home one day with a copy of *Casablanca* from the campus library. We sat down on our couch with beer and tacos, and I put the DVD into our PlayStation. As a seasoned viewer watching the film with a newbie, I was relieved that I didn’t have to feed him the historical context; that the film opens with a newsreel-type segment that explains everything has probably contributed to its

accessibility to later generations of film fans. It seems that before Pearl Harbor, the US had been so decidedly isolationist that a film released in 1942, about international events in autumn 1941, warranted an explanation of why Europeans might have fled to a North African port city, why they might have waited there for years to see if Lady Liberty would guide these huddled masses to freedom. Dave and I ate our tacos and sat through the movie, laughed at its witty one-liners, wondered if Laszlo, not Rick, was truly the one for Ilsa. Then, as we brushed our teeth that night, with my mouth full of foamed Tom's of Maine, I asked Dave, "Hey, what happened to Sam? You know, the piano player? Rick totally stranded him in Morocco."

\*

*Casablanca* was based on what was meant to be a theatrical play, a work titled *Everybody Comes to Rick's*, written by Americans Murray Burnett and Joan Alison in 1940. Burnett, a twentysomething English teacher, and his wife Frances had spent summer vacations traveling in Europe, and as the 1930s ended, Jewish friends and acquaintances had begun to ask them for help sending their possessions to stateside family members while they forged a path out of Nazi clutches. The Burnetts helped in any way they could as they explored the continent. One night they found themselves in a seaside French town, listening to a black jazz pianist play for a mixed crowd of French citizens, Nazi soldiers, and refugees looking to get the right paperwork to flee Europe through Morocco. Moreover, the couple learned exactly why those refugees were fleeing. *Casablanca* referred to concentration camps at a time when many Americans had never imagined that such places existed.

When Burnett returned home for the school year, he enlisted a friend to help him write a play based on what he'd seen on his trip. He and Joan Alison began marketing their play to New

York producers, but Broadway showed little interest, uncomfortable with the intimations of extramarital sex between Rick and several bar patrons, including the much-younger character that would become Ingrid Bergman's Ilsa. So long as they stayed intimations, Hollywood was more open to Rick Blaine's flings, and Warner Brothers bought the rights to the story. The picture was assigned to Hungarian-born Jewish director Michael Curtiz. At the time, like Rick's patrons, much of Curtiz's family had fled Europe and was waiting in Mexico for exit papers that would grant them admission into the United States. Curtiz didn't know it at the time, but his sister and her family, left behind in Europe, had been sent to Auschwitz, where only his sister survived. *Casablanca* turned out to be a deeply personal film for many involved. The studio hired writers to adapt the play to the screen and began casting. The film, in fact, wound up with an unprecedentedly diverse cast that brought in actors from all over the Western world, less than two decades after the advent of talkies had shuttered the careers of many non-American actors. Smaller roles went to European refugees who had found themselves in Los Angeles; these film extras were included in the scene in which Nazi soldiers take over Rick's Café Americain, and head right to Sam's piano to begin playing their own patriotic tunes. The refugee actors were instructed to stand up and sing "La Marsellaise" in defiance, perhaps the first time they got to stand their ground.

While African-American Sam was Rick's employee from the early stages of production, the studio wanted to portray the character as Rick's equal, a confidante rather than a servant. Their first step was giving the character a name. In the theatrical play, he'd been known simply as "The Rabbit, A Negro Musician" from a song in the source text that Warner Brothers would ultimately drop (unlike the other principals in the film, however, Sam never received a surname).

They auditioned any number of black actors, both male and female, for the role, but nobody had both the singing and acting skills that were required to play Sam.

Across town, Arthur “Dooley” Wilson got a call from his agent. Wilson was a Texas native who had garnered modest fame as a young man performing in black troupes, as a singer and jazz drummer, throughout the South and Midwest. Skilled at speaking in an Irish brogue, Wilson was often called on to perform in whiteface as one Mr. Dooley whenever his all-black players’ club needed someone to play an Irishman, and eventually, audiences knew him not as Arthur, but as Dooley. His sights set on greater fame, Wilson headed for New York and played in Harlem nightclubs, and later alongside actress Ethel Waters on Broadway in *Cabin in the Sky*. Propelled by his success in the theatre, Paramount Pictures signed him. He and his wife Estelle moved into a white stucco bungalow the West Adams section of L.A. that had been adamantly whites-only until the likes of *Gone with the Wind*’s Hattie McDaniel and Bill “Bojangles” Robinson dangled cash and star power in front of local realtors.

Knowing that Dooley and Estelle had just bought a house, Wilson’s agent was hesitant to tell his client that Paramount was considering dropping him. He scrambled to find just a few more auditions for Wilson and came up with a Warners’ film that needed a black actor with a good voice. Dooley walked in, charmed the audience, and sealed the gig when he revealed that he had, in fact, been to the city of Casablanca, hired as the bandleader at a Lawrence of Arabia themed gala in Morocco. His piano skills were lacking, but the studio could work around that. *Casablanca* had started filming a day before Wilson received his contract. He finished a bit role he’d signed on for at Paramount, and headed up to Burbank to begin his role as Sam.

\*

*Not every black actor had their sights set on West Adams – you knew that, Humphrey. When Lena Horne moved in across the street from you and your third wife, Mayo June, in Hollywood Hills, it was you who protected her against the animosity of the other white neighbors, when they petitioned to kick her out. It was you, Humphrey, that Sammy Davis, Jr. singled out for your colorblindness when it came to friendships. Perhaps Rick Blaine’s character, then, had an effect on you – Rick and Sam, and later Rick and Louis Renault, did show the world that two men could share a “beautiful friendship.” Lena Horne became your neighbor in 1941, Humphrey. You had about a decade-and-a-half of life to live. I like to think it was good karma from defending your neighbor that made those last years the happiest of your life. Casablanca had gotten you an Oscar nomination, but I’d imagine that filming To Have and Have Not a few years later with a pouty-lipped 19-year-old model was even more rewarding.*

*As I write this, Humphrey, I am 28 years old, living in 2018. So much has changed since you died in 1957; much of which, I am sure, Lauren has already filled you in on. To me, you had to wait two lifetimes to kiss Mrs. Bacall’s pouty lips again. Lauren was around for the advent of the internet, of social media. There’s Facebook, which this year on MLK day (he was just a young preacher starting his fight when you died, wasn’t he?) your son, Stephen, used to boast about everything you’d done for Lena Horne. I’m sure Lauren told you what a trailblazer your Rick was; in the decades after you passed away, the civil rights movement made some strides, and by the 80s and 90s, everyone, from white-blazered Miami detectives to ditzy teenage girls in L.A., had a black best friend, a trendy accessory that they didn’t leave to keep Nazis at bay. It was a trend my friends loyally kept up with.*



*Oh, and they opened a second Disney theme park, over here in Florida - one with a whole land dedicated to Hollywood! I learned about Casablanca from a ride there. It's closed now, but I got to ride it on its final day of operation. People still love the movie, and now can watch it in any number of ways. The dissolution of the studio system, the advent of cable TV and the internet—as a result, there's now so much to watch, and so many ways to watch it. But with the help of your children and fans, your movies, your legacy, are being kept alive. Your son runs a film festival every year in your honor, on Key Largo. This year's centered on Casablanca's diamond jubilee.*

*I wish Dooley Wilson's legacy were half as solid, and I think you'd agree.*

\*

Did Arthur “Dooley” Wilson have children who tried to keep his name in the press? His wife, Estelle, what was her story? It took me months of research to even fully understand where the nickname “Dooley” came from. I quickly wore out my small list of celebrity essayist/biographer connections. All were eager to help, but couldn't give me more than the name of someone else to ask about Wilson's life. The game of research hot potato just made me more eager to learn about Wilson. Sure, he didn't actually play the keys in the movie (Elliot Carpenter did, his playing dubbed over Dooley's.) But “As Time Goes By” still feels like Wilson's song, and the fact that it still greets movie-watchers who sit down with any modern Warner Bros. flick, says something about Wilson's star potential.

Dooley Wilson at least got a few prime acting gigs and a cozy house in L.A. What did Sam get? Sam knew the operations of the bar, in and out, but Rick handed it over to profiteer Ferrari, whose own bar, The Blue Parrot, was clearly not run as well, or as honestly. In selling his gin joint, Rick had stipulated that Sam get a quarter of the bar's profits, but again – we've

gone through the whole film believing that Ferrari can't be trusted. *Casablanca* is the rare film that nobody in Hollywood wants to touch, in terms of a sequel or remake. To which, I say, "good." Still, since that night when I first wondered, "What happened to Sam?" I have not been able to let his story go unfinished, even if the ending isn't Hollywood-happy.

INT. RICK'S CAFE - MAIN ROOM - NIGHT

The cafe is crowded, as usual, but has taken on a more somber tone in Rick's absence. FERRARI proudly walks through the room, stops at Sam's piano. Sam is playing "It Had to Be You." Ferrari pauses at Sam's piano, waits for the song to be over.

FERRARI

Nice job, but I think we could use some new material. Do you know, how you say, CHAT-ta-NOO-ga Choo-Choo?

SAM

Can do boss. But I've already had two requests for "Knock on Wood." It really gets everyone going.

FERRARI

You played it earlier tonight; if they wanted to hear "Knock on Wood," they would have come earlier, understand?

Sam nods and begins to play "Chattanooga Choo-Choo." A few bar patrons try to dance along in their seats, but most shoot Sam incredulous looks and resume their conversations. Ferrari holds his hand up, signaling for Sam to stop.

SAM

Boss?

FERRARI

I don't know; try something else. I've done the math and the bar's numbers are down.

SAM

Actually, boss, I had a few suggestions. Rick used to -

Yvonne, stumbles toward Ferrari, a drink sloshing in her hand.

YVONNE  
*Bonsoir, mon Signor.*

FERRARI  
My dear. Can I get you anything else?

YVONNE  
Oh, one more, Signor. I keep spilling this one.

FERRARI  
Your wish is my command, sweetheart.

SAM  
Boss, when Yvonne got this way before, Rick would always -

FERRARI  
Sam, I've told you before. This bar is only Rick's by name. I run it how I want to run it. You, and Sacha, the others, you do as I say.  
(beat)  
You know, if you behave, the Germans will let your kind be, but if you keep this up...

SAM  
Boss...

FERRARI  
And no more of this American word, this "boss."  
If "Signor" works for Yvonne, it'll work for you.  
(to Yvonne)  
Now, my bella, let's go see if Sacha will make you another.

The two walk off, Ferrari's arm around Yvonne's waist. Sam shakes his head, looks around the room. He begins to play "Knock on Wood," and the audience sings, and knocks, along. Partway through the song, two drinks in hand, Yvonne falls backward onto Ferrari, bringing them both to the ground.

YVONNE  
I'm sorry, Signor. I'm sorry Sacha. I -

She stops mid-sentence, to knock along, against the floor.

SACHA  
It's okay, I still loff you.

YVONNE  
May I have another?

INT. RICK'S CAFE - MAIN ROOM - END OF NIGHT

Sam and Carl (the waiter) are sweeping the floor of Rick's. Sacha is wiping down the bar. Abdul the doorman is moving tables and chairs around.

SAM

Rick never drank with guests. Ferrari only drinks with one, but it's the one shouldn't be drinking at all.

CARL

Ja, plenty has changed since Herr Rick left. Used to be, you didn't even have to close with us.

SAM

Ferrari seems lonely. With Rick, it always worked to take him out for a drive, then drink some gin. Ferrari won't go for it.

(beat)

If I can't even play what I want to play, is it worth it to be here? I'm making more money now, like Rick said I would, but I've been looking for a bigger apartment, but without Rick to vouch, nobody will even give me a tour. The Moroccans are worse than the French.

(beat)

Worse than back home.

(beat)

Say, Abdul, what does *aâzi* mean?

ABDUL

(quickly pushing a table)

Nothing. I don't know.

SACHA

Did Rick tell you he was leaving, Sam? I didn't know until I came into work, and Ferrari said that Rick was on his way back to America.

SAM

He didn't tell me, either. I don't suppose he thought I'd want to go with him.

ABDUL

Would you have?

SAM

We've gone everywhere together. All over the states...London, Madrid...

(beat)

You do know he didn't actually go home? Ilsa wrote me from New York.

The room starts to rumble. Sam heads to the window, looks out.

CUT TO:

EXT. RICK'S CAFE - SAME TIME

We see the night sky. An Air France Lockheed Electra plane flies low to the ground, seeming to almost graze the roof of the cafe.

CUT TO:

INT. RICK'S CAFE - MAIN ROOM - SAME TIME

Sam is still looking out and up, into the sky. Sacha is picking up broken glass from the floor by the bar. Carl approaches Sam.

CARL  
Still with the planes, ja?

SAM  
I can't help it. I look outside every time.

Carl nods. The FRONT DOOR swings open. Yvonne enters, legs shaking. She is holding a small HANDGUN and crying. Ferrari has his arm around her.

CARL  
Signor?

FERRARI  
Just a small accident.

YVONNE  
(slurring)  
It was just lying there. All the guns were. I didn't think it'd be loaded. There was a bird out the window. And an old man, too.  
(beat, sniffing)  
The bird flew away.

She drops the gun and falls to the ground, sobbing harder.

YVONNE  
(CONT'D)  
With Rick here, I never would've gotten into this mess.

FERRARI  
No worries, belle. Let me talk to the  
officials.

A group of gendarmes, the military policemen from the airport  
rush in. One approaches Ferrari.

GENDARME  
Signor?

FERRARI  
You know what to do. How you say...round up the  
usual suspects.

GENDARME  
They've all been rounded up, signor, weeks ago.  
We've shipped the usuals back to Europe for  
questioning.

FERRARI  
I see.  
(gesturing to the staff)  
Then round up this lot. Him, and him...  
(pointing to Sam)  
And him. Say he did it, and nobody will  
question you.

The police handcuff the staff of Rick's Cafe and lead them out.  
Sam exits last. We see him take one last glance at the piano.

\*

After months of looking for information on actor Dooley Wilson, I took a cue from two correspondents who recommended I contact the Schomburg Center in New York City. Within 24 hours, I received a few newspaper articles documenting Wilson's life. I learned that Dooley had amassed more fan mail at Warner Brother's than Clark Gable. As an actor out on loan from Paramount, however, most of the notes never got to him. Likewise, *Casablanca* fans reached out to the studio, asking for a copy of his "As Time Goes By." Warner Brothers did not have a music division at the time, so no soundtrack had been released. Union member Dooley Wilson was barred from re-recording the song during a musicians' strike that spanned from 1942 until 1944.

Without an official release of Wilson's "As Time Goes By," the film's success launched an older version of the song, recorded in the 1930s, to the top of the charts.

Wilson continued to perform, often on the stage, occasionally in movies. Along with Cab Calloway, he headed an "all-sepia" Broadway revue in the spring of 1943. In his last year before retirement, Wilson once again performed with his former Broadway co-star Ethel Waters, this time making his way into homes across the country, as the titular character's husband on the ABC show *Beulah*. Dooley Wilson died in 1953, in his West Adams bungalow, Estelle by his side.

My research didn't turn up much, but at least I had a bit of closure on Dooley Wilson's life. Sam, he was still another story. No matter how I rephrased "What happened to Sam in *Casablanca*" for Google, I still got few results, a couple of bloggers and forum-posters talking about the beauty of cliffhanger endings, and how not every character needs a happy ending, or even a complete one. And, yes, I am a fan of cliffhangers, when they are warranted. Rick Blaine and Louis Renault had chosen to live the lives of revolutionaries in the Congo. They knew they were heading into an unknown; gambling their lives for a cause they believed in. An unpredictable future is what they wanted.

Sam was the type who sought stability. In the film, he's offered more money to perform elsewhere, and makes it clear that he's happy where he is, performing at Rick's. In selling the bar, did Rick have Sam's best interests in mind? Did Rick know what Sam's best interests were?

\*

But Rick's not to blame, and Humphrey's not to blame, and the writers of *Casablanca*, at this point, aren't entirely to blame, either, for Sam's disappearance from the narrative, for his being left behind, for the loss of his best friend. In fact, I'm just as culpable in Sam's abandonment as anyone. It took ten years of viewings, on screens big and small, ten years of call-and-response to "Knock on Wood," ten years of mascara-dyed tears as those propellers whirred in the fog, for me to take notice. All my research showed that at least some others have watched *Casablanca* and have had the same question, but in this age of anonymous scrutiny, surprisingly few have said anything, perhaps hesitant to question a classic film, even from behind the shining armor of a computer screen. Models falling on the runway, former presidents that can't put a rain poncho on, everyday people who talk about the smell of their boyfriends' colon, when they mean to say "cologne"— they all get lampooned by total strangers online. People on the internet are quick to point out if a refrigerator magnet disappears between frames in a lesser film, but again, *Casablanca* is seemingly part of the untouchable few.

I still love the film, the characters, the cinematography, the way that they inserted so much deadpan humor into the script, without making light of the refugee crisis or Nazi occupation at hand. I, however, am not afraid to say that I want more out of the film. Not for myself, but for Sam.

\*

*You were there for him, Sam. You followed Rick all over the world. You were there when the Nazis marched into your arrondissement and knew as well as Rick did that it was time for the two of you, and Ilsa, to get out. Ilsa wasn't there on that terrible, rainy morning at the train*



*station, when the three of you were meant to flee Paris, but you were there. Don't forget that it was you who helped Rick move on. You and Rick, you'll always have Paris, too, and Casablanca, and you'll always have all the places where you and Rick would sit up at night, you always with a listening ear. And wherever life took you, Sam, you must remember this – someone out there is looking for you. And as time goes by, more of us will join the search. The fundamental things apply – one day, your loyalty to Rick will come back to you.*

## CRUISING/A WOMAN IN MOTION/A SUPPOSEDLY FUN THING I DID AGAIN AND AGAIN

“I can climb the highest mountain  
Cross the wildest sea  
I can feel St. Elmo's fire burnin' in me”

– “St. Elmo’s Fire (Man in Motion)” by John Parr

I didn’t understand the rules of shuffleboard, but I understood that the family haphazardly hitting discs in front of me, fumbling their cues, and hogging space on the ship’s open deck, plain sucked at it. Their youngest kept picking up the discs and running off with them, dropped one overboard, almost got taken out by one that his big sister had sent flying. And I did know that this group was distracting me from my reading, but at least they provided some fresh entertainment, a departure from the magic shows and musical revues I’d seen countless times.

I didn’t know what ship I saw up ahead in the distance, but from the standard coastguard orange of their lifeboats, I knew that it wasn’t a Disney ship (our lifeboats were the same yellow as Mickey’s shoes) and, somehow, that meant that the crew members aboard this other ship were more underpaid, more overworked, than I was.

Another 12-hour work day had just ended, and I’d changed out of my sweaty yellow polyester polo, high-waisted slacks, and white sneakers, into a heather T-shirt, silky batik skirt, and sandals. The poolside guitar player, the one ship act that I still made it a point to see, had told me that this outfit was much more becoming on me than my daily uniform. I rotated through tops, but the skirt/sandals combo was now in heavy post-work rotation.

I took a sip of my Vitamin Water, read the little blurb on the bottle, boasting of dubious health benefits, and then my eyes returned to my copy of David Foster Wallace’s *Infinite Jest*. A

coworker had been spotted around the ship, reading *Cloud Atlas* in anticipation of its film adaptation. Others in our department, whose libraries didn't go much farther than *Hunger Games* and *Fifty Shades of Grey*, kept stopping him to tell him how awesome it was that he was reading such a long book – he must have been so smart! I spent much of my free time reading, and I'd just gotten a degree from one of the best schools in the country. Nobody was telling me that I was smart. I decided that it was because I'd always been seen with an eReader – for all anyone knew, I was sitting there lusting over Christian Grey as I ate my white rice and protein-devoid veggie stew in the crew mess hall. Not wanting to be beat, I put my eReader in my desk drawer, took a cab to Barnes and Noble on a Cape Canaveral day, and bested my coworker's 500-page book with one twice the size.<sup>1</sup> I'd read the first thirty pages repeatedly and had no idea what was going on.

The little one was crying because his mom told him not to put a shuffleboard disc in his mouth. Some drunk ladies with crocodile skin were lounging in the deck chairs to my left, singing “A Whole New World.” The wind had started whipping around, and I could hear the ocean waves lapping against the ship. Back in Missouri, I'd completed midterm papers, many written in a foreign language, to a soundtrack of violent winds and tornado sirens, but now the noise made it hard to concentrate.

On the horizon, black clouds rushed in to eclipse the moon. Then, a thunderclap. The little one cried. His family threw their cues down on the floor, leaving them for some crew member to clean up, and scurried inside. A few lightning bolts struck sideways; the thunder rumbled into a crescendo. The drunk ladies let out a collective “whoa,” then also headed for

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<sup>1</sup> This would be the year of adventure, and of the egregious footnote! Or so I told myself.

cover. I closed *Infinite Jest* without marking my place, and pictured myself in St. Louis that past spring, sitting in the basement with my housemates from the WashU co-op. The sirens would start sounding outside. By senior year, the one-third of our class who hailed from the northeast, myself included, knew what they meant. Once sheltered in place, someone would suggest we order a pizza, someone else would sympathize with the delivery drivers made to go out in the storm and we'd wind up sharing leftovers from our weekly potlucks. We'd decide on a record to play and then all look outside as the sky ripened itself for funneling. As the other seniors in the room talked about how they'd miss these days when they returned to the east coast for grad school, or went to California for a new job, I would think about what the weather would be like in the middle of the ocean, when I embarked on the adventure of a lifetime. Tropical storms and hurricanes were a given,<sup>2</sup> but what I really wanted was to see was a glowing ball of pure, plasmatic electricity form at the Disney Dream's mast – St. Elmo's fire.

St. Elmo's fire typically occurs during a thunderstorm or volcanic eruption. When the air around an elongated object becomes heavily charged, the air molecules ionize and turn into a glowing blue-violet plasma. The more pointed the source object, and the darker the sky, the more intense this phenomenon will be, meaning that those living aboard ships, out in the ocean away from city lights, have higher odds of observing a St. Elmo's fire emanating from one of the ship's masts. When I accepted a Youth Activities role aboard the Disney Dream, I told myself it

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<sup>2</sup> Though at the time that season's big hurricane hit, I was on a six-week break between ship contracts. My shipmates experienced Sandy from the open seas; my family listened to the wind blow an hour away from the battered Jersey Shore. I was visiting my college friends in St. Louis – the one time I appreciated Missouri being nowhere near an ocean.

was going to be the adventure of a lifetime, and that if I was going to see the phenomenon anywhere, it was going to be there.

But by the time I found myself sitting on the open deck that night, I'd experienced the realities of ship life, and knew it wasn't going to be the mind-expanding journey that I had banked on. With seventy American employees out of a crew of 1500, I'd met plenty of people from around the world – but mostly we had self-referential conversations about ship life or Disney movies. I'd gotten to put my Spanish degree and A's in Portuguese 101 to good use while chatting with kids from Mexico and South America – but I'd put aside writing papers on postmodern Latin American lit for conversations spoken at a grade schooler's level.<sup>3</sup> I'd seen plenty of storms in the months I was there, but the electric jolts always went in all directions, sloppy white splays on the purple sky, that never coalesced into a glowing orb.

Though Elmo, the Bishop of Formia, Italy would become the patron saint of sailors, he is not understood to have had a seafaring life. Rather, it's said that the early Christian martyr was canonized as such because of the pervading story of his death. After years of being tortured for his faith, he was ultimately disemboweled by a windlass, part of a pulley system that was typically used not for extracting innards from men of the cloth, but for hoisting heavy items up to a ship's open deck.

Life at sea has always been treacherous. Sailors had to endure months of confinement, diseases that spread rapidly in close quarters, and malnutrition. They had to keep their eyes open for both rogue pirates and rogue waves, which could take down the loftiest of ships in a single

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<sup>3</sup> When I have a bad day at work nowadays, I remind myself of the time I had a crying American toddler pulling on one arm, a crying Argentinian toddler pulling on the other, and a slightly older Brazilian kid following me around, yelling at me because he didn't like what the kids' club was serving for dinner.

swell. By the Victorian era, the fields of engineering and communications had advanced far enough that wealthy Britons began sailing for luxury and fun. Then, as the Edwardian era closed, a certain unsinkable ship did the unthinkable.<sup>4</sup>

By the time the industry recovered from the Titanic disaster, consumers had more pressing concerns, an era of economic strife bookended by two global conflicts. When the travel sector bounced back after World War II, commercial airliners had begun promising quick jaunts to the hot destinations of the time, without the seasickness or norovirus that still plague even the nicest of ships (St. Elmo is also the patron saint of stomach ailments – I like to think he was by my side whenever I got quarantined for a stomach bug, giving me a much-needed day or two off from work.)

As the glimmer and awe of air travel wore off in the late 60s, the luxury ship industry saw a way back in: they began promoting cruises that boasted all the amenities and entertainment a tourist needed, under one roof, the ports of call becoming secondary to the onboard happenings. By the next decade, TV viewers in their landlocked homes tuned in every week to catch the romantic escapades of the crew and guests aboard the Pacific Princess. A typical episode of *The Love Boat* had three or four plotlines, each with a different team of writers. This resulted in clunky episode titles like "Joker Is Mild/The First Time Out/Take My Granddaughter, Please" and radical mood swings between scenes. Still, the Aaron Spelling show ran for nine seasons, and interest in cruise vacations skyrocketed.

Meanwhile, kids across the country were begging their parents to take them to Orlando, where a new Disney theme park had opened in the autumn of 1971. Running out of citrus groves

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<sup>4</sup> And inspired a film that took up two VHS tapes.

to decimate in Anaheim, Walt had set his sights on another Orange County, in Florida, so that he could purchase land to implement some of his more experimental ideas for a theme park. He passed away while Disney World was still in its early stages of planning, and the company, baffled at his notes about the likes of futuristic, sustainable communities, decided to just replicate Disneyland for the east coast crowd. As the 20<sup>th</sup> century chugged along, however, some of Walt's ideas were put into action, culminating in the four Florida theme parks that have captured the imagination of children and adults worldwide. To accommodate the influx of tourists, Orlando's McCoy Airforce Base became Orlando International Airport. The first time my mom and I flew from PHL to the airport whose IATA code is still MCO, one of my hands held one of hers; my other hand gripped my neon pink and blue *Lion King* suitcase, packed with floral dresses, short-alls, and hair scrunchies, but with room left for Mickey Mouse T-shirts and Tinkerbell accessories. As we boarded MCO's terminal tram, tears welled up in my eyes – I thought we were already on the Disney monorail. We weren't, and didn't get to Disney World until the next day, but the rental car and the immaculately clean, pastel-toned timeshare my aunt had gotten for us were almost as exciting.

As I met Minnie Mouse for the first time in 1996, and showed her my pink watch whose face bore her likeness, the Walt Disney Company was plotting their foray into the cruise ship industry. The Disney Magic's maiden voyage began on July 30, 1998, about a month after my eighth birthday. My mom and I had a Disney trip planned in a few months. I looked forward to the trip, but I also spent considerable time moping in my bedroom, listening to the most downtrodden songs off No Doubt's *Tragic Kingdom* (I chose to ignore that the titular song off the Anaheim band's album was a direct jab at Disney parks.) With a mother prone to

claustrophobia and seasickness, and a dad whose post-Vietnam PTSD was tied into a voyage on an aircraft carrier, getting on a ship with them was out of the question.

My first cruise took place in June 2005, on a Princess ship – not the MS Pacific of *Love Boat* fame, though at the time she was still navigating the seas.<sup>5</sup> It was the week of my fifteenth birthday, and I sailed to Alaska and British Columbia with my best friend, Lydia, and her mom’s side of the family. Lydia’s mother, Jen, spent most of her time in the casino with Lydia’s mémé. Lydia’s preteen cousins begrudgingly hung out in the infantile kids’ club.<sup>6</sup> Lydia and I split our days between the lido deck and the teen club, making hemp bracelets and drawing pictures of mushrooms while giggling to each other. The first day of the cruise, Lydia met a boy named Alex from one of the mountain states, a skinny boy with pale blue eyes who shared her love for Good Charlotte.

As they began chatting each other up, an olive-skinned, dark-haired young man entered the club and introduced himself to the staff on duty. I heard them tell him that, sorry, nineteen was too old for admission to the teen club. He said, in a monotone Kiwi accent, that that was too bad – he was too old for the teens, but too young for the bars, a forgotten guest.<sup>7</sup> The staff shrugged and apologized. As he left, his green eyes met my brown ones, and we both smiled.

When Lydia wasn’t exploring the ship with Alex, she, her family, and I would explore the ports of call, the totem poles of Juneau, the water fountains in the state capitol than ran

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<sup>5</sup> Between 2012 and 2013, consequently the years I worked about the Disney Dream, the Pacific was sold and gradually parsed up by a shipbreaking company. Unromantically, multiple people died during the deconstruction of the Love Boat. The ship demolition industry is notorious for lax regulations.

<sup>6</sup> Disney chose to have a separate club just for middle schoolers, furthering the fleet’s popularity among families.

<sup>7</sup> Young adult guests don’t have their own space on Disney ships, either, but Disney offers them exclusive social events throughout the cruise. Crew members must be at least 21, and most in our department were pretty close to that age.



constantly to prevent freezing pipes, the overpriced souvenir shops everywhere. We spent a morning kayaking, an afternoon ziplining among the eagle-topped evergreens. As we reached each treetop platform, Lydia and Jen would be the first to volunteer to zip across; I'd be the last one, legs quivering as I tried to lift them off the tiny wooden platform. By then, one tour guide would be across the line with the others, while the other guide was with me, encouraging me to take off. On the last leg of the tour, Lydia and Jen had the guide on their side radio the guide on mine, suggesting that I sing a song as I attempted to launch myself. In anticipation of seeing "Vancouver's lights" at the end of the trip, Lydia and I had found ourselves singing "Life is a Highway" by Tom Cochrane all week. I started a shaky rendition of it as I lifted my sneakered feet off the platform and glided toward the rest of the group.

Lydia and I, both claustrophiles,<sup>8</sup> slept soundly in our tiny bunk beds, built into the walls, with privacy curtains that would have blocked out the midnight sun, if we hadn't still been running around the ship at 3 each morning, stopping on the open deck to appreciate the way the summer sun and the full moon shared their glory on the horizon.

The entire ship seemed to know that I was turning fifteen. The shirts that Lydia and her mom wore, with my baby picture on them, must have helped. They'd gotten one printed for me, too, but rather than display an image of a chubby-faced, curly-haired, little Sienna on a white cotton/poly background, I rang in my birthday wearing a tie-dyed shirt bearing the image of Janis Joplin. Later that night, on the way to dinner with Jen, my shirt caught the eye of the older guy from New Zealand and his new friend, an American guy about the same age, with long, sandy hair and a Zeppelin t-shirt on. I chatted with them for a while, and the green-eyed Kiwi told me

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<sup>8</sup> Though days where the ship didn't dock tried my love of confinement.

that I reminded him of a hippie Scary Spice – not that I was scary! I laughed, and then Jen asked me if I was ready to go to the casino. “Happy Birthday!” they called after me, though Jen and Lydia had long changed out of their shirts.

One night, Jen snuck me past the casino bouncer, put dollar after dollar into the glistening slot machines until she had no spare change, and then turned to me and said, “Hey, Sienna, do you have any cash?” I hesitated, then remembered that this woman had realized my dream of taking a cruise. I sheepishly handed her the contents of my denim Mudd purse, on which I’d sharpied the lyrics to “Ruby Tuesday” by the Stones. The machines promptly ate up my money, too.

Wanting a family-friendly image, Disney Cruise Lines opted against casinos aboard any ships in their fleet, although there were still nightclubs onboard which closed at 2AM, an hour after the club for 3-to-12-year-olds shut down for the evening. Many a night, at one-fifteen, worn-out youth counselors would travel to the “nightlife district” on deck four and collect the parents who had lost track of time. We were worried about handing the kids off to parents that smelled like liquor stores, but nobody was driving anywhere, we wanted the day to end, and the kids were just happy to see that their parents hadn’t abandoned them.

Often, my workday would span the entirety of the Oceaneer Club’s operating hours, a split shift that started at 9AM, with a long midday break, and then I’d resume work after dinner, until one in the morning. Sometimes, I was lucky and performed opening duties at 8:30, then

worked nearly straight through until 8 or 9 at night, with a couple hours' free time in the evening.<sup>9</sup>

If I knew my roommate was working all night, that I'd have the tiny cabin to myself, I'd often head right back there, cuddle up under the ship-sanctioned brown fleece blanket, and watch movies from the comfort of my closed-in top bunk, built into the wall. The televisions in each cabin had every Disney movie possible, alongside a few new releases and some classic, family-oriented movies. I would sometimes put on *Oliver and Company* and sing along to Billy Joel, but usually I went with the couple of non-Disney flicks offered. I once made the mistake of watching *Beaches* and *Stand by Me* back-to-back. As the latter's adult protagonist typed out the closing line, "I never had any friends later on like the ones I had when I was twelve. Jesus, does anyone?" I began dabbing my eyes with that nubby brown blanket. I thought about how much I missed Lydia, who'd been my best friend since middle school. I hadn't cried that hard on the ship since spending my 22<sup>nd</sup> birthday working a long day, having to tell people my birthday, realizing that nobody cared. I'd Skyped my parents late that night,<sup>10</sup> and received an email from my Disney-loving aunt a few days later, stating that she'd understand if I resigned, since ship life seemed unbearable. When I did talk to my college friends, I painted my life to be the adventure I'd dreamed up when I completed my Skype interview with the company months before, my

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<sup>9</sup> Yes, this was "lucky." The Youth Activities Counselors rotated through various shifts. Every couple of weeks, St. Elmo would bless me with a "magic jump," a workday that ended relatively early (around 8 or 9), followed by a day when I wasn't scheduled until 3 or 4. This block of downtime, though not even 24 hours long, would provide a much-needed break.

<sup>10</sup> Shipboard internet access was generously discounted to crew at 10 dollars an hour, so this was quite the pricey crying session. While we did get free room and board, in terms of monetary compensation, this wi-fi rate was nearly double hour hourly pay.

back to a tie-dye wall tapestry. I'd sat there in my room in the co-op telling an HR rep about how much I'd loved teaching at an art camp.<sup>11</sup>

I didn't really correspond with those college friends much, however, or with most of my friends from the Quaker boarding school I'd attended from the 9<sup>th</sup> to 12<sup>th</sup> grades. Yet I kept in touch with my friends from middle school.

At some point in the seventh or eighth grade, my friend Bryn and I watched *Sixteen Candles* together, my first Brat Pack film. We'd known each other since our pre-school years, and she was always introducing me to new things. A star swimmer all her life, she'd introduced me to the vast ocean that existed beyond where the waves broke. Always more outgoing than me, she introduced me to many of my grade school friends. And after that rainy movie-watching day spent on her parents' couch, I began working through John Hughes's entire catalog.

Senior year of high school, knowing that many of my friends who boarded at our high school would be hours away by my eighteenth birthday in June, I held an eighties-themed party in the springtime. Lydia showed up wearing her mom's shirt from an 80's Cars show; I wore the black lace leggings I'd bought for a Madonna costume the past Halloween. Most of my boarding school friends didn't dress up, to my chagrin, but I offered them homemade pizza anyway, and we all watched *The Breakfast Club*, laughed at lines delivered by characters that had navigated high school twenty years before. There I was, a brain and a former (Disney) princess, a basketcase who wanted to be a criminal, like Judd Nelson, or maybe just wanted to be with one. Emilio Estevez's jock character was pretty much out of my picture.

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<sup>11</sup> The lady interviewing me never knew that I was wearing my nicest blouse, paired with my rattiest pajama pants.

A moment of connection with Mr. Estevez came later. It wasn't with wrestling star Andrew Clark, but with the actor's character in a later Brat Pack movie, *St. Elmo's Fire*. In the 1985 film, he portrays a law student, still somewhat hopeful about the future, about love, about his career, even as his cynical friend Andrew McCarthy reminds him that, at that moment in the mid-80s, there are more students in law school than working lawyers in the world. Watching it for a second time on the ship, I thought about the loftiness of every career aspiration I'd had – artist, actor, writer, translator, Great Movie Ride tour guide, famous animal rights activist – and embraced the hope I still held that one of them might be realized.

I'd initially watched *St. Elmo's Fire* in high school at some point, at least half of it. At the time, I couldn't relate to the deliberations of a bunch of college grads. The casting made it seem like a bizarro version of *Breakfast Club*, in which the criminal shows up in the opening scene wearing a suit, and is for some reason married to the basketcase. I tuned out but kept it on as background noise as I perused an issue of *Teen Vogue*. But the second viewing, the only *St. Elmo's Fire* I'd see in my seafaring life, spoke to me more. The film opens with Rob Lowe's mullet clad-character getting arrested for drunk driving. A friend admonishes him, "Four months after graduation and you're still acting like every night's a frat party." Four months after my graduation, I'd found myself in a social setting that revolved around the crew bar. Ignoring the fact that I had a twelve-hour shift the next morning, on nights when I chose not to read or watch a movie, I myself in that aft, sticky-floored part of the ship. During the workday, in the presence of guests and officers, we'd refer to the bar as the "library." That way, even on front-desk duty, we could make plans to read well-aged books about grapes, salty short stories about agave, and

trendy tomes about hops and barley.<sup>12</sup> My time on the ship was truly punctuated by the great books I read, and the *great books I read*.

Likewise, much of the Brat Pack film's action takes place in a bar called St. Elmo's; in fact, Rob Lowe's friends take him there post-DUI arrest. In the movie, nobody sails the seas,<sup>13</sup> but I could relate to the story. Watching the familiar cast of actors struggle with career choices, with fading friendships, with their first forays into adult relationships, I worried that my taking a job with Disney was an attempt to avoid it all, as much as it was a stab at an adventure that hadn't fully panned out. I realized that I couldn't stay on the ship forever, but as long as I was there, I wanted to make the most of it.

Some sailors took a sighting of St. Elmo's fire to be a bad omen, but many thought of it as a positive, a sign that their patron saint had walked up their gangway. Having not seen this plasmatic beacon, my seafaring life was devoid of such divine premonition, good or bad. My time aboard the ship was going to be what I alone made it. Well, perhaps there was an act of divine intervention, but it was more the mark of smug micromanagement. Our ship's Cruise Director had spotted my eReader in a utility closet, where I'd left it while I worked Welcome Line duty one Canaveral day, clapping and waving as a member of the Cruise Staff announced each individual or group that walked up the gangway.<sup>14</sup> The Cruise Director, who'd seen me all

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<sup>12</sup> Though an officer's three-year-old once blew our cover. She was a Spanish speaker; an Australian co-worker and I began making plans in front of her. The little girl chimed in, "¿Tenemos una biblioteca aquí? Yo puedo leer un poco y me encanta." She could read a little and loved it; she could apparently understand a little English, and we were terrified that she'd ask her parents about the non-existent library on the ship.

<sup>13</sup> Nor do any pious Italian men get their guts ripped out.

<sup>14</sup> Exceptions were sometimes made – when Terri Hatcher or John Stamos cruised with us, a concierge would discreetly whisk them to their suite on Deck 13, without announcing them.

over the ship reading on the device, had deemed it an unidentified, potentially hazardous electronic device, and had it disappeared to the security office, where it was likely destroyed.

Either way, with my eReader gone and my copy of *Infinite Jest* largely serving as a much-needed paperweight on the rocky ship, I started eating meals with my co-workers more frequently, instead of heading back to my room to read.<sup>15</sup> Other than fond childhood memories of Disney World and a love of Smirnoff Ice, I didn't share much in common with most of them, and I fell out of touch shortly after resigning, a process comprised of a single terse email written to HR as I watched *Jeopardy!* with my mom on her red brocade couch. Though I stayed with the cruise line for all of nine months, as I nestled underneath a mom-sanctioned fleece blanket one night after quitting, I smiled, thinking about how I'd made it all happen – I'd applied for the job, passed the interview process, and had made it through the intense job training. Part of this process had involved jumping off a platform into the placidly aquamarine, but suddenly threatening, ocean. Without Lydia down below reminding me to sing a song, without Bryn there to tell me how fun the water could be, I still took the leap, and earned the final certification I needed for the job. And aboard the ship, I ultimately made friends - however ephemeral those friendships were, I'd forged them.

In the most literal sense, John Parr's line, "I can feel St. Elmo's fire burning in me," from the theme song to the Brat Pack movie, conjures up gory disembowelment. But I was more interested in the new horizon, the blazing sky, the eagles flying higher and higher, the burning desire to start my life, the newfound confidence that I could do what I put my mind to.

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<sup>15</sup> I might have also found myself at the library even more than before.

## DIGGING UP THE GODMOTHER

My story starts like this: on June 25, 1990, I came into the world, much earlier than I should have been. I should have been born in August of that year, but I guess I sensed that music was about to go downhill, and fast, and that one day I'd take comfort in the fact that I was born just a little closer to the golden age of rock and roll than some of my friends.

Okay, fine, rock music still had a few good years. As I was crawling backwards, like a weirdo, through the hallways of my parents' Philadelphia apartment, exciting things were happening in rock music across the country. A Seattle-area songwriter was taking pen to paper, writing down lyrics that were maybe the only ever written in the rock genre to acknowledge my existence: "A mulatto, an albino, a mosquito, my libido, yeah." I'm not an albino.

Discovering that my parents had a copy of Nirvana's *Nevermind* in the house would later signal one of those pivotal moments in which a child realizes that her parents are actually pretty cool.

On one hand, Kurt Cobain is directly responsible for bands like Nickelback. But without grunge birthing post-grunge, I may never have dug so far into rock's past as a teenager.

Well into my twenties, I discovered that I hadn't dug deep enough.

Had I dug just a little deeper down, past Elvis Presley and Chuck Berry, I would have landed on Sister Rosetta Tharpe.

Her story starts like this: on March 20, 1915, Sister Rosetta Tharpe was born, just early enough to musically define the second half of the twentieth century. Between her childhood



home in Cotton Plant, Arkansas, and the Philly rowhouse where she spent her last years, she spent years as a wanderer. But all along, she worked to build a home, a modern-day castle, that today shines bright against the murky shores of Lake Erie. It opened decades after the black gospel singer had gone and met the Lord. Tharpe constructed the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame with a Gibson guitar as her hammer, but nobody thought to leave her a key.

Okay, so, the House that Sister Rosetta Tharpe built was actually designed by Chinese American architect I.M. Pei. I haven't pulled up a roster or anything, but I'm guessing that he and recent inductee Journey's current singer, Arnel Pineda from the Philippines, make up a plurality of Asian figures with a connection to the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. What I'm trying to lead with here is that questions of race in rock music run deeper than the Cuyahoga, and burn even hotter than the river did in 1969.

The year 1969 was likewise tough for Sister Rosetta, I'm sure – she wasn't literally on fire like that river in Ohio, but her mother had just passed away, and Rosetta had been diagnosed with diabetes. Her days of performing, of wailing out the gospel classics of her youth for more godless crowds, of shredding on her Gibson L-5, for audiences black and white, on both sides of the Atlantic, were coming to an end.

The House that Sister Rosetta Built, with the help of a Chinese-American architect and a generous grant from the City of Cleveland, today boasts 150,000 square feet of rock memorabilia, a towering double pyramid structure that defines the Forest City's skyline. If Rosetta hadn't picked up the acoustic guitar at age four, hadn't been considered in a child prodigy in the gospel circuits; if she hadn't gone electric in the 1940s to give her gospel-

crossover recordings a creative edge, who knows what would have been erected in that spot on the lake. Probably another parking garage for Cleveland Browns fans. Instead of attracting the cars of the local sports following, an estimated 90% of visitors to the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame come from outside the tree-lined city that's been striving to shake its "Mistake by the Lake" moniker. Rather than a pilgrimage to Seattle, or the Bowery District, or Haight-Ashbury, these music-loving tourists opt for a trip into the heart of Flyover Country to relish the fact that, per Huey Lewis, the heart of rock and roll is still beating...in Cleveland.

Sister Rosetta's parents worked as cotton pickers, but their true passions came alive once a week. On Sunday mornings, the black folk of Cotton Plant would leave the house around the same time, heading in two directions. The wealthy black business owners, who had moved there to send their children to Cotton Plant Academy, would go toward the Presbyterian Church, to let the Lord speak to them. But across town, at the Church of God in Christ, the farmhands and millworkers would wait for God to speak *through* them. COGIC chapters throughout the United States worshipped in their own way, with joyful singing in the pews, and with women at the pulpit. Tharpe's mother, Katie Bell Nubin, would always be front and center; if there wasn't a guitar or tambourine handy, she'd provide the choir's backbeat on a wooden chair.

Katie Bell Nubin felt that her life's purpose wasn't in making a buck for some cotton gin owner, but in sharing her faith with the country. Rosetta's father was content in Arkansas. Katie Bell eventually left her husband to head north, her daughter in tow. They stopped to spread the Word everywhere they could, and they did it with their music. Tharpe wouldn't return to Cotton Plant until after her father's passing. When she arrived, she was already a superstar, greeted by

an entourage of ten half-siblings who were eager to meet her. The siblings didn't have many pictures of their father, but they handed Sister Rosetta every one they had. She was, after all, Sister Rosetta Tharpe, she was someone, and for a family that had found so much joy in her albums, the photos were the least they could do.

But as she stood at the front of many a church as a little girl, her tiny hands strumming as her mother sang, hollered, and preached, there was no way for Sister Rosetta to know that music would ever leave the pulpit. After years of travel, Rosetta and her mother settled down, for a while, in Chicago, where a local COGIC branch had welcomed them warmly. Rosetta made a best friend, named Roxie, and became known as a guitar prodigy within her community. At the urging of Katie Bell Nubin, a teenage Rosetta married a young preacher named Tommy Tharpe. Four years later, the pair divorced. Rosetta Thorpe and her mother headed to New York City. Roxie, also recently married and divorced, soon followed them.

When Rosetta first arrived in New York, music was an escape from her life – she and Roxie would stay up all night singing, singing together, and to each other, to take their minds off of their realities as single women in an unfamiliar city. For Sister Rosetta, music quickly morphed, from an escape from her life to her higher calling.

Music was never going to be my higher calling. This one time in grade school, I volunteered to play the viola for my music class. When I was done playing “Hot Cross Buns,” which we all knew how to play on the recorder, the teacher stood up and explained to everyone how much harder the viola was than the recorder, how much easier it was for notes to come out wrong.

But that's not to say that music didn't shape my life from an early age. I don't know which of my parents bought that copy of *Nevermind*. In most of my memories, my Irish-German mom was listening to whatever obscure stuff WXPN, UPenn's radio station, was playing. I discovered a lot of new acts from sitting in the car with her. My black, Baby Boomer dad listened to Frank Sinatra. My dad listened to the music of his parents' generation; I came to love music from the 60s and 70s. I guess my kids are going to like post-grunge. Great.

I often get funny looks when I tell people that my favorite band is Fleetwood Mac, or that I own five Led Zeppelin albums on vinyl, or that I've seen Heart twice in concert. Alternately, someone will assume I got my music taste from my parents. And I clearly didn't, but I did inherit a blindness to race and age when it came to what I synced to my iPod shuffle as a teenager.

I was exposed to plenty of classic rock as a kid in the 1990s—my best friend, Bryn, and I spent hours singing along her parents' Beatles CDs. President Clinton rode into the White House on the back of Fleetwood Mac's *Rumours* album. Still, like most little girls born in 1990, I listened to a lot of the Spice Girls and N\*Sync. Then on a summer day when she and I were thirteen, Bryn took out a staticky, Limewired mix CD and played "Stairway to Heaven" for me, after discovering that I wasn't familiar with the Led Zeppelin song that her then-boyfriend knew the chords to. By the time that summer was over, my radio dial was constantly set to WMGK, Philly's classic rock station. I bought a bunch of Rolling Stones and Zeppelin shirts at Hot Topic, and changed my AIM handle from *kittenangell19* to something like *mrsmojorisin* (a take on "L.A. Woman" by the Doors, an anagram of "Jim Morrison's," because obvi I was his).

More than anyone, I latched onto Fleetwood Mac and the Pretenders. I'd liked Fleetwood Mac since the first time I heard a track off their *The Dance* album, could keep it straight that the

male singer was “Lindsey” and the female vocalists were “Chris” and “Stevie.” And it was that female-fronted aspect that drew me closer to them. While my friends were mostly listening to whiny pop-punk by overgrown suburban teenage boys, about parents that *just didn’t get it*, these two women had recorded mature, insightful songs about the prospect of having to face their exes every day they went into work, toured all over the world with the assholes. (Well, there were also songs about Christine McVie cheating on the bass player with the band’s lighting guy, but I ate that sort of drama up.)

Meanwhile, Chrissie Hynde, the lead singer of the Pretenders, had grown up down the Cuyahoga River from Cleveland, in Akron. She’d gone to Kent State, briefly, intermittently, but had dropped out for good after the Kent State shootings (she and one of the victims had run in the same circles.) She’d moved to London and formed The Pretenders; at the time, I couldn’t imagine leaving my hometown in Pennsylvania on my own volition, no matter how badly I wanted to. With her blunt bangs, kohl eyeliner, and foul mouth, she had a toughness that I so wanted to emulate, so I told my mom I wanted to paint my bedroom, to free it from the girly constraints of my carnation pink walls. I now wanted them to be hot pink! Well, it was the height of Hot Topic’s reign, and if the store’s racks of clothing were any indicator, certain shades of pink could be punk rock.

Chrissie was a vegetarian, like me, which I was excited to find out, and when I discovered that she was a PETA supporter and I had a spell where I was obnoxiously preachy. But my friends didn’t mind much – two converted to vegetarianism in that time, and it got me to shut up about the music their parents made them listen to, if just for a moment.

By the time of the divorce, people in New York City were starting to know the name “Sister Rosetta Thorpe.” The name had even appeared on the Cotton Club marquee. Sister Rosetta altered her last name slightly, going by “Tharpe” for the rest of her life. When the divorce and name change were official, Roxie and other friends admitted that they never cared for Tommy Thorpe. “Love thy neighbor” types from the New York COGIC community used words like “tyrant” and “caveman” to describe the preacher. Rosetta Tharpe was confident that she made the right decision in leaving him. But being a single woman in New York meant being self-sufficient, and in the 1940s, such a lifestyle carried no *Sex and the City* glamour.

Luckily, the Cotton Club gigs kept coming. Bandleader Lucky Millinder asked Tharpe to become a permanent part of his act. Though she needed the money, Tharpe hesitated. She pictured herself as one of Millinder’s half-dressed showgirls, up all Saturday night in a smoky bar, too tired to put her Sunday best on the next morning. Tharpe made it clear that she’d sing whatever Millinder wanted her to, but that she’d do so fully clothed, and she’d get off work at a reasonable hour.

The compromise wasn’t enough for Tharpe’s COGIC congregation. Members of the church accused her of squandering her God-given talents for a quick buck. Tharpe’s mother, while not thrilled by Tharpe’s musical turn for the secular, joined Roxie in defending Rosetta, to little effect. Sister Rosetta, however, kept her conviction that she could support herself by singing for secular audiences, while still doing the Lord’s work.

The religious/secular divide isn’t the only one that Tharpe crossed. Nightclubs across the country fought to book Tharpe, bringing her into cities that were much less hospitable to a black woman than New York was. While she played with the likes of Duke Ellington and Cab

Calloway, Tharpe's favorite act to play with was the Jordanaires, a white gospel quartet from the Ozarks that Tharpe referred to as her "four little white babies." Audiences were wary of a black woman performing onstage with white men, especially when the two acts were given equal billing. Crowds quickly warmed up to the idea, though. All it took was Sister Rosetta Tharpe pulling out her electric guitar.

Whether she was playing solo or sharing the state with one of these acts, crowds would wrap around city blocks for a chance to hear Tharpe's unique spin on classic songs. Restaurants would provide Tharpe with free food, so they could proudly say that Sister Rosetta had dined with them—even in the South, where these comped meals didn't include an invitation to actually sit in the dining room. Housing in segregated areas proved even trickier—unlike restaurants, hotels in these parts didn't jump at the chance to hang "Sister Rosetta Slept Here" placards on their walls.

The image of the tour bus, often one filled with groupies and lightly-powdered mirrors, is now synonymous with rock music, but I wonder how many music fans have considered the tour bus's origins.

To ensure that she always had somewhere to sleep, and to eat her free to-go meals, Tharpe was one of the earliest adopters of personal tour bus. While she is said to have shared a glass of whiskey with a few secular acts, and while she certainly had her share of flings, the bus was a party-free zone. She shared with a group of young backup singers, the Rosettes. She'd personally assured the young women's parents that there would be neither booze nor proto-groupies aboard the vessel.

While Tharpe's tour bus travels sprung from necessity, the bus would soon become more of a luxury. In the 1950s, Tharpe's musical innovations inspired other black acts, namely Chuck Berry, but it was largely young white men who became known for the fact-paced, electric guitar music that began to dominate the charts. The face of this new genre, rock and roll, was quickly changing.

After years of trying to reconcile her gospel roots with the admiration of secular music fans, Sister Rosetta Tharpe had carved a place for herself in the music world. But it wouldn't be long before she lost it.

It wasn't like I cared about being the face of rock music. With my lack of musical talent, I wasn't going to be. But I wanted to be recognized as some valid incarnation of what rock fans looked like. At fourteen, I definitely did care about being the face of who rock musicians might want to be with (I was in the 9<sup>th</sup> grade, and would've had them in their 20s or their 60s, or so I said in the Xanga blog I should've deleted years ago). No matter how much I tried, I couldn't get Marianne Faithfull's pin-straight bangs, nor Marsha Hunt's full afro; my hair was perhaps destined to be a limp, shapeless, yet frizzy, disaster. In those days before I discovered Etsy, I just couldn't find the right psychedelic-print minidress in my local Goodwill. Years later, when I started working in a vintage store, these were the clothes I'd gravitate to.

I'd gotten some of my friends to go vegetarian, but getting them to go classic rock was clearly a lost cause. Bryn and the boy had broken up, and she didn't appreciate me playing music that reminded me of him. Unable to catch the attention of the skateboard-riding, Zeppelin-shirt wearing boys with shaggy hair that hung out in my Quaker boarding school's parking lot



between classes and dinnertime, I hung out with the drama club crowd, with whom at least I shared a love of acting and writing. But they started getting bigger roles in the school plays than me, and with increased rehearsal time came time spent together, and lots of paring off, which left me alone with classic rock radio.

Well, not entirely alone. I joined a couple of message boards for teenage classic rock fans. The other posters actually understood, and loved, my *mrsmajorisin* moniker. These faceless teenage friends and I would talk about not only the music that we all love, but where to get cute hippie skirts, what activities we were involved with at school, what the most interesting thing in our boring hometowns was (my hometown was part of a huge FBI sting, one in which the FBI got stung, but I talked about our cable car instead.) One day, someone started a thread where we could all post pictures of ourselves, so we'd no longer be faceless figures debating the exact details of Led Zeppelin's mudshark incident.

A product of the mid-2000s no matter how much I resisted it, I spent an hour flatironing my bangs before snapping a mirror-picture with my digital camera and uploading it to my computer. People looked at the picture of the ubiquitous mirror-orb and me and told me how pretty I was, how they loved the color of my walls (I was home for the weekend, in the seafoam-green bathroom I'd helped decorate). Then, someone replied, "Damn, I'd just assumed you were white. I think it's because of all the white bands you like. My bad." I didn't know how to respond. I wasn't upset per se; it wasn't like they'd said, "Damn, I'd just assumed you were pretty," or something. But they clearly felt bad about their assumptions, and their assumptions made me feel bad, or at least, different from everyone else on the forum.

I was different from my friends from school. I shared common lineages with them – many of them were either black or Irish-German, and I was of black, Irish, and German descent. But when I talked about music, the one thing I wanted to talk about, they would quickly change the subject. The thought of after-school music chats with my online friends often kept me focused in school. The more I paid attention in physics class, the quicker I'd get done my homework, and the quicker I could log on. I'd posted a picture on the message board, just like everyone else had, to feel like less of a stranger, yet I came out feeling like more of an outsider. Just as I thought I'd found my place in the music-fan world, I felt like I was losing it.

In 1938, Sister Rosetta Tharpe signed with signed with Decca records, and a whole world opened up—she met many musical greats, which meant that her mother did, too. Dizzy Gillespie and Katie Bell Nubin became fast friends, eventually recording a duet together.

As Tharpe became a bigger star in the secular world, the church grew more uneasy with her proclamations of love for the Lord. It didn't matter that she'd played guitar in at countless pulpits since her girlhood in Arkansas. Gospel listeners deemed the guitar too masculine an instrument for a real daughter of God, at least in the way that Sister Rosetta played it, with her whole body thrusting in sonic fervency.

Moreover, Tharpe had married and divorced again. She didn't have the support of the church, or of a husband, but she had her faith, and her mother. But those affinities weren't of much use to DECCA. It was a secular record label, and one who had no idea how to market a mama's girl to the masses. Company execs decided that Tharpe needed to marry a third time. They envisioned a lavish affair in a big venue, a ceremony too big for a church to contain.

COGIC believed that if a chapel could contain something as big as God, it could contain anything. But DECCA, and Tharpe, set sights on Griffith Stadium in D.C. – the country’s beating heart, the crossroads between North and South. Tharpe wasn’t seeing anyone at the time, but a man named Russell Morrison volunteered himself for the role of groom, and DECCA said yes.

Tharpe’s friends, mostly people she knew from COGIC, objected to the matrimony. Roxie turned down her wedding invite. But 25,000 ticketholders, mostly strangers, showed up. Tharpe wore a white gown with sheer sleeves and a five-foot train. She held a bouquet of orchids and ostrich feathers. Thalimers, a southern department store chain, had a white shopgirl drive Tharpe’s dress to DC from their flagship location in Richmond, and instructed her to help Tharpe get ready. The store was still trying to atone for what had happened a few years, when Tharpe had purchased a mink coat from the store. An employee assumed Tharpe had stolen the money, and called the police. The cops took Sister Rosetta to the station for questioning. It soon became apparent who she was, and they released her.

Buttoned into her Thalimers dress, Tharpe traveled down the aisle. During the vows, the reverend advised it was time now for her and her new husband to “forsake all others,” that it was time for the bride to “obey and serve” her husband. Her bridesmaids laughed.

After the pair exchanged their rings, Tharpe, still in her dress, brought out her Gibson and played for all 20,000 guests in the summer heat. DECCA recorded the moment in which Tharpe served as her own wedding singer, and profited greatly off the album sales. Future recordings didn’t do as well. Perhaps it was because new husband Russell took over as Tharpe’s manager. Before the wedding, the closest he’d gotten to star power was serving as a nightclub valet.

But something else was happening. Tharpe's recordings had inspired young performers like Berry and Presley had been inspired to pick up an electric guitar, and those younger, and predominantly male, acts had begun to outsell Sister Rosetta. She and Russell Morrison had money saved up from the wedding profits, but nothing else was coming in. They moved into a small, for rockstar standards, rowhome in North Philly. Yorktown, Philadelphia was a neighborhood for blacks who had "made it," but none of the doctors, lawyers, schoolteachers there, had ever played onstage with Cab Calloway, and neighbors didn't know what to make of the couple.

They largely chose the neighborhood because the local COGIC church was one of the few that hadn't kicked Tharpe to the curb, accusing her of being anything but holy in her hip-thrusting interpretation of the gospel classic "Rock Me." The reverence that members of the Philly COGIC chapter still had for Tharpe made her feel that she truly could do it all, that she could sing for both the church and the non-believers. That everyone could take away from her music what they wanted, and needed, to take away from it. Generations of rock musicians, and rock fans, have certainly taken what they needed, without a word of thanks.

The first time I saw Fleetwood Mac in concert, I was a freshman in college. They'd released cheap nosebleeds a day before the band, sans Christine McVie, was slated to arrive in St. Louis. It was finals week of spring semester, and a year into legal adulthood, I was horrified at how few concerts I'd been to – I barely remembered the acts that WashU had brought onto campus for their free shows (whoever decided to establish a school for geniuses, and fund it through Budweiser was, well, a genius in his own right; the "work hard, play hard" mentality of

the school had appealed to me right away.) I'd otherwise just seen the Ting Tings with a co-worker, at the Pageant on the Delmar Loop, embarrassed myself by knowing all the words to "Shut Up and Let Me Go." But here was my chance to take the reins on adulthood, or so I thought, by seeing my favorite band for twenty bucks. I invited the only other Fleetwood Mac fan I knew at WashU, a junior named Rachel who I really didn't know at all. After the day's exams, we hopped on a Metrolink train toward the Mississippi River.

It was a great show, closed out by Stevie singing "Silver Springs," my favorite song by the band, a bitter song meant to spear Lindsey Buckingham's heart, that had been a source of any number of contentions between her and her bandmates over the years. Between the final encore and the mass exodus out of the arena, there is always that moment where the audience lingers, wonders if there could possibly be more, and finally accepts that the night is over. During this post-concert pause, the man behind Rachel and me stopped got our attention "I saw you two singing along to all the songs. You both look a little young to be Mac fans." Rachel told him that her mother was a huge fan, and I added that likewise had loved the band from a young age. He said something about Fleetwood Mac to Rachel. Then, looking at me, he started talking about how he loved Fleetwood Mac, but loved groups like the Supremes, too. I did love the Supremes, but I wasn't at the concert to talk about Motown. I wondered if my dad's love for Sinatra had ever been met with a, "yeah, he's great. So is Sammy Davis, Jr."

A few years later, there was a man who sat beside my mom at a Fleetwood Mac tribute concert in suburban Philly. I spent the night drinking cans of Yuengling, digging my feet into the imported sand meant to give the riverside bar a Key West vibe, and mouthing the words of every song, even the more obscure ones off recent albums. Toward the end of the night, the man,

wearing a Phillies jersey, reached out a sunburnt arm and tapped my mom on the shoulder, “How does *she* know all the words?” he said, gesturing to me. “What, my daughter?” my mom replied. “Oh, that’s your daughter? Uh, cool!” he said, then chugged his own Yuengling.

Was it my race? My gender? (Probably not, when Fleetwood Mac is concerned – when I saw Stevie Nicks and the Pretenders play together in Orlando years later, I stood and sang to every song as my boyfriend sat – and two-thirds of the audience were couples in the same exact position.) Perhaps it was my age.

In an article exploring the classic rock radio format, thirty years after it hit airwaves, Devon Powers had noted that classic rock music had embodied a “very white, male, baby boomer image,” and there I was, one-half for three. Did I care? Do I care? Is there a specific genre of music that mixed-race millennial chicks who attended Quaker middle school outside of Philadelphia, and then “work hard, play hard” Midwestern universities, should be listening to?

The collective power of music can doubtless be a powerful thing, but does it not distill down to those moments when one is alone, or at least alone in their thoughts, moved by a melody, paired with lyrics that are just right for not only the tune, but the moment? In that moment on the Delaware River, I wanted to be alone with “Running through the Garden” off of Fleetwood Mac’s *Say You Will* album, but Yuengling-man had just barged on in. I wanted to tell the man that maybe what I got out of the song, an escape from my life into someone else’s, a jaunt through an overgrown meadow of flowers that the song told me were poisonous, but still seemed a lot more exciting than the life I’d fallen back into after moving back to my Pennsylvania hometown with its flat lawns and familiar faces.

By 1957, Tharpe and Russell Morrison had settled in nicely in Yorktown. Sister Rosetta found herself attending Sunday services again, and in the church, found herself again. Then, a call came from jazz trombonist Chris Barber – did she want to tour with him in England for a month? Of course she did. Yorktown provided security, but the road had been her home since childhood. With music and God’s love, she could make a home anywhere. And Russell didn’t mind the extra income.

Tharpe spent a month touring with Barber, and found herself selling out concert halls across Europe, which she hadn’t done in the US for decades. Though European music fans had grown up listening to black gospel records, they’d never seen a gospel singer perform before; they’d only seen their local imitations. Nobody there questioned Sister Rosetta’s faith in God because of how she played her Gibson guitar for Him. Nobody criticized her for showing her knees on stage. They just wanted to know when she would return.

Muddy Waters invited Tharpe to tour with him a few years later. It was during this time that one of her favorite shows took place in Manchester, England. Grenada Television filmed the two acts playing at a local train station – the musicians stood on one side of the tracks, and the young, white-skinned audience sat on benches on the other side. Other musicians complained that it was a strange set-up, that they couldn’t connect with the audience, but Sister Rosetta took the challenge on. When it started to pour, as it does in the U.K., Tharpe began performing the gospel standby “Didn’t It Rain.” Decades after this concert, this would be the first Tharpe recording I’d encounter.

Many rock music fans gripe about the Hall of Fame's induction process, for different reasons. Prog fans, for instance, complained for decades that bands like Yes and Rush had been ignored for years after they became eligible for nomination. Others complain of the gender imbalance among nominees. About forty women have been inducted into the Hall of Fame out of 300 inductees, and no woman has been inducted more than once. Eric Clapton, meanwhile, has been inducted three times – with Cream and the Yardbirds, and as a solo artist. And, yes, I don't doubt that Clapton is God, but if Derek and the Dominoes gets inducted before Stevie Nicks, Carole King, or Tina Turner get inducted for their strides as solo artists, independently of their, by all accounts, terrible exes, I'll probably never set foot into the Hall of Fame.

People also say that the Hall of Fame has a race problem, which perhaps it didn't in its early days – Chuck Berry, Little Richard, and many other black male artists from the 50s and 60s, were inducted as soon as the Hall was established in 1986, and the next year, Aretha Franklin was the first woman of any race to be inducted. The divide became starker as the Hall got on in years, however, and acts from the 70s and 80s became eligible for induction. Hendrix and Prince, of course, got in as soon as they'd reached eligibility, but the Rock Hall started to honor the predominantly white bands that had taken over the scene. Some pioneering acts, Sister Rosetta Tharpe included, were left waiting.

I would assume that these decisions are at least partly economic. Induction into the Hall is an honor, yes, but the ceremony itself is a big concert, and organizers want a good line-up every year, ideally with more original artists playing their hits, rather than tribute performances honoring the retired and deceased. The Hall was exposed one year for fudging votes so that bands with more modern relevance got in over the elderly members of doo-wop groups.



Likewise, the Hall's response to accusations of racial bias seems to have been not to look back into rock's history when delivering honors, but rather to begin inducting crowd-gathering hip-hop groups, to the chagrin of many rock fans. I never had an opinion on the Hall of Fame's inclusion of hip-hop acts. I wouldn't have cared if they'd inducted Justin Bieber, as long as Sister Rosetta got in before him.

I've often wondered what Sister Rosetta Tharpe would say about the legacy she left, about the musicians that overtook her place in the charts, that rode Tharpe's wedding-gown train into arena rock glory. I've wondered how she felt, having to stop touring just as she found a new audience in Europe.

*Well, I'm glad someone asked. Let me tell you—I could have stayed on the road forever, but I was called back to Yorktown when the unthinkable happened. Mama's health was failing, and by the time I made it back home, she was ready to go. I didn't want to perform; I couldn't face the audience. All I wanted to do was face the Lord, and ask Him for guidance, but that would have meant facing the people in the church pews, and I wasn't ready to see them.*

*Roxie would come 'round from time to time, and sometimes Russell would let her in, but other times he'd stand in the doorway, smoking a cigar, telling her that I needed to be alone.*

*Roxie in particular had taken to nagging, about how little rest I got, about the black spot on my foot that she thought I needed to have checked out. I didn't want to go back to the doctor; last time I went, they said I had diabetes, and once Roxie found that out, she couldn't stop*

*picking at what I was eating, what I was doing. “Russell is my manager; not you,” I told her. She didn’t like hearing that.*

*Feeling better and thirsting for freedom, I hit the road once more in 1970, back to Europe. One night in Copenhagen, before a show, I’d been telling my driver about how mama used to carry on in church, singing and stomping, waving her arms in praise of the Almighty. I got up on stage, and still couldn’t shake Katie Bell from my mind. I never talked about mama to the audience – I knew she didn’t want much to do with the secular folk who bought my records. But that night, I told the crowd all about her, about how lost I’d been for the past two years. At least I still had them, the audience, my fans. I made sure to tell them that. Just like I’m telling you now.*


*I headed back to Philly with presents for everyone. Like you, I didn’t aim to stay in Philly for long. I thought I’d be leaving the States altogether; venues in Europe were already asking when I’d be back. The Lord had other plans, though. The spot on my foot was getting bigger – actually, my whole foot was blackened by then. Roxie finally convinced me to see a doctor. He told me they needed to amputate, or I’d lose my whole leg soon. I had no problem losing my foot; as long as I still had my hands, I could still play guitar. I prayed that I’d go back to touring one day, but instead the Lord called me up for a private concert.*

*From my spot next to Him, I’ve been able to see all kinds taking after me. It was 1973, and kids were asking their parents for Gibson electric guitars, just like I always played. One young man in Minnesota really made me smile – the way he’d practice on the guitar and piano for hours, but still always find time to teach his younger sister a few chords. After he made it big,*

*he spent the rest of his life helping women of every color succeed in music. If I'd been born a little later, maybe I would have been coming to him for advice.*

*I do know this: not too long ago, I met that young man from Minnesota. He wasn't so young any more, but not old either – he arrived up here at 57; me at 58. He walked right up to me and extended his hand. I told him to turn around; they still needed him on Earth. But that decision wasn't up to me.*

Shortly after Prince died, one of my Facebook friends posted something along the lines of, “Oh, I get it – Prince was like Bowie for black people; and now they're sad like I was when Bowie died!” I started writing a rebuttal to her over-simplification, stating that Prince was Prince, not “Black Bowie,” and that such a comment was a slap in the face not only to Prince, but also to Bowie's Somalian-born wife and their teenage daughter.

But then I stopped, realizing how long it had taken me to listen to Prince at all, despite my love for music of that era. It was partially because the material Prince, or , had put out in my lifetime was too avant-garde for my young ears, so I assumed his body of work was mostly like that. Mostly, though, it was because they hadn't played his songs on the classic rock station, and therefore, I wasn't interested. Then, I saw him participate in a tribute to George Harrison, pick up a tan electric guitar, and steal the show as he performed “While My Guitar Gently Weeps.” Once he had such relevancy for me, I began to appreciate him as a musician in his own right, and unfortunately, from the comments that the performance has garnered on Youtube, many rock fans began to appreciate Prince through a similar context, many not until after his death.

A clip from Tharpe's concert at the Manchester Train Station went viral not too long ago. I'd heard Sister Rosetta's name before, probably as a footnote to a story about Elvis, but it wasn't until someone sent me that video that I took the time to listen to her recordings. I wasn't alone. The video's popularity inspired an online petition to get her inducted into the Hall of Fame, or at least nominated. While the Hall's eligibility rules are clear, the exact details of the nomination and voting process are not as transparent. Fans collectively get one online vote; every living inductee gets a vote of their own (and as that petition circulated, we lost one of Sister Rosetta's biggest fans, 1986 inductee Chuck Berry). Otherwise, not much is known about the nominating/voting committee, but it's believed to be comprised of more critics and journalists than actual musicians, and is likely, as Devon Powers said, a "very white, male, baby boomer" crowd. At least stateside, this demographic didn't get a chance to see Sister Rosetta perform, never got to see what she could do with a guitar. I, of course, signed the petition, but didn't get my hopes up.

Even after Tharpe was nominated for the Hall's Class of 2018, I prepared myself for disappointment. In the fan vote, she placed fourth-to-last, earning a tenth of the votes Bon Jovi got. In response to these results, I took to commenting on rock sites online, saying how Tharpe should have been in decades ago, that without her there would be no rock and roll. For every person who succinctly agreed with me, there was another responding via caps-lock essay, about the epic nature of "Living on a Prayer." And, yes, Tommy and Gina's tale is one of like three songs I enjoyed hearing at high school dances. But the Rock Hall a museum, and I felt like I was doing their job, educating the public on the history rock music. (I provided such a service for free, but if any hiring managers from the Hall of Fame are reading this, come find me! Actually, no. I'm not big on the lake-snow effect.)

In mid-December, 2017, the Hall of Fame announced its 2018 inductees. As I read through the list of those chosen in the standard “performer” category, I was disappointed, but not surprised, that Tharpe’s name was missing from the list.

But then, in a much smaller block of text, it was announced that Sister Rosetta Tharpe was in, as an “Early Influence.” Per the Hall’s website, “these artists pre-date the birth of rock & roll, but have had a profound impact on music’s evolution and its iconic artists.” Honorees with this designation are chosen by a smaller committee, and their induction isn’t left to the whims of the fan vote.

I don’t think that Tharpe “influenced” rock and roll as much as she invented, and embodied it, but she finally had her space in the lake house that she built with just her voice and her guitar. At the induction ceremony, Brittany Howard of Alabama Shakes covered Tharpe’s song “That’s All,” and compelled the audience to give it up, one more time, for Sister Rosetta Tharpe.

*After meeting Prince, another black man from the Midwest put down his guitar and came to shake my hand, though this one wasn’t nearly as young. He said, that without me, he would have assembled cars for a living; his love for playing guitar would’ve just been a long-lost high school pastime. That without me, he never would have written “Johnny B. Goode.” But I’d kept going, letting music rule my adulthood, and so he did, too. He told me not to worry; before he’d arrived up here, people were still wrapping around St. Louis city blocks two, three times, to see him play at Blueberry Hill. We looked down and saw that they were now wrapping around the block to say their goodbyes. Chuck told me, if he wasn’t going to be forgotten, then I wouldn’t be, either; that my performing “Didn’t It Rain” at that Manchester train station had gotten me 5*

*million views on something called Youtube, that if somewhere, there were still kids picking up guitars, playing at their churches, in their schools, that there was still a place for us, on earth and in Heaven. Don't count me out, just yet.*

Not every artist views induction into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame as an honor. When the Sex Pistols were inducted, Johnny Rotten turned down an invitation to the ceremony in a letter that called the Hall a “piss stain.” But I like to think that Tharpe loves her new home, as she came to love that rowhouse in Philly in which she spent her last years.

The Godmother of Rock's story doesn't end here. When someone questions my taste in music, I'm now quick to point out that rock music was invented by a black woman. I don't view these conversations as a rebuttal, as much as a chance to share a beloved artist's music with someone else. As a rock and roll fan who has never fit the mold, I've never felt so much authority. Don't count me out, either.

## THREADS OF MEMORY

A lipstick-stained linen napkin shielded the rayon flower field of my dress from the impending yellow downpour. As usual, the egg at our favorite beachside brunch spot was a little short of my over-medium order, but I welcomed the consistency of the kitchen's error. With a swift fork-poke, sunny yolk met smoky tempeh bacon, met late-summer slice of Jersey tomato from just across the Delaware Bay. The familiar savory combination hit my tongue and tasted like any other daytrip to Rehoboth Beach, Delaware, but it was peppered with an unusual urgency.

As we often did while dining, my mom and I complained about our office jobs, and looked forward to our impending outs. She mused about all the time she would have for sewing after she retired from the Market Research industry. She envisioned her creations filling up the back bedroom in her house, the room I'd intermittently lived in through my early twenties, whose teal walls she'd painted beige after I moved in with my boyfriend, Dave. The first time I walked into the revamped room, the drab color, matching the neutral-toned futon cover she'd stretched over my old bed, didn't thrill me. Yet, I thought of the back bedroom of the house my grandmother had raised four girls in, with floral linens anchored it in 70s adolescence, even in the new millennium, and I was glad my mom had made my room her own. My grandmother, a professional garment worker, never would have marked her retirement with a sewing room.

As much as I wished that my grandmother had reclaimed her house, for her sake, I loved hanging out in that bedroom as a child, envisioning what it would have been like to sleep there every night. I loved the color scheme, the plushy shag carpet. Going there for lunch every Saturday in the 90s, I also loved seeing what my older cousins were wearing, and dreamed of a

day I'd be able to wear their clothes. Perhaps these memories explain why, through my young adulthood, the closet in my bedroom looked like Haight-Ashbury and Beverly Hills, 90210 had somehow gotten together to do Jägerbombs and projectile-vom all over a tiny storage space in suburban Philadelphia. Once I was out of the house, this closet began housing an underused sewing machine, and extra pillows for when guests came over; the guest was usually me. Often, I wanted to spend a night with the elderly pets that lived at my mom's house. Once, I drove over there at 10 PM just to sleep. Multiple spider crickets had catapulted themselves at my face that night as I watched TV. Dave was away on a film shoot, and since I couldn't scream for him to dispose of them, I just fled.

Soon, I was going to have to deal with much more exotic bugs, without a backup couch to crash on.

I'd gotten into grad school in Florida and was trying to figure out how to get all my clothes down there. I couldn't give them away. It had taken a decade of rummage sales and thrift store runs to put together the collection. Years of mourning whenever I ripped a hole in a dress that my mom couldn't fix. Years of fearing gaining or losing weight, and having my clothes not fit anymore. If I gave up my clothes now, there was no way I'd find the same items, in the right size, a second time.

When the summer before, I'd told my mom that my boyfriend had asked me to move in with him, she responded, "Does Dave realize how much stuff you have?"

"It's just some records and books...oh, and clothes." Yeah, there were a lot of random secondhand finds Dave had never even seen. The thought of him seeing me in the weird toucan-



print overalls with the big pockets had somehow been way more daunting than him seeing me naked.

As I unloaded my car into our new place, Dave's eyes widened a bit as I grabbed my hundredth armful of clothes, but he never questioned why I had so many ankle-length floral dresses or tropical shirts. Yep, he was a keeper.

One of the last things I grabbed from my mom's was my Crosley record player. I left the shoddy white IKEA desk that the stereo once sat on, and my mom filled the open tabletop with a brand-new Singer machine. She'd studied textile design in college and had made many of her own clothes at my age. She always said that she could turn a sheep into a sweater, but she never pursued a career in the textile industry. In the 70s, doing so would have meant moving to Manhattan's Garment District, or to one of the last vestiges of New England's mill towns. Neither interested my mom much. She fell into the Market Research industry and was now waiting to fall out of it. In the meantime, she was about to start a sewing refresher course in Philly.

"I need this, getting back into sewing," she said, sipping her margarita.

"Yeah, and I'm going to have so much time to write; it's going to be awesome!"<sup>1</sup> I told my mom, "I've been applying for part-time jobs, but none of them are biting. I'm taking it as a sign that I should be focusing on writing for the first few months."

Seeing how my mom pined to leave her job and devote her time to what she'd gone to school for, it seemed a sound decision on my part.

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<sup>1</sup> Yeah, right.

We started talking about what parts of Florida she might want to move to – somewhere a short drive to me, but longer than the seven minutes that currently separated us. She wasn't opposed to theme parks, but she wanted to be near the beach. I took out my phone to show her a few canal-side bungalows along the Space Coast, but was sidetracked by a "New Voicemail" notification.

It was a message from a woman in Orlando who owned a vintage store, which also offered year-round costume rentals. The month before, I'd been Googling vintage stores in Orlando, and mapping out their proximity to one another, planning out the types of secondhand hauls that were completely in a grad student's budget. I'd come across a "Help Wanted" ad for a long-standing store that had sold to the likes of *Boardwalk Empire* and *Mad Men*. Clearly, the owner knew what she was doing. There were surprisingly few books about vintage clothes out there, and this seemed like an opportunity to learn more –perhaps I'd even write the definitive book on vintage one day! I decided to send in my resume. Four weeks had passed and I hadn't heard back. I wasn't surprised. The ad specified that the new hire should know how to sew. My mom had tried to teach me a few times, but I never had the patience to stick with it.

I couldn't believe that I was hearing back from the store. I excused myself from the table, to the restaurant's hallway, its walls lined with bejeweled pages of midcentury romance novels. I sat in the burnt orange velvet chair outside the bathroom and called Lisa, my future boss. I told her that I was out to lunch but wanted to call her back right away, to quickly state my interest.

She told me all about the store, which she had run for twenty years. As we pushed an hour of chatting, I interjected a few times that my food was getting cold—pretty soon, I wouldn't be able to spontaneously drive to Rehoboth whenever I had a tempeh bacon craving—but didn't

mind when Lisa kept talking. She had a huge vintage clothing collection, pieces of which she'd sold to period film and TV productions. She was hoping to purchase a new property so she could expand the business. I grabbed a catalog of boats for sale in Delmarva, and I scrawled down everything Lisa told me in the margins of used Sunfish listings.

I peeked down the hallway, and through the glass door saw my mom sitting alone at the same high-top table we always sat at. I mentioned my lunch again, and we made plans to talk for another hour-plus when I got to Orlando in a few weeks. I thanked Lisa for her time and returned to my mom. The server, the same one we had each time, put his arm around me and told me he'd put my food back in the oven to keep it warm. When he brought it out, I thanked him and told him that everything was coming together for my new life in Orlando. I told him I'd be back next summer to eat my favorite brunch again, probably in much grander vintage clothes than the Goodwill dress that was covering my contemporary bikini that morning.<sup>2</sup>

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I had tried to sell vintage before. I'd traveled to Los Angeles a few years before, and had talked to the vintage vendors at a weekly market off of Melrose. Many of them had boring jobs during the week, but traveled to different markets during the weekend, met other vintage lovers, got to spend Sundays in the presence of beautiful clothes with interesting histories. I went home and started sifting for golden threads in my local Goodwill racks. I started piling these clothes up in my mom's basement, intending to sell them on Etsy, but I'd come across a few hurdles to my business plan – there was my first go at getting a screenplay of mine filmed, a time-intensive

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<sup>2</sup> I generally prefer vintage clothing to contemporary pieces, but used underwear and swimsuits are exactly that in my mind. My Victoria's Secret credit card is heavy and silver-toned.

pursuit that in the end had resulted in half a movie, but the experience had introduced me to sound-mixer Dave. Meeting him didn't exactly make me want to spend my spare time researching old dresses in a suburban basement. The bigger issue was that no matter the size specified on the tags of old garments, they all seemed to fit my modern-day size 4 frame. I kept a lot of the items I meant to sell.

When it came to those items I was willing to part with, I had a hard time dating them. Distinguishing a 50s dress from a 70s *Happy Days*-inspired reproduction was harder than it looked. I found myself overwhelmed with choosing the right words to sell the rest of the pieces on Etsy, a thimbleless needle-stab attempt at imagining who had worn, say, a matching Willi Smith<sup>3</sup> crop top and pants set, white with a palm-tree print, and how it went from the original owner's closet to a musty suburban thrift store. I'd conjure up some lofty story about some woman who had to sell her clothes in the 1981 recession, with that Smith outfit being the first to go- had she taken that job in New York, she would have proudly walked down the street in it on any mid-summer Saturday, but the one time she wore it on a Jersey Shore boardwalk, her friends mocked her, and her husband *really* hated it. I imagined that she'd regretted giving up that Smith outfit when the designer died in 1987. Meanwhile, I was sure, whoever picked it up in a consignment shop had sent it bouncing from Goodwill to Goodwill for twenty-something years before I found it.

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<sup>3</sup> A Philadelphia native and Parsons grad, whose Wikipedia page made him seem like a big deal – a NYC mayor even declared February 23<sup>rd</sup> "Willi Smith Day." Moreover, the Vintage Fashion Guild calls him "the most successful black designer in fashion history." The designer's clothing was going for all of \$10 of Etsy. I don't regret not putting that outfit up for sale.

I'd imagine all this, but not wanting to trick customers into thinking I knew the actual stories behind the clothes, the Etsy listings I drafted were along the lines of, "This is cute, buy it!" Then, when I went to price items, I couldn't put a cost on them; those secret stories I'd thought up were worth so much more.

In the end, I had an inactive Etsy site, a cluttered closet, and a mom whose attempts to downsize had been stymied by her daughter's clutter.

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A year after moving to Florida, the inventory I'd acquired for my side business still sat in my mom's basement. I worked in that vintage store through the first year of grad school, and signed an agreement, promising Lisa that I wouldn't participate in any other vintage enterprises. Now that I'm no longer employed there, I guess I'm free to sell vintage on my own. Once I find the time to do so, I'll probably still fall into the "wearing my own stock" pitfall,<sup>4</sup> but I'll otherwise be much more prepared.

Some pieces still stump me, but I've gotten better at dating clothing. Every once in a while, I'm super-lucky. If a shirt doesn't spell out "Daytona Beach Spring Break '78" in chipping glittery screen-print, there's still a chance that the label will have a copyright date.

But it's very slight. Whenever I hear about a fashion designer's work being stolen, it frankly comes as no surprise. Looking around my living room here in Orlando, every other mass-produced creative work I own— the Steely Dan record currently spinning on my turntable, the ever-growing stack of books I have every intention of reading; my boyfriend's copy of

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<sup>4</sup> I'd be a terrible and/or dead drug dealer.

*Overwatch* – they all have clear trademarks – the who, when and where. For clothing, the “where” is often easily identified – since 1960, any textile items imported into the US are required to denote country of origin.<sup>5</sup> The “who” can be fuzzy –handmade clothes aside, it can be hard to distinguish between labels for individual designers, for fashion houses, and for department stores. And the “when” is trickier still.<sup>6</sup>

I can sometimes get a clue from the patent numbers embossed into fasteners – these numbers are easy to look up online, but knowing the year a zipper-pull or magnetic clasp was patented only indicates the earliest possible year an item was made.

If the labels and patent numbers evade me, it’s time to go down the rabbit-hole. Count the number of back-vents on a jacket, note the placement of zippers, measure the width of suit lapels. Some items, such as silk robes and cowboy-style shirts, have a timeless feel to them, and while trendier designers might update their labels to follow the aesthetic values of the time, lines that pride themselves on creating timeless pieces may use the same label for decades. This is all great for waxing sentimental about those classic fashion standbys, but not so great when trying to woo a customer who wants some semblance of an item’s history before they sink a couple hundred bucks into it.

For those clothing lines whose labels have changed with the times, the Vintage Fashion Guild’s website has an extensive label database, in which one can type in the name of a designer

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<sup>5</sup> If in the past decade, you’ve noticed more clothing that features a detailed label at the side-seam, but still has a small, scratchy tag or screen-printed label at the collar, the reason is this: the FTC doesn’t specify where fiber content or care instructions need to appear, but dictates that for any garment with a neck-hole, the country of origin must be placed there. You can thank them for that itchy feeling between your shoulder blades.

<sup>6</sup> Sometimes, when met with an ‘80s dress that is all acid-wash, sequins and shoulder pads, “what?” and “why?” are the hardest questions of all.

or department store and see how they've made their mark through the years. Often, this database nails the era. Done.

The Guild, however, can't possibly track down every designer, manufacturer and purveyor since the dawn of the textile industry. If a clothing-maker isn't in their database, I usually just Google the name on the label. If the label contains a manufacturer's name, it's usually easy to track down information. The department store labels are trickier, especially ones for defunct or hyper-local stores. In my Guild and Google searches for the department stores of yore, one thing has stood out: just how many of these stores have been converted into luxury lofts. These high-end apartment buildings keep the names of the old stores, to invoke a trendy, retro vibe that will invoke a trendy, and pretty damn wealthy, crowd.

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My maternal grandmother reached adolescence just as the U.S. was falling into the Depression, and left school to work in the clothing factories of then-industrial Northeast Philadelphia. Those riverside Philly neighborhoods now portmanteaued by realtors as "Port Fishington<sup>7</sup>" are seeing an uptick of yoga studios and juice bars. Many of my mom's twentysomething colleagues are moving into the area that she fled from at their age. Describing the authentic feel of her new loft apartment, one young woman told my mom that she was still picking sewing needles out of the floorboards.

"Yeah, my mother used to work with those needles," my mom replied.

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<sup>7</sup> Port Richmond, Fishtown, and Kensington

I don't know how much those loft apartments go for, but I'm assuming that my mom's colleague pays more for a studio in a historically gritty part of Philly than Dave and I do for a three-bedroom with a yard in Orlando. In general, old things that gleam with authenticity are getting expensive. As vintage clothing has become trendier, more curated boutiques have opened, catering to customers with ample money but little time to spend sorting through thrift store racks. Lisa's store was such a place.

When I walked into the store on my first day of work, the showroom was dark. I stumbled over wires and shoes as I approached the back room of the shop, my dulled vision heightening my sense of the musty smell of wall-to-wall vintage. I followed Lisa's voice to her desk in the back. She showed me the minifridge and a place I could stow my bag next to a box of backstock Bakelite trinkets. She led me to the front of the store and showed me how to open, starting with turning on an assortment of retro lamps, rigged to the ceiling by bronze chains. After starting up the point of sale software on the computer, she discussed the week's schedule with me. She had me working five days that week. I'd made it clear in both our phone call and face-to-face interview, that with school, I would only be able to work three, maybe four during her busy Halloween season. And I thought she'd hired me on those terms.

"Isn't it just syllabus week?" she asked, "I'd really like to get you fully trained this week." Fine, I said.

When, a week or two later at a staff meeting, Lisa again tried to schedule me for a 40-hour workweek, I was already behind in my school reading. I said that I definitely couldn't work that much. She said something like, "Well, you're going to have to be available for a lot more training if you're going to be of any use to me."



Her tone was needlessly pissy, but I wondered if she was right. I was pretty sure I'd only gotten the job because we'd hit it off in the interview stage. I knew something about vintage clothing, but Lisa carried clothing from the Victorian era through the early 1990s. I'd only bothered to study the fashions that I personally liked, mostly from the 60s and 70s. A former Disney employee, I was endlessly friendly with customers, but to the point where they didn't feel pressure to buy anything. There was still the sewing detail. Lisa acquired new stock each week, and often it wasn't ready-to-wear. It was becoming clear how important it was that she have staff who could let the hems out of inexplicably short Go-go dresses, who could re-affix the tulle crinolines in 50s fit-and-flare prom gowns. Maybe even someone who could carefully replace the dry-rotted lining of a velvet Edwardian jacket. Whenever a button fell off one of my own thrift store finds, I'd stick it in a Zip-loc somewhere and wear the clothing as-is, accepting the lost button as part of the vintage territory. But I wanted to learn about it all, so maybe one day I could do what Lisa did, and if not, at least I'd give substance to the stylish stories I assigned to every garment I encountered.

My sewing-savvy co-worker was assigned the bulk of the mending.<sup>8</sup> I could tell Lisa felt bad about her comment at the meeting, so she more or less dropped the forty-hour expectation and assigned me to putting the finishing touches on new stock – spot-cleaning any stains, cutting off any loose threads. She had me steam the wrinkles out of everything with a burbling machine that seemed to awaken the dormant smell of mildew in every fabric, so then I'd spritz the pieces with Febreze. As the store sold much of its inventory to period TV and film productions, the goal

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<sup>8</sup> I did learn how to sew a button, but it didn't motivate me to re-affix the fallen ones back on my own clothing. In fact, once taking care of clothing became work, I became a lot less diligent about spot-treating laundry or remembering to buy color booster at Publix. Then again, our laundry room is in a shed, and there was a wasps' nest in there for part of that year, and with my mom way back in PA, I had no backup washer.

was to make the items look like they were plucked right off the rack at Wanamaker's,<sup>9</sup> that they weren't fifty years old and secondhand.

Often, we got the pieces back to their original (albeit Febrezy) state, sent them off to a production, and saw Lizzy Kaplan wearing one of our dresses of *Masters of Sex* sometime later. But it was easy to make things worse. I once tried to snip an errant string from the chest of a brown Ban-lon shirt. At the peak of the synthetic material's popularity, knitwear made of Ban-lon<sup>10</sup> was marketed as long-lasting and easy to care for – the pieces *practically took care of themselves*, stated one ad from the 1950s. And this so shirt had lived for sixty years, only to have a clumsy shop attendant puncture its heart, behind the counter in a dimly-lit showroom. I sheepishly showed the quickly-expanding hole to my boss, who said it couldn't be fixed. I think the shirt became a polishing rag.

Lisa purchased a two-story property down the road from the strip mall spot that for 18 years she'd subletted from the pawn shop next door. The new space, which had been an antique furniture store for decades, had huge windows. Lisa splurged on stately art deco light fixtures that were sleekly wired into the ceiling, no more chains dangling down to outlets. Being able to see better meant fewer stabbing casualties, but with two floors to work with, she established the air-conditioned downstairs as the showroom, and the second story became storage, a mending workshop, and the perfect place to swelter in the Florida heat. I once lifted my hand to wipe a bead of sweat off my face, inadvertently taking some of my hazelnut-toned foundation with it.

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<sup>9</sup> Or any of the countless other department stores that have gradually folded into Macy's.

<sup>10</sup> Ban-lon was the invention of some chemical baron in the great state of underrated beaches, Delaware.

Next thing I knew, there was a blemish the exact shade of my skin on a stark-white Halston dress that Lisa had valued at \$1500.

My first thought was, “how did Bianca Jagger’s makeup not melt all over her white YSL suit on that late-spring day that she married Mick? She did climb on that horse<sup>11</sup> in a Halston dress that one time, so maybe messing up clothes wasn’t a concern for her. Must be nice.”

My second thought was, “Fuck.”

I immediately doused the spot with Shout – should I have shut the shop down and run it to the dry-cleaners? No, the fibers set the stain free, and no watermark was left. I didn’t tell my boss about that one, just hoped that she wouldn’t notice when I started wearing less makeup to work.

Some clothes show remarkable resilience.

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The muslin dresses and linen bonnets my American Girl dolls wore taught me how fashion had evolved through the years, but through my mom’s Barbie’s, I first came face to face with real vintage dresses, in great condition, preserved in time.

My own Barbie dolls were usually happily single, and very focused on their careers as teachers and gymnasts and princesses. When the opportunity arose, however, they would become sugarbabies for a day. I didn’t have any Ken dolls of my own, but sometimes, my mom would

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<sup>11</sup> In 2015, Jagger specified that she didn’t ride into Studio 54 on the horse, but that it was already there and she climbed on it. She wanted to make clear that, as an animal rights activist, she never would have brought the horse to a party herself. It’s kind of like me, a vegetarian, not buying gelatin products, but also never turning down a Jello shot.

pull an old case, made of turquoise vinyl, out of the attic and let me play with her Barbie and Ken Dolls. She even had an original incarnation of Barbara Millicent Roberts, with curlicue bangs and a black-and-white striped swimsuit. My 90's Barbies and their middle-aged Ken-doll dates would chat at tables fashioned out of Keds shoeboxes while I marveled at the fact that my mom had played with Barbies as a kid just like I had, except that hers had much more interesting clothes.<sup>12</sup> Perhaps they were just “more interesting” because they were different, but the doll's dresses had real structure to them, the frilly skirts a far cry from the '90s minimalism that had even crept into the toy industry. My dolls had choppy haircuts courtesy of rubber-tipped Fiskars shears, thick eyeliner with a vague licorice scent, from the Mr. Sketch cosmetics line. I didn't dare take a marker to the faces of my mom's Barbie's. They, and their clothes, had aged so well, and I wanted them to stay in such good condition, so that if I had a daughter one day, she'd get to play with them, too.

By high school, I'd moved on from Barbies to the old clothes my mom kept in the back of her closet, the pieces that had waited for her on the other side of an adolescence spent in itchy school jumpers, until the early-summer day when water beaded on her wool uniform and graduation cap as she splashed in the fountain outside JW Hallahan Catholic Girls High. Some of those clothes kept waiting, just a little longer, for me to take an interest in them.

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Those lucky enough to study vintage's popularity for a living have said that the rampant, and well-preserved, consumer culture of the second part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century makes those decades

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<sup>12</sup> Although mine had more interesting careers – as of 2017, Barbie has held 125 jobs.

easy for modern-day shoppers to access, at least from a material standpoint.<sup>13</sup> On one hand, these relationships with the past *are* just that – purely material. A red, white, and blue dress with boxy shoulders and subtle pleats conjures up visions of the glamorous USO singer, her red lips, and her RCA microphone, not the brutalities of the war she was doing her part in. Vintage culture can over-idealize the past, letting consumers buy into the fantasy that the ads, tv shows, and films of an era hawked, without having to confront any of the time period’s harsher realities. Other vintage scholars<sup>14</sup> have examined the creative positives of the vintage world, the vintage wearer’s ability to tap into decades’ worth of styles to craft a unique image, giving old items new meanings. Vintage wearers don’t need to pair that harvest gold poly blouse with an avocado-colored corduroy miniskirt like some seventies Sears catalog suggested, not if they can match the top with a contemporary leggings/boots combo and Victorian cameo. That double strand of pearls that once connoted McCarthy-era conformity can today be used to express individuality. Yesterday’s mass-produced clothing is today’s one-of-a-kind, one-in-a-million thrift store find. We’ve formed a fashion scene that embraces old clothing not out of necessity, but out of desire for the quality, the flair, and the stories.

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Beatniks and hippies, cost-conscious but big on originality, popularized second-hand clothing in the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, breaking the connotations of poverty linked to these garments, instead assigning an air of creativity and cool to them. My grandmother never got the

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<sup>13</sup> And the fact that many of these clothes are made from creepy synthetic fabrics that won’t biodegrade means that that many of these pieces are still in pristine condition.

<sup>14</sup> Seriously, how does one get that job?

“creative” or “cool” aspects of being a hippie. Once, my mom cut off her dreadlocks and gave them to her mom as a present.

Some used clothes have always been viewed as cast-offs, but at different points in history, the higher-end pieces of yore, or at least the fabrics they were sewn from, were highly coveted. The first evidence of repurposing clothing dates to the year 1007, when the wealthy would donate their unwanted silk pieces to the Church, which would bury prominent figures in reconfigurations of the original clothing. In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, dressmakers were still cutting up silk dresses from the 1700s, turning clunky hoop-dresses into streamlined Edwardian gowns.

But the era of the custom-dressmaker was ending. The industrial revolution had made the mass-production of textiles and clothing viable, and had also lowered the costs of printing, these advances converging in the creation of *Vogue* magazine in 1892. A bi-weekly publication until the 1970s, the magazine could keep up with the rapid sartorial evolution that helped define the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and helped popularize fashion designers and houses who pushed these changes along. Few could afford the clothes featured in *Vogue*, but many wanted to emulate the looks. Enter today’s fast-fashion world, where clothes sewn by tired hands in a sweatshop get cast aside like McDonald’s wrappers, filling up landfills or getting smuggled into developing countries whose governments see second-hand clothes as a threat to the local fashion industries.<sup>15</sup> Many vintage consumers see their purchases as an end to this cycle, a green and humanistic means of looking sharp. And, yes, buying vintage takes money away from the fast fashion industry, but

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<sup>15</sup> Countries like Bolivia, the Philippines, and India have banned the import of used clothing, creating quite a robust black market for Crocs and corporate picnic t-shirts.

I've started to question the self-congratulatory fables we create for our outfits, and what of the real stories behind the clothes are forgotten in these myths.

One night after leaving the store, I read a statement from PETA <sup>16</sup> where they denounced the wearing of vintage fur, because it still sent the message that the killing of animals was fashionable. I don't know why a vintage store in Florida carries so much fur, but the next day I went into work and kept making eye-contact with the fifty-year-old fox faces on the top rack in the shop, fixated on fluffy necks that somehow manifested no trauma, soft ears that never heard a single "thank you" for keeping someone's neck warm during harsh northern winters.

The same "thank you's" my grandmother wouldn't have gotten for the Depression-era wool coats that hung opposite the furs, many emblazoned with the label "Made in Kensington, Philadelphia."

Yes, we far too often forget the teenage girl in the 1930s, who toiled in a factory so that some modern shopper could pat herself on the back for not supporting the fashion industry's child labor problem.

We also forget the woman who couldn't find clothes in her size back then. The fashion industry cared even less about dressing plus-sized women back then, than they do now. The first high-end line for plus-size women didn't debut until 1980. Thus, we get the vintage-loving woman who can't find clothes in her size today. This woman rolls her eyes at the size-4 shopgirl who chirps, "People were just smaller back then. Look how teensy all our gloves and shoes and

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<sup>16</sup> I know, I know...I just read their newsletter for the vegetarian recipes, I promise.

hats are!” The shopgirl can’t believe the words coming out of her own mouth, spinning a silk cocoon to protect the glory of the glory of the clothes she’s come to love.

And we forget the village whose water was redirected to grow the cotton for a simple shirtdress, and the bay choked by the synthetics used to make ugly polyester leisure suits.

We forget, or never learn about in school, the couple who shared a kiss, perhaps a prayer to St. Homobonus of Cremona, patron saint of clothworkers, before jumping from the windowsill of the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory on a March day in 1911, joining the pile of bodies that the FDNY dodged as they approached the burning building.

I’m not saying that vintage clothing doesn’t deserve its ethical status in the present, but as gluttons for a good story, we secondhand shoppers also need to consider the less-savory narratives woven into our clothes.

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Horseshit on a Halston, what have I done? When I look at vintage clothes, I want to think “Pretty!” I don’t want to think, “What a fine mark of postmodern materiality,” or “Someone died in a fire to make this.”

I don’t mean to be a fun-sucker, but sometimes it just happens. I made my mom cry at our favorite bar once.

We were seated at corner booth of our favorite John’s Bar and Grille, at one of the weekly margarita outings we established around the time I moved in with Dave. We got on the topic of my grandmother, and how she had to leave secondary school.



I licked some salt off my glass, let it burn on my tongue for a moment, and then said, “It’s cool that so many of her grandkids have advanced degrees now.” Two generations later, there were multiple doctors in our family.

My eyes went back to my drink, then to the Eagles game on the wall-mounted TV, then, when I heard a snuffle, to my mom.

“What?” I said.

“No, that was just really touching,” she replied.

Matt, the short-order cook, came over with our usual greasy platters. I bit into my vegetable reuben. He lingered for a second.

“We’re good; thank you,” I said, dismissing him with my mouth still full of sauerkraut. I rolled up my sleeves on the red floral Villager blouse my mom had worn and took another bite as my mom took a napkin to her eyes.

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It’s hard to find and snip every loose thread on a long, 60’s hostess dress when your mind is on the two books you need to read and annotate that week. You’ll find that out early on in your stint at the vintage store. You’ll find your boss brilliant, creative, hilarious, but you’ll wizen up to the fact that, while she won’t schedule you for more than four days a week, she has no problem keeping you super-late, so there’s no catching up on school at night. You’ll realize that you probably/definitely had more time to write before you were studying writing, but you spent it all looking at clothes you weren’t going to buy on Etsy and watching *Beachfront Bargain Hunters*. You’ll discover it’s harder still to smile at the hordes of customers that come into the

store for Halloween costumes, when the seasonal doubling of your scheduled hours coincides with mid-term season. And when, in the first few months of grad school, your twenty-year-old cat back in PA dies and your leasing company's handyman floods your house and you have to move at the same time that work and school expect the most from you, you won't want to be at the store at all. You'll want to be back home with your mom, with or without the option of margaritas. You'll try to quit your job, but your boss will beg you to stay on, at least through Halloween. By November, you'll be so accustomed to being in the presence of all those gorgeous dresses, and will have only dreamed up narratives for a sliver of them, that you'll stay on, keep those backstories coming. As all the Temple and UPenn kids are flying down to Florida's beaches, you'll return to your mom's in Philly for a snowy Spring Break, drink tea from a mug whose familiar handle seems to hug your hand back, and watch HGTV marathons in the oversize 80s sweaters you haven't been able to wear at all in Florida.

You'll again return home a few months later to warmer weather, chances to walk around town in breezy 70s maxi- and 90s mini-dresses. You and your mom will return to Rehoboth Beach, head right to that brunch spot you've visited for years, to find that it has been closed, but not completely shuttered, for months. From the sidewalk, you can see not only your favorite high-top table, but through the glass door, also the faint outline of the chair where you took that phone call a year ago, the table still advertising boats that could have sold months before.

You'll fly back to Orlando and get assigned the impossible feat of dating hundreds of pairs of vintage gloves,<sup>17</sup> while sitting in the August heat on the AC-less second floor, and

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<sup>17</sup> Unless a pair of gloves is fingerless and looks like it should go with a "Boy Toy" belt, there is little to go by – most gloves don't have designer labels, and the differences between older, hand-stitched gloves and newer, machine-stitched ones are, according to my former boss, obvious, but they're really not.

realize that at this point in your MFA career, your time should be spent writing about vintage clothes, not sorting and clipping threads from them. You'll look around the building your boss lovingly restored, and realize that while you'd love to sell vintage on the side, you'll never devote your life to building a shrine to the clothes, and should maybe figure out what you will devote your life to.

When school starts back up, you'll jump at the chance for an office job on campus, one with central air and much more flexible hours. When you give your boss notice, she'll once again beg for Halloween help, for you to stay on for weekends until October 31st. And you will, and you'll help squirrel vintage clothing away to the second floor, so that the showroom can be flooded with costumes during your last days. At the end of your last day, you'll volunteer to lock up the second floor, tie up your frizzed hair and ignore the heat. And you'll wonder not only about the backstories of the clothes up there, but also about their futures, the period TV productions and shoppers' "Eureka!" moments that you won't be a part of. You'll ensure that your hand is makeup free and brush it against that soft but sturdy Halston one last time – who knows when you'll next feel such expensive fabric against your skin – before flicking the lightswitch downward and wrestling with the swelling door's deadbolt once more. When she takes you out for margaritas that night, your boss will reiterate that whatever office job you've taken will never be as fun as working for her. "I know," you'll say. And you'll mean it.

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My mom once dreamt of having a beach house (ideally, one I bought for her after selling a screenplay) a few hours from us in Florida. Between seeing how hurricanes even hit inland

Florida and seeing how most of coastal Florida voted in 2016, she recently chose to buy a house just outside Orlando. She and I might wind up living minutes away from each other again.

I sent my mom a listing for the house one morning, and that afternoon Dave and I went to scope it out, and told her she'd like it. I identified the sunniest room in the house and told her it would be a good office, should she work remotely while moving down here, and a perfect sewing room once she retires. I pointed out the two fabric stores within five minutes of the house. By sundown, she made an offer. Dave and I will rent the house from her for a bit until she's ready to move. We're excited to have an indoor laundry room.<sup>18</sup> Needless to say, my mom's excited in general. She's already talking to members of a textile group here in Central Florida.

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I probably wasn't wearing anything vintage when I sat under yellow lights in a GRE testing center somewhere in the Philadelphia suburbs; I'd probably mis-matched a pair of leggings with my dowdiest sweatshirt and vegan Uggs knockoffs. I'd spent the previous months focused on re-teaching myself math on my office lunchbreaks, but at the testing center, I still found myself blanking on quadratic equations. The qualitative portion was easier. Then, came the essay.

One of the prompts was something like, "Do you believe that education forces students into conformity, or does it empower them?"

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<sup>18</sup> You have been reading these footnotes, right? If not, this remark will fall flat.

My response started: “My grandmother never set foot in a high school. Today, most of her grandchildren (myself included, if all goes well today 😊) hold advanced degrees...”

I somehow didn’t get slaughtered for the smiley.

I wasn’t sure if I was ready for grad school, but told myself that if someone offered me money to study writing, I’d take it, and that if that place happened to be somewhere with mild winters, all the better.

I wasn’t expecting to be offered a full-ride in Florida.

I’d been required to board at my Quaker high school the last two years, despite living right down the road. I’d done my undergrad a thousand miles away from home. I’d traveled to Spain, Cuba, Ecuador, without missing home much. I’d worked on a cruise ship with little internet access. I’d never felt reluctant to leave home, until my mom held a going-away dinner for Dave and me before we headed to Orlando. I’d broken away from the party to crawl under my mom’s bed and pet my elderly, misanthropic cat for the last time. I peered into the bare closet that once held my wardrobe. I went into the basement to leave my mom the Merry Clayton record we’d split the cost of, and took a moment to look at the vintage collection I was leaving behind. I told myself, I told the clothes, I’d find them homes one day, not in cluttered thrift stores, but in closets that brought smiles to faces every morning. And I will, one day.

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My mom and I have taken a few curiosity-induced trips into Port Fishington. With two of my three aunts, we toured my grandmother’s house one last time before flippers installed stainless steel appliances and rustic hardwood flooring, and sold it for way too much money. We

then headed across the street, to a pizzeria that had one up where a funeral home once stood, the one where my 14-year-old mom had said goodbye to her father. We all, somehow, enjoyed the pizza.

Another day, my mom and I enjoyed craft beers and seitan cheesesteak sandwiches in a hipster reimagining of an Irish pub that once had a designated ladies' corridor. We once stopped in a vintage store that had recently opened. I saw it right away. A purple floral dress, with long sleeves built for Philly winters, but whose lightweight rayon fabric would be passable in erratic autumn and spring. The ankle length and subdued palette made me think it was from the 70s, but I didn't care when it was from, or what the dress's past was. I just knew I wanted to be its future. I asked to try it on, wise enough to not trust vintage sizing. I prayed to Saint Homobonus<sup>19</sup> that it would fit me, and it did. I stepped out of the dressing room to show my mom.

"I shouldn't spend the money," I said.

"Sienna, it's perfect," she responded.

"It does have pockets."

"Pockets? You have to get it."<sup>20</sup>

And I did. I wait for those few Florida days when it is cool enough to sink my hands in its pockets as I walk across campus, earbud in one ear as the other one waits for compliments on the dress.

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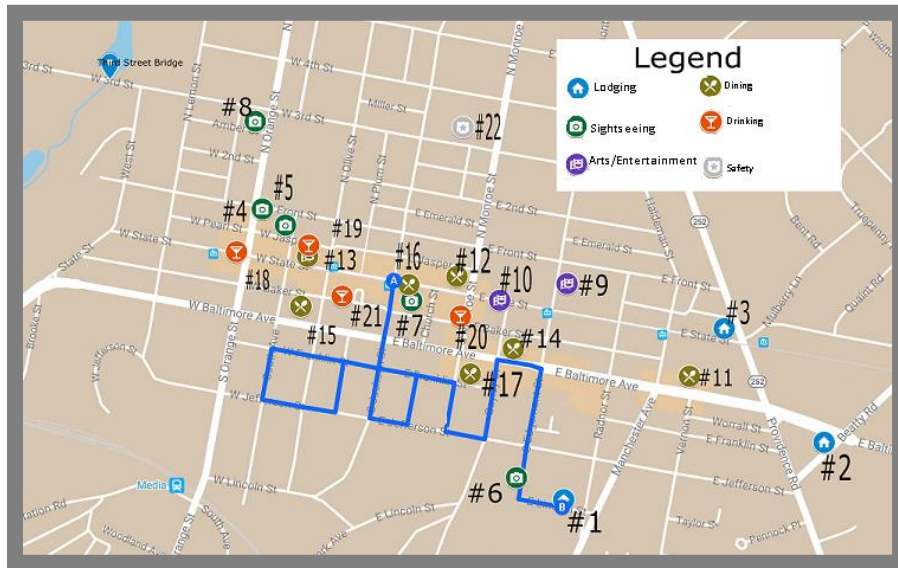
<sup>19</sup> Why isn't this a more popular confirmation name?

<sup>20</sup> For centuries, most women's clothing has lacked functional pockets, causing us to fuss around with matching handbags to shoes. Christian Dior allegedly once said, "Men have pockets to keep things in, women for decoration."

“Oh, this old thing?” I’ll say. If I’m feeling generous, I’ll continue on, “I got it in a vintage store in Northeast Philly. My mom’s from there. So was my grandmother.”

I’ll tell them about how cool the neighborhood is now. But they’ll walk away knowing a bit about Port Fishington’s past, too – both the beautiful threads and the sooty factories that birthed them.

## A TROLLEY RUNS THROUGH IT – A VISITOR’S GUIDE TO MEDIA, PA



Located between Wilmington, Delaware and Philadelphia, the borough of Media was incorporated in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, carved out from the center of Providence Township, which had been settled by Quakers in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Media was designated dry at the time, but in 2015 was deemed the “Drunkest Town in Pennsylvania” in an online ranking. One might say that



the tiny town is constantly re-inventing itself, while maintaining its status as the county seat of both the old-money estates of Delaware County, and the brick rowhomes with tiny yellow lawns of neighboring *Delco*. Known as “Everybody’s Hometown,” Media has become a shopping

and dining destination for people all over the Delaware Valley, the upper echelons of whom are quickly moving into our modest but respectable duplexes, and jacking up real estate prices.



**Disclaimer:** If you're actually looking to plan a trip to Media, I'll stop you here and direct you to [VisitMediaPA.com](http://VisitMediaPA.com), run by the Media Business Authority. If you're looking for a fun romp through Pennsylvania's drunkest town, a version of the town that might not exist by the time you get to read this, then continue on.

### Know Before You Go

**Local Currency** – USD (\$) in 99% of Media, save the corner of the Methodist Church emblazoned with a handwritten “Your Money’s No Good Here!” banner. Adherents of the Transition Town movement opened Media’s FreeStore in the church a few years back. As the name suggests, the donated goods in the space are free. If you take more than the volunteers deem to be your share, they’ll let you walk on out, and then lambast you on social media later.

**Language** – English, of a dialect Philadelphian enough to pronounce H<sub>2</sub>O as “wooder,” but not enough so to refer to a group of out-of-towners feeding the meters on Sundays as “yous suckers.” We are Philadelphian enough to let them keep putting their quarters in, though. When Medians want to present themselves as down-to-earth, common Delco-ites, we might refer to a meter or quarter with the catchall term “jawn.” We would not use such slang when putting on a proper act in the presence of people from Delaware County.

**Driving** - Despite what their demonym implies, Medians drive on the right side of the road. Don’t drive down the middle. You’ll flip your car on the trolley tracks and people will talk about your drunk, out-of-town ass on Facebook for months.

**Climate** – Under the Köppen climate classification, the Metro Philadelphia area has a humid subtropical climate. This Köppen guy would have fit in well in Media, because if the town is subtropical under his system, he was clearly ten Yuenglings in when he devised it.

Don’t believe Köppen’s liquid-longjohn lies. Instead, utilize the below chart to plan your trip to Everybody’s Hometown:

Climate Data: Media, Pennsylvania												
Month	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec
Average Temp	Shit	Shit	Meh	Nice	Nice	Meh	Hot Shit	Hotter Shit	Nice	Meh	Sick of this shit already	Shit, but with eggnog
Precip.	Snow :-)	Slush	So much rain	Rain; Might Still Snow	Only on Memorial Day	Yes	Yes	Yes	Only on Labor Day	Yes	Flurries	Snow, but not on Christmas

Now that I’ve left the town to study in Florida, Media has also become a destination town for me. Moving was a no-brainer; Orlando held the promise of higher degrees, both in education

and Fahrenheit. Still, I visit Media often. And every time I'm home, Media finds a way to remind me of its ever-changing nature.

### **Getting To Everybody's Hometown**

A fifteen-minute ride from Philadelphia International Airport, Media is easily accessed by taking I-95 South to I-476 (locally known as the "Blue Route.") Visitors should be advised of the Blue Route bottleneck experienced when approaching Media, the result of neighboring Swarthmore demanding that the highway be reduced to two lanes, to keep their cute college town quaint enough for the college's trustees. Unlike Media, Swarthmore is still a dry town, but that's not to say that they make wiser choices than we do.

The Southeastern Pennsylvania Transportation Authority (SEPTA) provides transit to Media via multiple bus and light rail lines, as well as the 101 Trolley Line from West Philly. If you are



**Media has embraced its oddly specific title as "the last suburban town in America with a trolley running down the middle of its main street that originates from a major metropolitan city."**

driving into Media, take special care when driving down State Street; keep in mind that the trolley cannot get around you should your car flip over.

On a related note, if you do leave one of Media's many bars having had a bit too much Yuengling, please call an Uber or

proceed to your nearest trolley stop. Do not, as one woman did, drive your baby-blue Jeep to the local liquor store to top yourself off. Not only will it be closed, but you'll come crashing through the brick exterior of the store, *a la Kool-Aid man*. I was about 23 when this incident took place.

At that time in my life, I knew the layout of that store well. I knew that this lady had pummeled

right into the curated wine display. I can't imagine what it cost to replace the damaged inventory, but I do know that her car was hardly dented. Despite the dynamic ad for Jeeps that still graced the borough that morning, you are still more likely to see Subarus and Priuses poorly parallel parked on State Street.

Walkscore.com has graded Media a 93 out of 100, but take heed: after your first day in Media, you are bound to cross paths with acquaintances on any given block. When traveling anywhere by foot, allow yourself an extra fifteen minutes for small talk.

Pedestrians can take advantage of Media's Scenic Third Street Bridge, which theoretically connects Media Borough's downtown area to the further reaches of the 19063 zip code. This thruway is closed off to motor vehicles, as indicated by the sign stating that the bridge is slated to re-open to cars in ~~19 200~~ 2010-something. The closure stems from the same NIMBY attitude held by Swarthmoreans with their stupid two-lane highway, but do not mention this resemblance to a resident of Media, under any circumstances.

### **Lodging in Everybody's Hometown**

So, you've decided that one day in Everybody's Hometown isn't enough? Or you've just had too much to drink to drive home? Well, if you're looking for somewhere to stay the night in Media, I honestly can't help you much.

### **How to Become an Award-Winning Filmmaker...like a Local**

Since 2008, the Media Arts Council (MAC) has hosted an annual Film Festival. Since 2008, organizers of the festival have debated the clarity of the festival's name, given that for people unfamiliar with Everybody's Hometown, the word "media" is a pretty generic term for any type of mass communication.

I've experienced this confusion first-hand. In 1998, I brought a book about the Spice Girls in for a free-reading period at Media Elementary School. A few classmates and I gathered around the book, and when we came across a page called "Spice Girls in the Media," we all nearly hyperventilated. Until our teacher told us, in the nicest way possible, that "media" had other meanings and that there was no way these famous British ladies knew anything about our town.

Anyway, nobody has been able to come up with an alternative name for the festival, so it remains the Media Film Festival. While especially talented international filmmakers have taken home the Golden Trolley award, the jury heavily weights the scores in favor of local filmmakers. *Motel Providence* was a perfectly fine piece of indie cinema, but I'm sure it didn't fare as well in other festivals.

So, if you're a filmmaker a little short of a Palme d'Or, consider staging your next work in Media. You might just receive a sought-after Golden Trolley.

On the outskirts of town, just off US-1, there's **some motel** (not on map) whose neon sign boasted "Color TV" until around 2013, when they presumably reverted to a steady stream of *Leave it to Beaver* re-runs. There's an **America's Best Value Inn (#2)** at the corner of Baltimore Pike and Providence Road, formerly known as the Motel Providence, whose claim to fame is that a short film took place there, a work that scored highly at the Media Film Festival The inn appears to be a popular extended stay venue, but the parking lot is always filled with too many broken TVs for comfort. I assume that in their heyday, these sets broadcast in full color.

A few blocks away, you'll find the **Raven Motel (#3)**, known to rent by the hour and remembered for a massive heroin sting that took place around 2014. The **Media Police Department** caught one of the two perps right away. The other drug dealer attempted to drive away, struck a cop with his car, then opted to flee on foot. The police hopped and/or hobbled into their cars and pursued the man, who was over 6 feet tall, who weighed 300 pounds, and wearing a lime green shirt, into Nether Providence Township's Smedley Park. They promptly lost him. While he was still on the lam, my mom and I sat in our corner booth at nearby **John's Bar and Grille**, sipping margaritas. "How did the police lose this individual?" my mom asked, "I'd imagine he'd be hard to miss." A much larger police force did locate him, a week later, at a concert in New York City. It was never revealed if he was still wearing the neon shirt.

But if you're looking to make Everybody's Hometown your hometown in the long-term, don't let the hookers and drug-busts dissuade you. Media is a great place to live. I moved there as a toddler, my parents having given up on raising a child in Philly after witnessing someone getting shot on our block. We moved into the top-floor apartment of a narrow building on Media's Jackson Street, right across from the office where my mom worked. I don't remember

much about our first suburban home, save the living room at the front of the apartment, which was filled with natural sunlight, lots of plants, and lots of fleas (I think they were there to bite the roof squirrels.) Not counting the vermin, four of us lived there – my parents, me, and a tortoiseshell cat named Pilar who passed away a few years later.

Eventually, when I was about six, we moved to a twin house across town, and took in a new kitten, named Rainbow Flower. Rainbow lived for twenty years, that is, until I left Media for good to live in Florida.

**The first house my family owned (#1 on Map)**, was listed as 3bed/1bath, but the realtors didn't know about the fourth bedroom, a crawlspace under the stairs where Rainbow Flower hoarded her toys and stuck her head out to snarl at my friends. She might have been angry that she was an indoor cat, with no access to all the tasty koi fish in the backyard pond.

I watched this pond freeze and thaw many times over from the greenhouse window in the plum-colored bathroom. In that time, I grew somewhat taller, coasted through school, watched my music tastes change from the Spice Girls to Zeppelin, watched my dad move out to a house a few towns over. The summer between my junior and senior years of high school, my then-stepdad convinced my mom to sell the house, in the town at the crossroads of Delaware County and Delco, for a brief residence in a larger townhouse out in what was *definitely* Delaware County. As young couples toured my childhood home and complained to the realtor about the pond upkeep, the splintery floors, and the size of the kitchen, I'd sit on State Street, usually at the **Coffee Club**, re-reading *Valley of the Dolls* and choking up my latte in laughter, imagining the trouble the new owners would have re-painting my room's *Valley*-pink walls.

I eventually left the state to attend college in St. Louis. In that time, my mom and stepdad divorced and my mom headed back to Media, to a different twin house a few blocks from the original. She missed being able to step outside and see familiar faces walking their dogs, kids who'd grown two inches overnight running in the streets. Through college and a brief postgrad stint working for Disney Cruise Lines, I missed it, too, and returned in 2013, staying for a few years.

During the two decades that I intermittently lived in Media, the borough council saw multiple proposals for hotels right in the borough, but all fell through. In this time, neighboring towns such as Springfield and Swarthmore have established highly-rated accommodations (The Inn at Swarthmore is ranked #1 of 1 hotels in Swarthmore by Trip Advisor!) So, go ahead and filter your money into the economy of a neighboring zip code. We won't begrudge you too much.

### **Sightseeing in Everybody's Hometown**

Ah, Media...the city that never sleeps. No, we're "Everybody's Hometown." Did you forget already? We may not have that many Instagram-worthy spots, but that just means that instead of proving to the world that you've made it to Media, you can simply take in all of our landmarks. Here are my recommendations. But now that you know there's nowhere to stay here, you might be wondering, can you hit all these hotspots in a day?

Yes, you definitely can.

**Delaware County Institute of Science (#4)** – If you’ve come all this way to look at dead butterflies, this is the place for you. I think I’ve only been once; it’s open at very erratic hours. But it doesn’t disappoint on the preserved organism front.

**FBI Building (#5)** – On March 8, 1971, I’m sure that neither of my parents had aspirations to one day raise a daughter in the square suburbs. But on that night, group of revolutionaries marauding as suburban parents set out to prove that change didn’t always come from within urban cores.

These concerned citizens tucked their children into bed and headed to Media’s Veterans Square, the site of an FBI satellite office. The watchman was tuned into Ali and Frazier’s “Fight of the Century” taking place that night, and completely out of tune with the fact that classified information was being carried away by the reamful. Over 1,000 documents were stolen and leaked to the press, confirming the existence of COINTELPRO and other controversial surveillance programs. By April 1971, COINTELPRO was dissolved, but more importantly Media made national headlines.

The building they broke into now houses law offices. By the time my family arrived in Media, the locals cared a lot less about political justice, leaving such concerns for Swarthmore, which, being a college town, is still stuck in the early 70s. By the 1990s, most of the parents in Media threw their energy into putting on talent shows and chaperoning field trips; my parents were the ones writing angry letters to the school when my class visited a nuclear power plant.

**Philip Jaisohn House (#6)**– Located down the block from my childhood home, this Federalist-style brick house was where Korean Independence activist and the first Korean national to become a U.S. Citizen, Philip Jaisohn, spent the last 25 years of his life. A foundation established in Jaisohn’s name opened the house to the public in



1990, the year I was born. From the time my family moved to our house in Media, I recognized the building as one of the nicest on the block, but it wasn’t until I was in my tweens and the President of South Korea, Kim Dae-jung, drove down our street and waved to me and my neighbors, that I learned of its significance. Before that point, I envied my friends who lived in bigger houses, or in ones closer to the playground, or in neighborhoods had more kids. But from the day of the presidential visit, until Wanda Sykes and her wife bought a house on 7<sup>th</sup> or 8<sup>th</sup> Street in the late 2000s, I lived on the most important residential block in town.

**Pennsylvania Veterans Museum (#7)**– Located in the basement of the local Trader Joe’s, which used to be an armory, this museum is run by volunteers, mostly local veterans looking to share their experiences with the public. Be sure to block out a whole morning to visit – their stories can be lengthy. And while I’m sure there’s a lot to learn from there stories, it’s hard envision the old man in front of you storming Normandy when your mind is fixated on the free samples you could be eating upstairs.



If you're in town in the fall, be sure to attend Media's annual Veteran's Day Parade. The first big change I noticed in the town took place over the course of elementary school Novembers, when we'd put on our L.L. Bean fleeces and head out the back foyer of the school and line up along State Street, grasping tiny flags in gloved hands that had been running naked through crisp leaves a month before. Our teachers always were sure to point out the Great War veterans to us, who typically rode in the backs of classic cars driven by the staff at Fulmer's Garage (known as the local Subaru experts, though I'm sure they preferred the challenge of Model T's). By the time I started middle school, the WWI vets had dwindled to zero.

**Sign-Eating Tree (Former Site of) (#8)** –When a tree began growing around one of Media's many No Parking signs, the borough changed the copy to something much more humorous, warning the public of a menacing presence, and incidentally opening up another lucrative parking spot in Downtown Media. Now, only the tree and a bare signpost remain. Nobody has been able to tell me when the sign came down or why, just that they're sorry to see it go.



**Laura, a friend from out of town, stands to my left, in front of one of Media's must-see landmarks.**

## Arts/Entertainment in Everybody's Hometown

Since 2004, the Media Arts Council (MAC) has been committed to securing Media's position as a regional arts destination, planning and promoting programming such as the Media Film, curated art galleries, and a reading series for local writers who didn't abandon Everybody's Hometown to establish themselves. Additionally, the Media Business Authority hosts annual blues, roots, and jazz music festivals which draw in an audience from all over the Delaware Valley. You can take a seat in one of Media's many bars and catch an Eagles game (if you're into that...I'm more into the tribute band that plays "Hotel California" each year at Rose Tree Park's summer concert series). For live athletic events, check out a youth softball game at Barrall Field, or find your way to a Penncrest High School game (as long as we're not losing to Wallingford-Swarthmore's Strath Haven Panthers.)



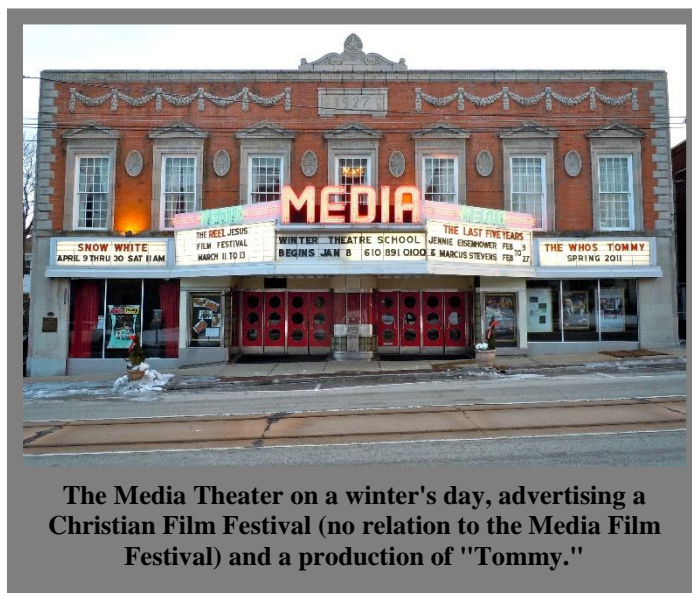
Me at 18, visiting an old friend of my own creation

**Barrall Field Mural (#9)** – Verdant clover specked with baseball diamonds and tennis courts, Barrall Field is a popular sporting venue that sits across Edgemont Street from Media Elementary School. It is closed to the public during school hours and after sundown, but the most important sight is still accessible at any time. Around 1998, Media Elementary's art teacher, Mrs. Maxwell, had her students paint a mural on the side of the field's

cinderblock restrooms, facing the school. I can't remember if I was pushed out of the best mural real estate by bigger kids or if I zeroed in on the spot myself, but when you visit, scan the bottom

of the mural for two dogs. In between the boldly painted canines, find the fading, streaky depiction of a bug-eyed girl with wisps of hair. Mrs. Maxwell was such a cool teacher that, at the time, I'd decide that I was going to be an artist when I grew up, but this picture serves as reason why that dream was never realized.

**Hedgerow Theater (Off Map)**– Technically located in the neighboring borough of Rose Valley, this theater is in the Media zip code, so you may ignore its zoning to the Wallingford-Swarthmore school district, and attend one of its productions. When the Hedgerow put on “No Sex Please, We’re British,” they flooded State Street with flyers that referred to the play only as “the classic farce by Anthony Marriott and Alistair Foot.” The ads were often found alongside those for my friend’s monthly drag show at **Picasso**, touting guest star Aida Snatchwell, as well as ads for the **Media Theatre** upcoming production – “Hair,” performed by high school students. The teenagers didn’t get naked on stage, but they did sing along to “Sodomy” and “Hashish.”



The Media Theater on a winter's day, advertising a Christian Film Festival (no relation to the Media Film Festival) and a production of "Tommy."

**Media Theater (#10)** – Founded as a movie house in the 1920s, this deco-style venue re-branded itself seventy years later as a premier performing arts facility. Locals today know the theater for its Broadway-caliber productions, very generous bartender, and its rigorous youth acting program, one that has produced some great talent, but also one

that made me realize that I'd never be an actor.

To fund the kids' classes, once a year, the Youth Program Director holds a benefit concert, showcasing the talent of some of his students. After intermission, when everyone has donated to the bar, the director encourages them to stand up and loudly proclaim how much they are donating to the theater its self. For a couple of years, until I moved to Florida, my friend Lydia and I made it a tradition to down some of the strongest drinks in town, then watch the parents who, with their kids and the whole town watching, tipsily forfeited thousands of dollars.

### **Dining in Everybody's Hometown**

On Wednesday nights in the summer, State Street closes to car and trolley traffic. Most restaurants along the stretch set up outdoor seating so that patrons can enjoy the night's live music while they eat.

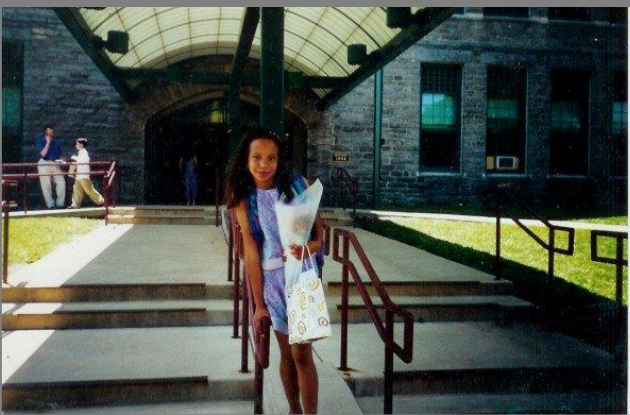
Being a socially progressive, yet bottom-line obsessed down, it's fitting that Media was designated the first "Fair Trade Town" in the country. On one Wednesday night, our trolley tracks transformed into a runway for a Fair Trade fashion show. I was asked to model in it. I wore a tunic hand-sewn by someone in India and organic cotton leggings, and carried a "Shop Fair Trade" sign up and down State Street. Most of those dining that night thought we were protestors, not models, and inevitably the haggard-looking man known for walking around town singing loudly started walking, and haggardly screaming a Ramones song alongside us.

So, if you attend dining under the stars, don't expect another fashion show, and also don't expect restaurants to take walk-ins. Most Wednesday nights are booked months in advance, usually by out-of-towners like you.

Perhaps you didn't make a reservation in time. Or perhaps you didn't take the time to read my climate chart and visited Media in the winter. Here are a local's suggestions for where to grab a bite:

**Double Decker Pizza (#11)**– Originating in the Delco borough of Ridley, the Media location of this chain showed up just as Media began positioning itself as a fine-dining Mecca. Searing your tongue on the greasy guts of an *inside out pizza*, essentially a deep-fried stromboli, is the perfect way to end a night spent waiting in line for the single-stall bathroom at **Joclyn's Bar**. Also a solid fallback on Wednesday nights when the other restaurants are full of unfamiliar faces.

**Iron Hill Brewery (#12)**– This Delaware-based chain of brewpubs opened its Media location when I was finishing up elementary school. After fifth grade graduation, my mom took me to lunch there. Noticing that I was dressed up in my favorite lavender paisley beaded top and skirt from Limited Too, the hostess asked if we were with the big party – it turns out, many fifth-grade families had gathered for a celebration, which according to those we wound up sitting next to, was totally an impromptu event. I ate one of Iron Hill's stone-oven pizzas and enjoyed a float made with their house-brewed root beer as my mom tried to talk local little league stats with the other parents. More recently, I dined there with a French filmmaker in town for the Media Film



Me, age 10, all dressed up and not invited to the graduation party.

Festival. I'd signed up to be a juror that year, an experience that introduced me to Media's most influential residents. Sitting in the black leather booth with a Parisian director and members of the festival jury,

I took a bite of my pizza and smiled – the pizza was as good as ever, and I was finally at a party I didn't have to invite myself to.

**O'Mally's Ice Cream (#13)**—O'Mally's remains the longest-standing, and on most days, the only parlor in town. The little wrought iron tables and chairs outside are great for people-watching, but I recommend sitting inside, where you can study the faded wall map of a version of Media that ceased to be by the time I moved there.

Generations of Media residents have grown up going to O'Mally's after school, before graduating to the hangout just upstairs, **Joclyn's**. Heading down the steps of Joclyn's at the end of the night as the DJ played Bobby Darin music to drive everyone off the dance floor, I would sing along to "Beyond the Sea" under my breath as I peeked into a dark O'Mally's. Sometimes I would place my ear against the door, trying to hear the hum of the freezers, remembering when a good night out with friends meant ice cream at eight and bed by nine, without needing to shower the smoke smell out of my hair beforehand.

**Pinocchio's Pizza and Beer Garden (#14)** – Like the O'Mally's/Joclyn's complex, Pinocchio's is a venue that grows up with its customers. A few blocks from Media Elementary, the restaurant was the designated caterer for school functions and dining there meant receiving a glob of pizza dough to play with, in lieu of the standard paper-and-crayons fare. Always accommodating, the waitstaff will still provide dough to middle schoolers wearing unfortunately blue-tinged lipstick, even those too proud to ask for it. They will also recognize you the first time you order from the restaurant's extensive craft beer menu, taken aback that the little girl they used to wait on has surpassed the age of twenty-one, and has discovered that orange-reds suit her much better.



**Towne House (#15)**– In 1950, local businessman Babe D’Ignazio opened up a tiny bar, the Stag Room, just off of State Street. When the bar flourished, he bought up most of the block cornered by Baker Street and Veteran’s square, eventually opening the larger D’Ignazio’s Towne House restaurant, its many dining rooms and banquet halls covered in garish wall-to-wall carpet that often clashed with the colorful Tiffany lamps lighting the way for diners reading the restaurant’s extensive menu. I don’t know how or when D’Ignazio acquired a giant Santa-and-reindeer statue, but by the 1990s, it sat on the roof year-round.

### **How to Become a Famous Singer...Like a Local**

In the fourth grade, my choir walked from Media Elementary to the Towne House to sing for the local Rotary chapter. Halfway through a rendition of “God Bless America,” my vision grew fuzzy, until I could only see a few dimly lit stained-glass lamps, and then nothing. I screamed, “Help, I can’t see!” and the principal of the school stood up and carried me to the kitchen. In a movie-like moment, an audience member followed us, screaming, “Let me help – I’m a doctor!” I re-gained my vision shortly after, without the doctor having to do much of anything, but he did drive me and Principal Koch back to the school.

My mom came to retrieve me from the nurse’s office. As we left, some random second-grader I’d never seen before asked me if I was okay – everyone had heard what had happened.

You, too, can achieve such fleeting fame in Media. Just remember: before singing, never drink water, and always lock your knees.

My mom took me to a modeling school audition at the Towne House when I was ten. Despite my frizzy hair and venue-induced nerves (see sidebar), I somehow got in and loved learning how to properly walk a catwalk, and pose for pictures. I was in my twenties by the time I mastered make-up application, but as I was the youngest one in the class, my peers were always willing to help me with my foundation. I just needed to wait until I reached five-ten, like my mom. By the seventh grade, I’d stopped growing at five-five – another career not for me.

Anyway, Babe D’Ignazio died in 2008, and when his wife died in 2015, the children decided to sell the business, an auction off its decorations. The Media Facebook page is often filled with speculation as to who bought Santa. If you’d still like to pay a visit to the Towne

House's empty, Santa-free façade, I recommend you do it soon – it's rumored that the building will be knocked down to make way for loft apartments.

**Trader Joe's (#16)** – Unaware that it was just the beginning of many changes to Media, I welcomed the 2005 opening of Media's Trader Joe's in the stone, Tudor-esque building that had previously housed an armory, since 1908. No longer requiring a parent to drive us to the Delaware location, Lydia and I would stop in on weekends in high school, gorge ourselves on free samples, then snag some helium balloons from the kids' corner, and then walk around State Street, sucking from the balloons and impersonating Karen from *Will and Grace*. Obnoxious as we were, we knew of, and respected, the building's history, even before we visited the **Veteran's Museum** in the basement. As I started seeing fewer familiar faces blocking the cramped aisles of the supermarket with their Speculoos-filled carts, I began wondering if any of these new residents had considered why their Trader Joe's featured battlements and iron gates.

**Wawa** – The headquarters for Wawa convenience stores are located in the Media zip code, down Route 1 from the borough proper. Within the borough, there are now two Wawa locations, the second one having opened in early 2017 after years of zoning hiccups. While this new one has a gas station and outdoor seating, I'd recommend going to **Media's Original Wawa (#17)** a few blocks down (see **Safety** below.) This one has no picnic benches; Delco residents are used to eating their Wawa hoagies off the tops of trash cans. If the trash can is taken, those dining there are likely to make some room for you – so go ahead and enjoy your meal with a local.



## Drinking in Everybody's Hometown (Woohoo!)

In recent years, Media has put a lot of stock into its solid culinary offerings, but many flock here for the borough's liquid assets. Being the drunkest town in a state that tightly controls all wine and liquor sales takes hard work and dedication, and Media has enthusiastically taken on the challenge. For the better-behaved, downtown Media also provides residents and visitors with their choice of coffee shops, juice bars, and the like.

The summer that I turned 21 marked my first birthday away from my friends and family in Media. I spent the night flush against a stucco exterior wall in an Ecuadorian village, watching as the locals got increasingly drunk, terrified to take a sip of chicha (both because I wanted to be aware of my surroundings, and because my friend said that the liquor, made from masticated corn, tasted like "cow shit").

While it was a great story, I felt cheated out of a traditional milestone in American youth. Then, my friends back in Media sent me footage of the cardboard version of me, going out for drinks on State Street. I



realized that Media hadn't forgotten about me, just as I could never forget about it.

Whether you're looking to catch up with a friend over cappuccinos or whether you're wanting to get wasted and drive into brick buildings, Media has something for you, or for your cardboard avatar.

**Coffee Club (#18)** – I only got into overpriced espresso drinks in order to spend Saturday mornings in high school among the purple-haired, tattooed twentysomethings that hung out at this local café. I never talked to any of them, but I liked having them around as I drank my butterscotch latte and wrote stories in a ratty journal whose cover was full of my bad drawings – one of my English teachers had made me realize that maybe there was a creative activity that I wasn't absolute shit at, and now this journal went with me everywhere. These mornings were often a follow-up to Friday nights spent in the same spot, as my friends as I watched (but never participated in) open mic night. There were many talented acts, but our favorite was the Puppet Master – a woman with an asymmetrical haircut, who dressed in all black, and Coke-bottle glasses – and a small figurine that bore her exact likeness. She'd take the stage, have the puppet take a tiny keyboard out of its case, and then she'd wiggle the doll in front of the microphone to make it “sing” along to “Self Control” by Laura Branigan. When I finally saw the music video to this song on VH1 Classic, I didn't bat a sloppily-shadowed eyelid at Laura getting finger-banged by the Phantom of the Opera. I'd seen the Puppet Master, and therefore, I'd seen everything.

We could always pick out those who were new to Open Mic nights – they were the ones trying not to spit out their coffee laughing as this woman performed. By 2011, the Coffee Club had closed to make way for **Diego's Cantina**, serving Mexican food and over 60 types of tequila. As I turned 21 that year, it should have been another case of a site in Media growing up

alongside me, but one night as I leaned up against a faux-adobe wall, contorting my face at the first sip of a cloying cotton candy margarita, I could only wonder if any other stage would welcome the Puppet Master.

**Joclyn's (#19)**– Located above **O'Mally's Ice Cream**, the carpeted dance floor of Joclyn's, baited with a sweet-smelling sticky trap poured by decades of clumsy barflies, has snared generations of fun-seeking Delco-ites. Smoking is only allowed on the back deck, but the whole bar smells like stale tobacco anyway. The crowd skews younger, but be on the lookout for the John Oates lookalike swiveling his hips to an autotuned playlist week after week, with Yuengling foam and a touch of gray in his mustache. Karaoke takes place on Wednesday and Sunday nights. I usually screeched out a rendition of "Heaven is a Place on Earth," missing a great opportunity to change the lyrics of "Escape (The Piña Colada Song,)" making the

dubiously faithful couple meet up not at a bar called O'Mally's, but a bar *above* O'Mally's. But I stuck with my Belinda Carlisle number; nobody ever changes their tune at Joclyn's. Karaoke nights were my favorite, but I found myself there for many a Saturday night dance party. Sometimes, my friends would be on the same wavelength as me and just want to dance. When

### **How to Get Kicked Out of Joclyn's...Like a Local**

So, your filmmaking and singing careers in Media didn't pan out the way you thought. Don't worry, you still have one more chance at local fame. I somehow never got kicked out of Everybody's Home Bar, but I know plenty of people who have, and their stories have been told throughout town. This list isn't exhaustive, but here are some suggestions to get you started on your way to local infamy. Somehow, they all involve bathrooms:

- Look at the line for the single-stall bathroom; instead throw up all over the bar, your red hair, and green shirt on St. Patrick's Day.
- Let someone in front of you in line for the tiny single-stall restroom, when there is a line forming behind you.
- Utilize a single-stall bathroom not meant for your gender.
- Get in a bouncer's face, yelling about how pointless gendered single-stall bathrooms are.
- Punch someone in the face while in line for the bathroom.

hooking up was their goal, I'd often find myself sitting alone at the bar with a sandpapery gin and tonic, wishing I were home with Rainbow Flower and our sheltie sister, Trixie. Those nights sitting at the bar, having conversation after conversation fall flat with a rotating cast of townies, made me realize that I was a Shetland sheepdog –usually one of the smarter and cuter ones sniffing around the sticky-floored dog park, but totally aloof when taken out of the home.

Oates would often catch me sitting alone and extend a hand to me. And, what the hell, I was there to dance – and so I would.

**John's Bar and Grille (#20)**– The bar at **Joclyn's** closes at 1 AM. Last call at John's, the only other dive bar still standing, is 2, but they typically close their doors to new patrons around 1:15, to keep the Mike's Hard crowd away from the older, and more laid-back, clientele at John's.

John's has historically had less luck preventing young troublemakers during the day. When my best friend Lydia and I were in middle school, we'd get off the bus a few stops early, sneak into John's, and steal an armful of saltine crackers from the service station. Through the years, my mom and I only went to John's with Lydia and her mom, but we started going on our own after a failed attempt to get served margaritas at a packed **Diego's** one Cinco de Mayo. The musty, wood-paneled bar was devoid of sombreros and drunken shouts of "wool!" and the bartender welcomed the challenge of making margaritas, a chance to show that he could do more than fetch pints of Yuengling. The bartenders and cook memorized not just one usual order for me, but multiple situation-dependent ones – I'd get a Patrón margarita and a veggie reuben if my mom was there to foot the bill, the same sandwich with a Cuervo margarita if she wasn't, and a tequila sunrise with a shortstack of pancakes if it was before 2PM. My mom and I sat down on

many a Sunday morning to hear Andrea, the weekend bartender, relay the antics that Lydia had gotten into there the night before.



Media's Very Own Liza Minelli, with bananas, without shoes.

**Picasso (#21)**– Owned by local actor-turned-restauranteur Loïc Barnieu, this tapas-style restaurant has fittingly been a venue for some of Media's greatest entertainers. For a couple of years, my friend Timmay held the Bro-lesque drag show there, and afterwards I'd often find myself sitting at **John's** or ordering a **Wawa** hoagie with a drunken Liza Minelli (Timmay's specialty) in tow. Picasso is also where Lydia and I once ran into a woman who sat next to me

on a Philly-bound train and somehow decided that I was her friend and the other passengers and conductor were our enemies. When she started screaming at the conductor for leaving a door open, I decided the feelings of friendship weren't mutual, but that night Lydia struck up a conversation with the woman, and they spent the rest of the night heckling the band onstage – which featured my neighbor on guitar. Inevitably, the next day, my dog decided to poop on his lawn as he was outside gardening. I hid my face as I lowered my plastic bag to the ground.

### **Staying Safe in Everybody's Hometown**

Media is generally considered a safe, family-oriented town, but if events like those at the **Raven Motel** are any indication, visitors should remain aware of their surroundings. The **Media Police Department (#22)** is located at Jackson and Third Streets, and typically a few members

of the force are patrolling the  $\frac{3}{4}$  of a square mile borough. Media cops can often be found sitting outside **Joclyn's** on a Saturday night, waiting to snare those staggering down those big steps, car keys in hand. In the absence of drunk drivers, they will sometimes check up on those on foot – or those found slumped against the wall of **Picasso**. After a night at **Joclyn's** with my friends Ashley and Megan, they headed back to their houses, and I started toward the Olive Street Garage, when I heard the familiar voice of someone we had expressly not invited to go out with us – my best friend, Lydia. I recalled how she'd jumped out of my moving Subaru a few weeks before to pee the side of a hill (but the hill was in Swarthmore, so I wasn't too mad.) I considered walking on, but couldn't bring myself to leave her there. I stopped and asked her how much she'd had to drink. She responded with some silly string of words that didn't answer my question. Her friend Joyce, who had presumably gotten her to this point, approached and told me that she was fine.

A Media cop approached, arms crossed, and asked if everything was okay. Joyce and I told him that everything was fine. We almost warded him off, when Lydia chimed in with a lilted, “Hi, Officer. What's your name?” and a hiccup. Lydia tried to stand up and shake his hand. When she couldn't get off the ground, the officer said, “Okay, sweetie, let's get you and your friends home.” He never did tell Lydia his name, even though she asked him five more times as she laid across Joyce and me in the back of the cop car. He waited outside Lydia's house as Joyce and I got her through the front door. He smirked as he drove off. He wasn't much older than Lydia or me. I wondered if he still went to Joclyn's on his nights off.

After getting Lydia to bed, I backtracked the five blocks to my car. In the morning, I texted her and asked if she was okay, relaying to her the ordeal that I was sure she'd forgotten.

Her response – “Did I see you last night? I thought I was in Ridley with Joyce. I was on State Street? IN MEDIA? LOL!” She didn’t react to the cop-chauffeur detail at all. Before leaving Media, I found myself getting into an increasing number of similar situations with Lydia, often on State Street, sometimes while on day trips (Media is centrally located, only two hours from both New York City and some of the country’s highest-rated beaches!)

The Media Police were also ready to help when, nearly two decades after meeting him, I finally took action against the guy who’d been following me, first around school and then around town, since the first grade. In school, teachers and peers would always ask me to continue being his friend, he probably liked me so much since I was the only one who had ever been nice to him. When he followed me home from one of Media’s many street fairs junior year of high school (**see route highlighted on map**) and started showing up on my doorstep every following Sunday, my mom and I simply started taking Sunday day trips to Philly or Wilmington. It wasn’t until he followed my friend, and coworker, Ashley, to our workplace one day and started showing up daily, that my mom and I stopped by the police department. I showed an old picture of him to a cop, who said that he’d frequently seen him wandering around town by himself, and knew his mother – he’d go have a chat with his mom that afternoon. Sitting in **John’s Bar and Grille** with our margaritas around 2 that day, we imagined the conversation that was going on as we spoke. “I sort of feel bad now, getting his mother involved” my mom said. “Yeah, I do, too.” I replied.

The Media police used to have enough free time to drive around at night, and take drunk girls home from the bars, but they’ve been pretty busy lately. To locals, the opening of the new Wawa has seemed a strategic move to get Media out of Delco and firmly into the realm of

Delaware County. During the location's first week in operation, a customer walked behind the checkout counter and started piling cigarette cartons into his arms.

"What are you doing?" asked the cashier.

"I'm robbing you," said the man. And he took off with \$1,000 in cigarettes.

I noticed that nobody was asking if they recovered the merchandise, or if the cashier was okay. Most people wanted to know one thing: where was the robber visiting from?

Even as I've left Media, even as it becomes a place that *I'll* need a visitors' guide to navigate, I'm determined to keep my ties to the town – if they were to break, I wouldn't know how re-tie them.



## THE DRIVERS' SEAT

In high school, I would often space out during geometry or the required Quaker Meeting for Worship that took place every Wednesday morning. Meeting is meant to be a time to reflect on yourself, on the world around you, to find God's light within you. For many of my friends, it was a time to cuddle with their significant others or fall asleep. For me, it was a time to wish I'd eaten breakfast as my stomach grumbled for the entire school to hear. On those days when I did remember to eat a granola bar beforehand, I would meditate on my life, like I was supposed to. I'd often think back to whatever movie I'd sneakily watched instead of doing homework the night before, and I'd try to conceptualize my own life as a movie. A really boring movie, in which I lived in the middle of nowhere and all of my friends were dating and I wasn't, and my potential as a movie star wasn't realized because I was too busy proofing triangles. But at a pivotal turning point in this mind-movie, I'd move to a crowded city, meet all sorts of people on the subway, and have great adventures. There was always a subway, or a bus, or an elevated train. In imagined scenes where I was traveling somewhere important, to receive a million-dollar check or an Oscar, there might be a cab or limo involved. But I was never behind the wheel, and I never thought of what I'd have to do to get the money or award. It would just sort of happen.

Cut to my college years, spent as far away from my high school as possible, years spent learning how narratives, both in life and in fiction, worked. Most people on public transit kept to themselves, and the ones that did introduce themselves to me were pretty creepy. Nobody handed me money just because, I discovered that becoming a famous screenwriter would require actual writing. I accepted these truths. But it was harder to admit that I needed to learn how to drive. After graduation, I would often find myself cast in scenes like the one that follows.

FADE IN:

INT. JOCLYN'S BAR - 11 PM

It's a Saturday night, summer 2013. A suburban Pennsylvania dive bar filled with local TWENTYSOMETHINGS, mostly drinking Yuengling and (shittily) singing along to "Poison" by Bel Biv DeVoe. The walls are wood-paneled and covered in Philadelphia Eagles paraphernalia.

THE WRITER, 23, enters with her friend MEGAN. They are stopped by a BOUNCER.

BOUNCER  
ID's please?

MEGAN  
(handing over her license)  
Dude, seriously? We went to high school together.

The Writer pulls a passport, covered in a lime green leather sheath, out of an impossibly small clutch and hands it over.

BOUNCER  
Oh, world traveler.

He hands the passport back. The Writer is, indeed, pretty well-traveled. But that's not the reason she carries a passport as her ID.

BOUNCER  
How have you been? I hear you're a writer now?

THE WRITER  
I mean, I've been trying to sell a screenplay if that's what you mean.

BOUNCER  
That's awesome! Have fun, ladies.

INT. JOCLYN'S BAR - A FEW HOURS LATER

The Writer and Megan are dancing to pop music. Around them, the bar patrons are spilling drinks and making out with each other. Megan checks her phone every once in a while, smiling.

A DRUNK GIRL backs into the DJ's table, spilling a sugary cocktail on his computer. He mouths "what the fuck?" And shakes

his head. He spots the time, 2AM, and smiles. He switches the music to "Fly Me to the Moon." The floor clears, except for the writer, who is still swaying to the music. Frank Sinatra is her dad's favorite. She evaluates the song's merits as a father-daughter dance at some abstract wedding, somewhere in the distant future.

The Writer thinks of her once-estranged dad, who is presently sleeping in his mom's bed, or maybe sitting up and listening to a paranormal radio show. The Writer has already assured her friends that when he stays over on weekends, her mom sleeps on the couch.

Speaking of friends, where are they? Megan, future bridesmaid contender, who lives walking distance from the bar, is standing off to the side texting. Who is she texting? Why is she smiling?

The Writer approaches.

MEGAN

I mean, you're still free to crash on my couch, but I'm expecting some company now.

THE WRITER

Maybe someone else can give me a ride.

They look over at their other FRIENDS, all clamoring at the bar for one more drink, to an unamused bartender. Megan shrugs. The Writer takes out her phone and dials.

THE WRITER (CONT'D)

Hi, mom, it turns out I don't have a ride. Can you pick me up?

(to camera)

You know, if you told sixteen-year-old me that within a decade, she'd have friends that would actually want to go out and do things, she might've sucked it up and decided to give this driving thing another go...

During my last two years of high school, I was required to board there, but my mom would pick me up every weekend. I'd sleep over my best friend Lydia's house on Friday, spend Saturday and Sunday with my family, and then my mom and I would go to Goose Creek grill before she dropped me off at school. Every Sunday night, I whined about having to go back to the dorms, even though the house my mom and then-stepdad lived in was in walking distance from campus. Supposedly. My mom would always drive me back and forth, lest I wound up

dead like the deer, squashed like the squirrels, wheel-whipped like all the creatures that had been crushed by the pickup trucks that lived in every McMansion's garage, trucks whose flatbeds were probably never utilized.

Why didn't I want to drive myself? There was the roadkill, the thought of personally creating more of it. There was the hatred of fossil fuels that my hippie-dip school seemed to work into every lesson plan (high school math sucks enough without word problems about climate change). There was my mom's overt nervousness every time she rode in a car as a passenger, even with a licensed driver. There was the fact that I was sixteen and still hadn't learned how to steer a bicycle, that made me certain that I'd be a terrible driver. I had no interest in owning a car. My friends at Westtown were perfectly content playing video games in the dorms all weekend, every weekend. The school bogged down our weekday schedules with extracurriculars and mandated study hall, so I couldn't go work at the mall. Lydia went to the public school down the road and hadn't gotten her license either – her dad's house was within walking distance of her afterschool job. On those Friday nights spent at her house, we'd stay up until 2AM, watching bad movie musicals, and eating spoonfuls of often-expired cake frosting from her dad's fridge. There was nowhere as fun as her living room.

One Sunday night at Goose Creek Grill, as my mom and I exited with our takeout pizza boxes, she handed me the keys to her Subaru and asked if I wanted to drive a bit. I said I didn't have a permit, and didn't want to risk anything on the mile route between the restaurant and my dorm. She suggested I just drive around the parking lot a bit. I was afraid to give the car gas. Then I gave it too much gas. I didn't know how sharply to turn the wheel. I turned it too sharply.

I kicked up a lot of gravel. My hands shook a lot. We decided that was enough driving for the day. It would be enough driving for a couple of years.

I headed to WashU in St. Louis for college. I didn't know what I was going to study. I was voted "most likely to start her own fashion line" by my high school class, but I wasn't going to pursue fashion design. I couldn't draw for shit. I was headed to a good school, but it was one I'd mostly chosen because I had cousins in Missouri, and because the school was close to a Metrolink stop and gave us free transit passes.

EXT. ST. LOUIS METROLINK STOP - DAY

The Writer lugs four heavy Target bags from a suburban shopping center to a nearby lightrail station. PASSENGERS mill about, many wearing Cardinals jerseys. A shirtless, shoeless, sunburnt man with a scraggly beard follows close behind the Writer. He is mumbling something about scripture, a modern-day, MISSOURI JESUS.

THE WRITER

(to camera)

So, I've memorized all the St. Louis Metrolink routes. Usually, I get around just fine. I work on campus, so that's awesome. I can get to Target; what else do I need?

MISSOURI JESUS

Something, something, water, baptism.

(to The Writer)

I poured water on them there train tracks.

THE WRITER

(to Scraggly Beard)

Do you mind? I'm sort of narrating something here.

The writer sits down on a bench at the stop, puts her bags down, and wipes her brow. Then, to the camera...

THE WRITER (CONT'D)

I get hit on sometimes, especially on the downtown route to the Quaker Meeting House. I've learned to deal with it. But this?

(pointing to Scraggly Beard)  
This is something new.

MISSOURI JESUS

I was tellin' you why I put water on them tracks. You know why? That was Jesus talkin'.

MISSOURI JESUS sits, continues to ramble, and gets closer to The Writer. Across the parking lot, The Writer spots a family loading their Target bags into the back of a minivan. We zoom in on them, then go back to The Writer, who sighs. The man is still talkin' about Jesus and the water on them there train tracks.

The train arrives. The Writer stands up, but one of her shopping bags, holding a gallon of milk, breaks at the handle. She leaves it and boards the train. As the train pulls away, we see Scraggly Beard, still at the station, pick up the milk and chug it.

I was living in a cooperative housing unit just off-campus at the time that I walked with Missouri Jesus. At one of the co-op's communal meals, I started telling everyone about the guy. They responded with a combination of amusement and sympathy for him. Once I was not in the midst of the encounter, that is how I felt towards it, too. I told my mom about the ordeal. She wasn't amused. Since her daughter was involved, she felt no sympathy for him. She sent me money for driving lessons.

INT. WASHU CO-OP - AFTERNOON

The Writer sits at the communal table in the basement of the WashU Co-Op. The Writer is writing - no really, she is for once, but just because the internet has been the first casualty of the storm revving up outside. Her friend EVAN is sitting next to her, sketching a picture of the Writer, writing, with a tornado funnel behind her. A few other CO-OP RESIDENTS have joined them, The Writer doesn't remember exactly who, but they have computers and textbooks. One has brought a guitar and is strumming it. There is suspicious smoke in the air. Outside, the sky is an ominous bright-white.

EVAN

What are you working on now?

THE WRITER

It's a screenplay for class, about a driving instructor who's well-liked by his students, but sucks at his job. It's called *By the Dashboard Light*.

CO-OP RESIDENT #1

Is it autobiographical?

THE WRITER

(to camera)

It's a fair question. I'm in a screenwriting class right now, but I mostly write nonfiction.

(beat)

If only there were some zany way to combine the two genres.

The first instructor I hired inspired the general premise for *By The Dashboard Light*, the story of a personable, but ineffective driving instructor. My teacher came from the generically named Missouri Driving School, and played gospel music in the car as she told me stories about other students, like the one she made laugh so hard that he couldn't see the road. She laughed so hard while telling me this story that I started laughing, too, and, yes, both of us wound up with our eyes closed. Moments like this helped me craft the story's main character, Roger, but from there, I was left on my own to figure out a plot. Most of my lessons with Missouri Driving School were uneventful. She would pick me up once or twice a week, drive us to some blighted block of urban prairie close and then hand the keys to me so we could practice turning. We did this for an entire summer. One weekend, I accidentally let on to my mom that I hadn't been on a highway yet, or any kind of real street. I quickly added in that the lady was really nice and didn't yell or anything. My mom soon announced that she'd put enough money into my driving lessons, and that I was on my own.

I considered calling my dad and asking for money, but decided against it. I was sure he'd send it over, but I would have felt guilty about wasting his VA pension on my jaunts around the block. He'd enlisted in Vietnam as a teenager, gone AWOL and wound up living with Buddhist monks in the jungle. He lived with PTSD his whole adult life; it created rifts between him and any number of family members. Including me and my mom. When I compared my life to all the things he'd experienced at such an early age, I'd start to think of myself as some bratty woman-child. I didn't want to feel that way anymore. I decided to foot the driving school bill myself.

Int./Ext. Missouri Driving School Car - Day

The Writer is behind the wheel of a white Toyota with a MISSOURI DRIVING SCHOOL vinyl wrap. She pulls up in front of the WashU Co-Op, puts the car in park, and unbuckles her seatbelt. DRIVING INSTRUCTOR #1 is sitting in the passenger seat next to her with a carbon copy credit card imprinter.

DRIVING INSTRUCTOR #1  
That'll be two-hundred dollars. I'll see you next week.

THE WRITER  
I bet you're wondering how a full-time student is going to pay for driving school on her own.  
(beat)  
Well, so am I.

I quickly maxed out my credit union-issued Young Adult Visa, while still making tight turns around corners with the same instructor every week.

This instructor from Missouri Driving School was often late picking me up. One morning, she didn't show up for our lesson. I gave her thirty minutes to arrive, and I finally



called, I found out that she'd been sitting outside of some other student's house, honking and hollering.

By the time that she arrived at the co-op, we only had an hour left in our scheduled two-hour lesson. She apologized, and I told her it was fine.

The next week, she was an hour late again.

Evan was home that morning, working on an art project, and asked me why I was still putting up with this lady. At his urging, I called the Missouri Driving School, expecting a manager to pick up. Instead, a familiar voice answered the phone. I started, "Hi, we had a lesson..." but I wasn't expecting to confront her, so I panicked and hung up. She never called back.

A few days later, I sent an e-mail out to the Co-op, seeing if anyone was willing to take me out for a few lessons, in exchange for cookies or cupcakes or something. I was a terrible cook, and everyone in the Co-op knew it. Still, a guy named Zach who lived in the building auditioned for the role of Driving Instructor #2, and I cast him immediately. We got in his VW. A much more proactive teacher, he got me on the highway right away. Well, right after I maneuvered myself off the cement island that I beached myself and made a few turns without signaling.

INT./EXT VOLKSWAGEN - DAY

The Writer drives in the right lane down U.S. 64/40, her face red and her hands growing raw from her grip on the wheel. DRIVING INSTRUCTOR #2 sits next to her, his right hand on the handle that hangs from the car's ceiling. Driving Instructor #2 takes a breath, loosens his grasp of the handle and turns to The Writer.

DRIVING INSTRUCTOR #2  
So, I hear you're writing a movie.

The Writer doesn't respond, too focused on the road.

After what felt like an eternity of Hell, Zach told me to get off at the exit with the JesusWater Target. I crookedly pulled us into a parking space. We went inside and followed him as he made his weekly grocery run. I almost offered to help him pay, until I checked my credit card balance and realize I couldn't. On the left turn out of the lot, I overshot and hit the curb, hard, popping one of his wheels. AAA came by and helped him put a donut on. We drove back to the Co-Op without reciting any lines. As we approached the door to our building, he said, "So, uh, I don't think I can give you any more lessons."

When my next paycheck came in, I called up Community Driving School. Their reviews complained that the instructors get tended to get "off-topic." I didn't know what that meant, but their rates were much lower than the last generically-named place I tried, and they got Instructor #3 out to me the next day. He pulled up in a giant SUV and opened the driver's side door for me. After some time on the road, he told me that I gripped the wheel too hard, which I knew, suggested that I might try steering more with my wrists instead. Like, actually just controlling the wheel with my wrists. His advice was obviously flawed, but I tried it. And he soon found himself slamming the instructor brake of his car, so that I didn't hit a hydrant. He let me drive on, gripping the wheel my way. And then he started a dialogue that was truly stranger than fiction.

INT./EXT. COMMUNITY DRIVING SCHOOL - DAY

The writer and DRIVING INSTRUCTOR #3 drive into a part of town that The Writer doesn't recognize. It is then that Driving Instructor #3 pulls her over for a pep talk.

DRIVING INSTRUCTOR #3  
How are you feeling?

THE WRITER  
(uneasily)  
Not great. Can we keep driving?

DRIVING INSTRUCTOR #3  
I can tell you're nervous. Can I tell you something to give you courage?

THE WRITER  
Can we just keep driving?

DRIVING INSTRUCTOR #3  
Let me tell you something. God made you to drive a car. He made cars so they could be driven by you. Whenever you're nervous, just think of the Almighty.

He gesticulates to the ceiling. The Writer says nothing. They resume driving.

DRIVING INSTRUCTOR #3  
Something something Bible scripture something.  
(beat)  
Anyway, are you a Christian?

THE WRITER  
Yeah, I'm a Quaker.

The Writer doesn't offer up that Quakers quote NPR like it's the Good Book, or that her high school religion teacher taught her that the sin of Sodom and Gomorrah was that the residents were inhospitable to houseguests. When he points to the sky again, it takes all her courage to muster up..

THE WRITER  
Quakers think of God as an inner force. I wish you'd stop pointing up there.

Driving Instructor #3's pointing gets more dramatic. The Writer is waiting for him to take his shirt off and start bragging about pouring water on the road for Jesus. And maybe he would, but she nervously swerves into another lane before he can.

THE WRITER  
I'm sorry.

DRIVING INSTRUCTOR #3  
It's okay. God forgives all mistakes.

THE WRITER  
This lesson is over.

He immediately navigated back to the house and didn't charge me, which I guessed was pretty Christlike. Still, I was so shaken up from the whole morning that I forgot to turn a manuscript in to my Advanced Nonfiction professor that afternoon. I emailed her after dinner, telling her everything, and she said it was okay – it sounded like the whole thing would make a great essay one day. “Or maybe a screenplay,” I thought.

Over Spring Break, Lydia's mom took me out in her Subaru a few times. She told me that when I moved back home after graduating, we could continue practicing, but I was intent on not moving home. I applied to some jobs in St. Louis, just because all my stuff was already there, and to a couple of openings in New York and San Francisco. Nobody called except for my wildcard, a cruise ship in Florida, and that's the job I took. My commute was a five-minute walk in the sunshine, and I let my learner's permit expire. When ship life got exhausting, I found myself living with my mom again, but things had changed. She'd divorced my stepdad and moved into a part of town with sidewalks and public transit, a place where the roads were littered with Wawa coffee cups, not deer innards.

My dad had learned of the divorce and helped her move. By the time I got back, they were friends again. Usually. During the week, I walked to my new job in a local store and to Lydia's mom's house, or took the trolley to the gym. My dad had never had a license so on

weekends I would go with my mom to pick him up from his apartment in the city, and he'd sleep at our house for two nights – separately from my mom, thank God.

On the way back to the city one springtime Sunday, we saw an injured bunny on the side of the road. My mom drove an extra hour to take it to a wildlife rehab center, one the three of us had taken some baby robins to when I was eight. My dad called the following Monday to say what a great weekend he had, and the rabbit rescue made it even better. We'd saved a life, as a family, just like old times.

The whole arrangement was unusual, but usually fine. But some weekend visits erupted in fights, and those were the weekends that make me decide to apply for another learner's permit, so even if things soured between my parents again, I'd be able to see my dad easily.

Lydia's mom started taking me out again, early in the morning, in the same Subaru she'd had since I was in the sixth grade and met the family. She would ask me each time if I wanted to try a highway and I'd say no, so we'd focus our time together on parking between the cones at the local DMV. We'd drink Wawa coffee and sing along to '80s music. Lydia's mom was fun to be around, and not a bad instructor, either. And I eventually felt ready for my close-up.

Take One didn't go so well. Fucking up the parallel parking test means automatic failure, so the examiners always get it out of the way quickly. I hit the curb backing into what was, really a generously-sized spot. It took me six turns to get myself out of the situation.

On Take Two, a State Trooper got into the car without looking at me, put on her seatbelt, and told me to get started. Out of nowhere, I manifested the most beautiful parallel park-job of

my life. I went through the whole course. At the end, the examiner told me to pull over. She informed me that I stopped in front of two stop lines while on the road. I failed again. This time it stung.

On Take Three, a different state trooper got into the car. She introduced herself and shook my hand. I made my allocated three wheel-turns, peered out my window, and saw that I was slightly over the border. "I didn't do it," I told the examiner, before she could tell me the same. She stepped out of the car. She reasoned that I wasn't really in the lines, but not really out of them, either, and so she let me go on. She looked at my file and told me I was doing a great job with the stop signs this time. I got my license. Just in time. It was November, my dad's birthday month and I planned to take him to dinner. Just the two of us. I had big news for him.

INT. THE WRITER'S MOTHER'S HOUSE - DAY

It is a late-November day. writer's MOM sits by the door on a red brocade couch. The mom is reading a blog post, with the headline LOCAL SCREENWRITER'S SCRIPT GOES INTO PRE-PRODUCTION. The Writer puts on her coat, grabs her car keys, and dials her DAD.

INTERCUT WITH:

INT. THE WRITER'S DAD'S APARTMENT - SAME TIME

The Writer's dad sits on a similar-looking sofa, watching TV. He picks up the phone.

DAD  
Peace, baby.

THE WRITER  
I'm leaving the house now; see you soon!

DAD  
What's that now?

THE WRITER  
I'm on my way to take you to your birthday dinner. Remember? I was thinking we could go to this great vegan place that -

DAD  
I have a dentist's appointment tomorrow, baby.

THE WRITER  
Huh?

DAD  
Something something Agent Orange made my war buddies' teeth fall out or something and now it's going to happen to me.

THE WRITER  
(after a pause)  
They have really good smoothies.  
(beat)  
Talk to you later.

The Writer hangs up the phone, puts her coat back on the hook and runs upstairs without a word. When the mom hears the door close, she picks up the phone, and dials The Writer's dad. Because the situation concerns her daughter, she has no sympathy for the man on the other end.

MOM  
Goddamn it, you just have a cavity. Your daughter's been waiting to tell you something.

Ambler, Pennsylvania was about half an hour from my mom's house if you take the highway. Which I wasn't willing to do. When a filmmaker asked me to meet with him and his costumer girlfriend in Ambler to discuss *By the Dashboard Light*, I accepted right away, and then spent the week leading up to the meeting mapping out the least scary route to get there. The

drive took me an hour. The Filmmaker went to grab us some beers, and I chatted with The Costumer for a bit. She complained about her day job in a fashion house, and complained about The Filmmaker's cats, with whom she'd recently started sharing an apartment. I was worried that she'd complain about my script, too, but she loved it. The Filmmaker came back with our beers, and said that he also loved it. He told me that he wasn't sure about the script at first, scenes in a car weren't easy or fun to film. I hadn't thought of that, even though I knew that sitting in a car with a random driving instructor wasn't easy or fun.

Despite his reservations about the opening scenes, he said something compelled him to keep reading on, and that by the end he had a vision for my story. We'd all get paid eventually, but for now, we'd have a lot of fun working on our first feature.

And we did. The Filmmaker and I bounced ideas off of each other, introduced new characters, added more scenes to the script, scenes that didn't take place in a car. I ensured that Roger, the protagonist of my script, had a somewhat happy ending, left the driving instructor job that he hated, and worked toward his dream job, an antiques dealer. I had no idea how to write my own career path, but I felt fully in control of Roger's.

The filmmaker invited me to the casting calls and welcomed my input. We lined up a roster that was, in my novice opinion, pretty perfect, but we failed to find our lead. The Actor came to us through a webcam audition, some weeks later. The Actor and his boyfriend lived in Brooklyn. They were thinking of moving out to LA in a few years, but didn't have any plans in motion yet. The Filmmaker and I drove up to New York, where most of our lead actors lived, for a table read. The Actor and I talked about gardening and Stevie Nicks and how in awe we were of California.



Some weeks later, I drove up to Amber for a day of filming. We were just trying to get enough footage for a promotional trailer that we'd attach to an IndieGoGo campaign. The Actor and I goofed off between takes, complaining about the hot weather, sticking helicopter seeds on each other's noses, and laughing at everything.

The Filmmaker introduced me to The Sound Guy, who went to school with the Wardrobe Manager. His eyes were covered by prescription Ray-Bans, but that just made his smile even brighter, kinder. Every time he spotted me sharing a private laugh with The Actor, he swooped in and started telling me about the fireworks he'd seen a few days ago. The Sound Guy's misguidedly-jealous interruptions were annoying until I realized I actually wanted to hear about every type of pyrotechnic the Borough of Conshohocken got their hands on, as long as the fireworks display was narrated by him.

The Filmmaker announced that it was time to resume filming. The Sound Guy nodded in recognition but kept talking to me. The Filmmaker let it happen. Even that early in the day, he sensed the second round of fireworks going off on set.

When The Sound Guy enlisted me to help record audio at the go-kart tracks later on, instead of having a P.A. who had recorded sound before, get in the two-person kart, The Filmmaker said whatever, he could see where this was going. I sat in the passenger's side holding a microphone whose workings were completely foreign to me. The Sound Guy drove. I had no idea how to record sound, but I was still uneasy on the road and dreaded the drive home that night, so I was glad to not be the one behind the wheel.

INT. SOUND GUY'S BEDROOM - ONE WEEK LATER - MORNING

The Sound Guy is still asleep, in a loft bedroom with high ceilings. The Writer sits up and addresses the camera.

THE WRITER

Well, I guess I did a good job holding The Sound Guy's boom pole.

She laughs and then grabs the boom pole from just off the camera and brings it into view.

THE WRITER

No, actually. The recordings I got weren't bad.  
(beat)

I took the highway last night. I told myself that if I had to drive an hour through the woods to get here every time, it would be a lot harder to make this work.

She looks at The Sound Guy and Smiles.

THE WRITER (CONT'D)

And I really want it to work.

(beat)

God, can you imagine if I needed my mom to pick me up from here?

I-476, colloquially known as the "Blue Route" was the quickest way to his house. I learned to navigate that highway, knew to look out for the bottleneck when the highway reduced to two lanes by my house, knew not to get in the rightmost lane that cropped up by Exit 3, since it would abruptly end in a mile and nobody would let me back over. I would get on the bigger highways, but with some restrictions. I would get on I-95, but only as far as the karaoke bar by the marina, where I introduced the Sound Guy to many of my friends. I would get on I-76, but only for a mile, exiting where The Sound Guy's mother lived. My first time meeting her, I was an hour late for dinner because my car stalled out on the highway. Not a good way to start, but I

felt a sliver of self-satisfaction, knowing that it had been my car, and not me, that had screwed up.

The other parental introductions went much more smoothly. My mom and I rolled our eyes as The Sound Guy and my dad started debating the existence of aliens within ten minutes of meeting. With The Sound Guy around, my dad told us stories I'd never heard before, about the fact that my dad learned to drive in a dream, woke up the next morning and drove my uncle's car around. I believed him. Decades ago, my mom met my dad, didn't see him for months, and woke up one morning with the premonition that she'd run into him at a local health food store that day. And she did. I had a feeling that the making of *Dashboard* would bring good things my way, but that those good things wouldn't necessarily be career-related.

We got enough footage for an IndieGoGo campaign. The trailer looked pretty good (and sounded great). We raised one-third of the money we hoped to get, but The Filmmaker said it was a good start. We filmed a couple more scenes over the course of a year. The Sound Guy and I moved in together and we waited for more call sheets to come our way, for more scenes to be shot. Nothing came through. Suddenly, The Filmmaker had a new crowdfunding site up, this time for his girlfriend's cat café. The site talked all about The Filmmaker's background in restaurant management, and the former-Costumer's apparent love of cats, and how badly she wanted to get out of the fashion industry. I didn't have any money to give to it, but it seemed plenty of people did. Still, when the café opened, I didn't know how the amount of money they'd earned from this campaign covered everything. Actors from *Dashboard*, ones that were depending on our film to accelerate their careers, started asking me when production would resume, as if I knew any more than they did. As if I was the type that would do something about

Dashboard stalling on the road, and not the type who'd dropped hundreds of dollars an ineffective driving instructor, because I thought sacking her would be mean.

The Filmmaker and the Costumer hired The Sound Guy's younger sister to work in the café. A former Starbucks barista with a bunch of cats at home, she was elated, and I didn't want to get in the way of that. But *Dashboard* donors, including my mom, were pressing the filmmaker for production updates.

Then they fired The Sound Guy's sister for no good reason, and we decided that we were done working with them. It was going to get harder to finish the film, anyway. The Actor's plans to move to California were being put into motion. I'd gotten into grad school in Florida for nonfiction writing and The Sound Guy agreed to come with me. I drove on, finding new highways to avoid, namely I-4, the main clusterfuck running through Central Florida.

One night, as The Sound Guy and I headed home from Cocoa Beach (with him at the wheel), we had a conversation with The Actor, who was ready to wrest *Dashboard* away from The Filmmaker and start anew. We were ready, too.

INT. THE WRITER'S FLORIDA HOME - VESTIBULE - DAY

The Writer is sitting in the southwest corner of her house's windowless hallway, with all the doors shut. She is on the phone with The Actor and his now-husband. She is sitting cross-legged, a laptop slightly burning her legs. On one half of the screen is a radar of Orlando, a red cell passing through the area. On the other half, she is taking production notes. She buries her phone in her shoulder and addresses the audience.

THE WRITER

Did you know that, like Missouri, Florida is prone to tornadoes? The difference being that now I don't have a basement full of friends to

wait it out with. But things are picking back up with *By the Dashboard Light*. The Filmmaker had such a hand in the last shooting script that I had to re-write most of it from scratch.

THE ACTOR  
(through the phone)  
But it's even better now!

THE WRITER  
But it's even better now. I remember how long it took for me to get my license, and how at the time it felt like my whole life was being put on hold until I passed the test. But now I know things happen in good time. Just like this movie.

THE ACTOR  
(through the phone)  
Really? We just got all the on-the-nose exposition out of your last draft.

The phone beeps.

THE WRITER  
(into the phone)  
One second, there's another call coming through.

THE ACTOR  
I think we've wrapped everything up for today.

THE WRITER  
Talk to you later.

She takes the other call.

THE WRITER  
Hello?

ROGER Thomas, the driving instructor, is on the line.

ROGER  
I've been honking outside your house for hours.

THE WRITER  
I have my license already.  
(beat)

There's a tornado warning in effect.

ROGER  
Don't worry about it. Just get in.

The Writer exits the vestibule and goes outside. The sky is blue and calm.

EXT. THE WRITER'S FLORIDA HOME - FRONT YARD - CONTINUOUS

The Writer gets into the driver's seat of an old car with a STUDENT DRIVER sign on the BUMPER. She takes off.

THE WRITER  
I've gotten notes on the script. You can't become an antiques dealer anymore. People think it signals that you're still stuck in the past.

ROGER  
Okay, let's move forward then.

THE WRITER  
Okay, let's move forward.

## TIP OF MY TONGUE: A VEGETARIAN, ONION-FREE MEAL FOR EVERY OCCASION!

### Garden Restaurant Bread

*You are stuck at home watching Nickelodeon reruns. You live on a block with no other kids. You are six or seven and honestly you prefer the company of adults, but your mom's always working and your dad's back is often out. So, you give into the Rugrats marathon, and while Tommy and Angelica sneak into a restaurant's kitchen for some reason or another, you see a cartoon chef stirring some sort of sauce into a pot of soup. You decide it's something spicy. You are inspired to make something delicious. But you can't reach the spices in the kitchen cabinet. Still, you grab some crayons and paper and announce that tonight, dinner is on you. Don't worry, nobody is eating the crayons – you're in grade school, but you're somewhat refined.*

*Okay, so the only option on the menu you scrawl in wax on pink construction paper is the blandest thing possible. But dad's a vegan and mom loves bread, so while this isn't what you'd order on any menu, they'll totally love it.*

Prep Time: 6-7 years

Cook Time: 5 minutes

### Ingredients:

Whatever bread is in the house,  
mangled into small chunks

1 Dash cat hair (any color;  
tortoiseshell assortment preferred)

1. You name your restaurant The Garden, because it sounds like a good name for a vegetarian spot. It doesn't occur to you that there are no garden vegetables in tonight's special. After you grab some crayons and craft two menus, you find your parents in different rooms, your mom reading a book and your dad listening to an episode of Art Bell's radio show. Art Bell sounds like the name of a phone subsidiary, but your mom says his show is about aliens and that you shouldn't get too into it. So you tune the show out as you announce to him that the Garden Restaurant is open and hand him a menu.
2. You go into the kitchen and wash your hands, like your babysitter has you do whenever you bake cookies with her, but don't consider washing them again after petting the cat when she hops on the counter.
3. You then tear some bread up into a bowl. You announce to your parents that dinner is served. You feel pleased with yourself as the two of them sit together as you wait on them.
4. Then, you watch your parents nod in approval when they eat small bites. When they offer you some, you selflessly say it's all for them.
5. You believe them when they say the food is delicious. Twenty years later, the three of you will drive past a new restaurant in your hometown, a real restaurant, that is called The Garden. You'll be shocked when they joke together about how hard it was to get through your dinners.



## Grammom's Pasta Salad

*In 1912, a few years before Grammom Golden was born, a midwestern grocer named James T. Williams developed a new line of thin-walled elbow macaroni noodles that cooked more quickly than anything else on the market. By midcentury, his Creamette pasta brand touted itself as the pasta to use for recipes, printing quick dinner ideas on their boxes.*

*You wouldn't normally take cooking advice from some dude who named a dairy-free product after milk, but you know that if you ever attempted this recipe, you'd go out of your way to find the brand. Your grammom wouldn't have it any other way.*

Prep Time: Infinite

Cook Time: Who knows; you always assumed it just magically appeared at Saturday lunches.

### Ingredients:

1 Small Box Creamette Elbow	Finely chopped onions
Noodles (Your grammom, like you, always believed that food tasted better in small packages.)	Mystery ingredients
	Magic

1. You know that you'll never get the recipe right, so you just wait until a family gathering, knowing your cousin will bring a big bowl of it.
2. As you enjoy it, you pick out all the bits of onion no matter how small, just like your mom did as a girl. Your grammom used to say to your mom, "I hope you have a daughter just like you," and as your mom sits watching you locate the

tiniest bits of bulb, she thinks back on this. Your mom eventually outgrew her hatred of the demon bulbs; your dad's always loved them. They're sure you will come to like them, but the slick-but-crunchy texture will forever wig you out.

3. You enjoy your onion-free pasta salad as you try to figure out exactly what makes it taste so good. Maybe it really is the Creamette brand.

### **Thanksgiving Tofurky**

*A useless fact that you'll come to know: when the term for a vegetarian turkey-like roast is spelled "Tofurky" without an "E" it refers to a specific brand put out by Turtle Island Foods.*

*The spelling "tofurkey" is generic, referring to any veg-friendly roast.*

*A useless fact that you'll come to love: A plant-based knockoff of a turducken is ostensibly called a "tofucken." You don't know if anyone's ever attempted to prepare such a thing, but you appreciate that the term has been coined.*

Prep Time: 9 years

Cook Time: 1 hour, 25 minute

### **Ingredients:**

1 Tofurky, Thawed

Sage

½ Cup Soy Sauce

Some random seasonings found in

½ Cup Orange Juice

your mom's cabinet (If you're feeling confident)

1/3 Cup Olive Oil

1. You decide at some point in grade school that you want to be a vegetarian. You accept that, with your propensity for mozzarella sticks, and later for pecan-crust ed brie, you'll probably never go vegan like your dad (although a hatred of eggs is still to come). It's a rather abrupt decision, made as you poke at a piece of breaded chicken on your dinner plate. When you can't bring yourself to eat it, or any meat, you mom calls your dad, in whatever apartment complex he's living in another part of the county.
2. For a few years, you endure the cozy smell of turkey at family Thanksgiving dinners as you poke around a plate of stuffing and green beans.
3. When your mom discovers that there is a vegetarian turkey-style roast on the market, the two of you travel to a Whole Foods thirty minutes away from the house to secure one.
4. The first year you buy a Tofurky, you follow the directions on the box religiously. It doesn't taste like turkey, but it doesn't taste like a plate full of side dishes, either. The following years, you keep close to the suggested baste for it, but eventually stop looking at the directions and rely on instinct.
5. You wish that your dad were sharing the Tofurky with you; he might actually feel a part of the celebration now. You wish Thanksgiving dinner would be like nights at The Garden restaurant, but with better food.

## **Easy Baked Potatoes**

Prep Time: 10-11 years

Cook Time: 10 minutes

*Some way or another, you find out that a baked potato can be made in the microwave. Like the sweat-smushed bread of yore, this dish should also be so easy a child could make it.*

*You now have your own locker at school and your own key to the house. Now that your mom works two hours away in New Jersey, you and the cat get to stay home alone sometimes. You both are completely convinced of your own independence. The cat is sure she could catch her own food if humans didn't provide it like clockwork, and you could for sure cook something more advanced than a potato, if you cared. But it's just food.*

**Ingredients:**

1 Potato

Butter, Salt, and Pepper to Season

1. You decide at some point in grade school that despite watching Emeril Lagasse every night, that you see no appeal in cooking when it's not Thanksgiving. You're afraid of knives and of the blue-white flame that wriggles underneath the burners of your mom's stovetop. You're taking modeling classes on the weekend and you see no appeal in a hobby that could make you fat. You whine until your mom buys a cubic, candy-colored microwave meant to resemble an iMac. You enjoy your prepackaged noodles and greasy bags of popcorn for a while, until you hear that you can bake a potato in the microwave. This is one dish you know how to cook from scratch. Simply take a potato, poke some holes in it, wrap in tin foil, and cook!

2. After turning the microwave on, you think the first leaping spark is just a fluke.  
After a couple more foil flashes, you shut off the microwave.
3. Luckily, your mom is working from home that day. When you let yourself into her home office, you announce that you don't think tin foil likes being nuked. She gives you a "no shit" look that you won't see for a while, because after this incident you'll just stick with Easy Mac.

## **Deviled Eggs**

*You learn to boil an egg in the context of dying them for Easter, an occasion where actually eating the eggs is a bit of an afterthought, so you don't mind when the yolks turn out runny or green and hard. But let's be honest, you've never been great at dying them, either; your colors have always bled, and you can't draw straight enough rings around the shells for the wax resistance method to do much good. So, maybe Easter eggs aren't your thing, but there are plenty of other times to enjoy a boiled egg.*

Prep Time: Life-long

Cook Time: 20 minutes

### **Ingredients:**

1 Carton Large Eggs

Smoked Paprika

Mustard

Optional: Seasonings emblematic of

Mayonnaise

your favorite world cuisine

1 dash each salt and pepper

1. You boil eggs using your preferred method. Let cool.
2. You shell the eggs. This should be a given, but if you're a foil-in-the-microwave type, you might need this reminder.
3. Then, you cut the eggs in half longways (shortways if you're a monster). You scoop out the yolks and put into a bowl with mustard, mayo, salt, pepper, and half the paprika. Perhaps a little more paprika. Everything gets mixed into a chunky paste.
4. You scoop the mixture back into eggs. Take the mixing spoon and scrape the bowl, eating the remnants.
5. The remaining paprika gets sprinkled on top of the eggs. When you bite into one, you imagine that you're running around your dad's sister's house, first with cousins, and later with nieces and nephews. This is one egg dish that your dad is missing out on by being vegan.
6. A few years after your aunt dies, when you're in your twenties, you'll spend a Christmas Eve with your boyfriend and his family. His sister will decide that you'll all prepare boiled eggs based off global cuisines. Your contribution will be pesto-infused Italian eggs, and you'll mix guacamole in with the yolks for Mexican-inspired eggs.
7. Your contribution will be well received, but you'll eat so many worldly egg-halves that you may never touch a deviled egg again. You'll laugh about it with your boyfriend whenever eggs come up in conversation, but secretly worry that

your amusing new aversion will overtake fond memories of your aunt and the parties she hosted.

### **Westtown School Peanut Butter and Jelly**

*Students at your Quaker high school are required to board junior and senior year. It doesn't matter that your mom and your stepdad, who works at the school's kitchen, have bought a house down the road. It doesn't matter that at sixteen you still prefer the company of adults. You have to live in the dorms, eat the school's food, and participate in the school's mandatory work program, in which students rotate through foodservice and housekeeping-type jobs around campus. Although the kitchen staff cooks three meals a day, you find yourself preparing your own food more often than not. Although a disproportionate number of Quakers are vegetarians, in the grand tradition of school cafeterias, there seems to be a lot of mystery meat going on. So, although your mom and stepdad have started fighting every weekend, you make it a point to go home every Friday night, watch their cable, and enjoy your mom's stuffed shells and seitan stir-fries.*

#### **Ingredients:**

Prep Time: 16 years

Cook Time: 3 minutes

#### **Ingredients:**

2 Slices Bread (whole wheat, if they have it)

1 Scoop Peanut Butter

## 1 Scoop Grape Jelly (Grape is your least favorite, but it's all the kitchen has.)

1. First you wait to see what your classmates who have gotten stuck with serve duty bring out to your table, which is already stained pink with fruit punch from a pitcher incident. You're on the team that clears the tables after lunch, so you'll be the one scrubbing the red out of the wood grain in a bit. Table bussing takes some energy, so you hope that the meal will be cheese pizza or a (seared but edible) grilled cheese sandwich.
2. The food the serve crew brings out isn't vegetarian, but it's also not something particularly appetizing to your meat-eating friends. You're not surprised when some of them follow you to the dining room's hot bar, which offers up only some sort of steamed vegetable. You glance at the wilted iceberg lettuce and chunky salad dressing. For a school that's totally granola in every other way, their veggie options seriously need help. Your stepdad doesn't really get vegetarianism, but complains on your behalf anyway, and is told that vegetarians can just eat PB&J. This sandwich has been beneath your culinary proclivities since your Garden Restaurant days, but it's what you usually find yourself eating.
3. You scoop some eerily shiny jelly onto one half of the bread. Peanut butter thinly lines the other half. The sandwich gets sliced diagonally (vertically if you're a monster, horizontally if you just hate your life, which sometimes you do at this school).
4. As a friend starts a "the food sucks, but I wouldn't change this place for anything" monologue, you cut him off to complain about your mom and stepdad fighting. You don't realize that they're headed for divorce, until the kitchen manager stops



you mid-jelly spread one day at the end of senior year, to tell you that you're a great kid and like family to him, no matter what. Since the kitchen manager is apparently family, you consider telling him you never want to see a PB&J sandwich again. But you put it behind you. You're about to leave Philly to attend college in Missouri. You made sure you chose a school with good food.

### **Co-Op Dinner**

*Senior year of college, you move into an off-campus apartment within your university's Co-op. At some point in the year, you plan (and bartend) a murder mystery party for the intentional community, creating a story in which a St. Louis flavor mogul is murdered when he won't give up a trade secret: the ingredients of the elusive "Co-op flavor."*

*Even though you hated high school, you've spent the first three years of undergrad somehow longing to be among chore-chart-loving hippies again. So you apply to live at the university Co-op, and they welcome you into their intentional community with open arms, and with open space in their kitchen. You have to sign up for weekly shifts to either cook dinner or clean up afterwards. You try to take as many cleaning slots as possible, but between a full course load, two jobs, and an internship across the city, you sometimes don't get to the sign-up sheet in time. You're trying to call home more often, but sometimes you don't find time for weeks on end. Now that your mom and stepdad have divorced, and she's friends with your dad again. This makes keeping in touch a little easier; you know that if you call one of them on a Saturday, you might get both of them. When you complain about life at the Co-op, you can tell that they actually think your housemates' political diatribes and bad guitar playing sound like a sweet arrangement.*

*The co-op building is university owned, and the university doesn't kick tenants out for not serving food to others. But you show up for your cooking shifts anyway, on time even, and help create dishes that make your housemates' mouths water for that co-op flavor. You know from the script that you wrote for the murder mystery party that being privy to the secret ingredient is a huge honor. One day soon, you'll miss that flavor.*

Prep Time: 21 Years

Cook Time: 1 hour

**Ingredients:**

30 Servings Rice (bought in bulk, upsetting your preference for food in tiny packages)

Assorted Legumes and Vegetables

3 shit-tons of onions, chopped.

1. When it comes to co-op chores, you've learned this: arrive at the kitchen early so you can choose your own job for the night. You'll do anything but mince onions. Even when uncut, their very existence makes you cry.
2. The cooking crew reads through whatever Moosewood Cookbook recipe the meal committee has chosen for the night. You may gripe about the onions, but at least all the meals here are vegetarian. You offer to the rice going in a big dutch oven whose thick walls really aren't designed for rice cooking. Or get some beans soaking. They're supposed to soak overnight but whatever. You'll chop up whatever non-bulbous veggies are involved in the meal. Anything but onion duty.

3. Another cook cranks up KWUR, your university's radio station, for entertainment.

The DJ is probably playing a psychobilly shoegaze band from Kirbati. You, chefs, are probably the only four listeners.

4. You think for a moment that you sort of like the smell of cooking onions, that it smells like something either of your parents would gladly make, until you burn your wrist with a small smatter of hot onion-oil that leaps from a cast iron pan. Then you wish that your duty as the Co-Op's designated bartender was enough to absolve you from cooking.

5. As the smell of onion, paprika, and cumin permeate the air, you all banter about capstone projects and fearless campus squirrels, until one of you stops to wonder if something is burning.

6. You remove the crusted-over rice from the stovetop and share a shrug with the others. Congrats, now that the rice is burnt, the dish has now been seasoned with that elusive "Co-Op Flavor." Serve the veggies over the burnt rice and go into the building's foyer to announce that dinner is ready.

7. When your friend Evan, a Warhol-obsessed printmaking major, moves in with you at the Co-Op during senior spring, you both make it a point to only sign up for after-dinner dishwashing shifts, and to avoid the meals themselves. Evan is allergic to onions, so on many nights you split the cost of Domino's with him. Only go to the communal kitchen to clean, or for parties, or, when you're out of vodka, to descend into what you and Evan call "Hell." Hell is a closet full of liquor only meant to be broken into when you're working an event. Over takeout and tonic water, sit in Evan's shimmery gold-painted room and listen to his plans to break into the New

York art world after graduation. Realize that, for the first time in years, you're eating dinner somewhere that feels like home. Start to regret accepting the cruise ship job that you're about to start.

## **Cruise Ship Apple Crisp**

*You stick with the cruise ship job for two four-month contracts, which is about 1.75 contracts more than you thought you'd last. You skip an entire Philly winter, meet people from all over the world, and get paid to chase kids around all day. After quitting, when friends ask you to describe ship life, these are the things you play up. But inevitably, they ask about the food, assuming crew members have free access to the buffets. They don't. You know that cruise ships serve their crew white rice even at breakfast, and being a vegetarian limits you to rice or PB&J. But you'll tell your friends that there is perk to eating in the crew mess: guarantee of a tasty dessert at every meal.*

Prep Time: 22 years

Cook Time: 4 minutes

### **Ingredients:**

1-2 Pre-plated Ramekins of Apple Crisp (quantity depends on how many times you've been screamed at while at the kids' club front desk that morning)

1-2 Dollops of soft-serve vanilla ice cream

1. You patiently wait for the two-hour lunch break in the middle of your 11-hour shift. You consider running to your cabin to Skype your parents while in tears

about how bad the food is. Your dad is livid that the vegetarian meals on the ship are so bad, but since fresh food isn't allowed in the crew cabins, neither he nor you can do much about it.

2. But you decide you've stressed your parents out enough this week with your nonstop calls, so you head to the crew mess with your co-workers instead.
3. Everyone has to wash their hands before entering the mess hall. If the cameras catch you skipping the sink as you walk in, disciplinary action will be taken. This isn't the co-op; they could fire you at any time. You make yourself a hasty PB&J, and laugh as your Australian coworker Gemma eats the same. Except that she raves about this pinnacle of American cuisine, which she has just discovered. Someone who willingly eats Vegemite isn't someone you should take culinary advice from.
4. After lunch, you turn down Gemma's invitation to go sit by the pool; you have some reading to do. When she leaves, you ensure that the soft-serve machine is both working and producing vanilla ice cream (it probably won't be). Chocolate or that weird banana-flavored stuff won't cut it for this dish.
5. On the off-chance that the soft-serve gods are smiling upon you, it's time to grab your ramekin, and cover it in plastic wrap (not tin foil) from the industrial-sized dispenser next to the microwaves. You cover your nose as you open the microwave door, releasing a waft of old fish into the air. When this smell constantly emanates from your uniform and pores, having it slightly flavor your dessert seems trivial. You heat up the apple crisp for ninety seconds.

6. The ramekin burns your fingers when you take it out. There's no time to let it cool when there's a long line of time-pressed crew members behind you, waiting to microwave their fish.
7. You dispense soft serve on top of the crisp. You find a small table in a quiet corner of the mess hall. It's time to take out your e-reader and enjoy whatever free public domain book you've most recently managed to download on the shoddy Wi-Fi.

### **Lightly Waxed Soft Pretzels**

*After resigning from the ship, you move back into your mom's house in suburban Philly. You take a job at a local store that sells southwestern handicrafts. Now that you've gone months without a kitchen, your cooking skills have gotten even worse. Your mixology skills, however, continue to improve. You and your mom discover a love of margaritas and you try to replicate those served in your favorite dive bar. When friends come over, that's your time to test out weirder concoctions. For your 24<sup>th</sup> birthday, you invite some friends over for key lime pie martinis (and buy some red wine for the less adventurous). You could have paired the drinks with some chips and salsa, but in a moment of misguided ambition, you decide to make soft pretzels from a mix. Since you won't touch scrapple or a cheesesteak, you've always regarded pretzels as the one piece of Philly cuisine you could call your own. For the party, you put your own twist on the Pennsylvania Dutch classic.*

Prep Time: 24 years

Cook Time: 15 minutes

## **Ingredients:**

Some soft pretzel mix you spend way too much money on at Wegman's

Wax Paper

Wine, barely sipped

1. You preheat the oven to 350°. After pouring yourself a single glass of wine you a finger across the Saint Paschal placard given to you by your new boss, a souvenir from her latest buying trip in New Mexico. Your co-workers don't understand why you received that saint, when they received placards much more fitting to their interests. You don't understand either, but you hope Paschal will help you get through this recipe.
2. You mix together the ingredients and twist them into haphazard shapes that vaguely resemble the classic pretzel. You've always wondered where that weird shape even came from, how it became standard.
3. When the dog assumes her position under your feet, you chase her out. Trixie is only taking an interest in you because you're handling food; she's kind of a brat about the fact that you're home now and take up more of mom's time. You can tell that the dog wishes that your dad lived in your mom's house all the time; when he cooks here, he not only lets her stay underfoot in the kitchen, but slips her scraps of whatever he's cooking. Your weird dog likes tofu now.
4. You and the now-senile cat have always been close. A few weeks ago, you found Rainbow Flower crying in the basement when she got her claws stuck in a carpet. Your mom was out of the house and you called her in tears, because you couldn't figure out how to help the cat. You are a human adult and the cat is old enough to be one, but after

the rug incident, neither one of you has any illusions of independence. Rainbow is losing weight and fur, and you're starting to feel bad for her, so you sneak her food when the dog isn't looking. Your weird cat loves asparagus.

5. You pet the cat, who remembers your Garden Restaurant days. Maybe you wash your hands afterwards. Per the directions on the box, you dip pretzels in soda solution and salt them lightly. Well, you heavily salt yours, and the one you're setting aside for your mom.
6. You place the formed pretzels on wax paper. The timer goes on for fifteen minutes.
7. After five minutes, you wonder why the kitchen smells like candles. When your mom comes down to check on you, and comments on the smell, you realize it could be the wax paper. Wait, you ask, are you not supposed to bake on wax paper? Then what's it used for?
8. Your mom watches as you take the pretzels out of the oven to find them fused to the wax. When your mom shoots you that "foil in the microwave" look, blame it on the wine. You hope she doesn't see that you haven't finished a single glass.
9. You're able to scrape the waxy bottoms off the pretzels and put the salvaged pieces back in the oven, this time on parchment paper. They bake until golden brown.
10. This dish is best served with spicy brown mustard, and, if you're feeling ambitious, a homemade cheese sauce. Chances are you won't be feeling up to it, but perhaps Saint Paschal will come through.



## **Vegan Chili**

*When you first meet your boyfriend, Dave, you are upfront about your lack of cooking skills, but assure him that you can make a perfect margarita. You quickly discover that he's great at making breakfast food, and there is always Chipotle or Jimmy John's for dinner. When you move out of your mom's house to a rental down the road, you realize that perhaps your propensity for fast-casual takeout has something to do with your scramble to make rent every month. Your mom gives you her big burgundy-colored slow cooker, and a book of vegetarian recipes to make in it. You feel guilty when she justifies handing it over by saying she doesn't have anyone in the house to cook for.*

*Like the Thanksgiving Tofurky, you initially stick to the recipes faithfully, but your love of spicy foods leads you to experiment with different peppers, which leads to trying different beans out, and then different vegetables.*

*If this were an essay, and not a cookbook entry, this would be where you, the reader-as-narrator, would experience personal development and recognize that cooking is a gift, an art and a science, an escape from her uncreative desk job, a way to channel the mom who has always made sure your friends got a good dinner, the dad who wakes up to make you perfect omelets though he hasn't eaten eggs in decades, that cooking is a chance to give something of yourself to your boyfriend. But this is a cookbook, so you should go make some damn chili, because it is delicious.*

**Prep Time:** 25 years

**Cook Time:** 4 hours

## Ingredients:

1 tbsp olive oil	1 can cannellini beans (drained)
1 green bell pepper, chopped	1 6oz. can tomato paste
1 yellow bell pepper, chopped	1/2 bundle of kale, chopped
6 minced cloves garlic	4 tbsp chili powder
1.5 cups vegan beefless grounds (or sub another can of any bean)	2 tbsp smoked paprika
1 cup frozen corn kernels	1 tbsp cumin
1 medium-sized sweet potato, cubed	Hot sauce to taste
~2 cups diced butternut squash, cubed	1/2 tsp. salt
1/2 cup quinoa, rinsed	1/2 tsp. pepper
2 14.5 oz cans of diced fire roasted tomatoes	Dash of liquid smoke
2 cans kidney beans (drained)	1 tsp. vegan Worcestershire cause
1 can black beans (drained)	1 cube Edward & Sons Not-Beef Bouillon, broken into small pieces
	3-4 cups low-sodium vegetable broth

1. The most important steps to any recipe: you need to put a record on and pour yourself a glass of wine. You know you won't need to blame any cooking mishaps on a few sips of Malbec this time.
2. You dice the squash and sweet potatoes. You don't worry about them being perfectly shaped or sized – honestly they'll dissolve as they're cooking, but the flavor will be there.

3. In a small pan with a splash of olive oil, you sauté the peppers and garlic until translucent. Your boyfriend will yell from the couch that whatever you're cooking smells good. In response, throw even more garlic in the pan.
4. Then it's time to transfer the peppers and garlic to the crock pot. Gradually you add all the other ingredients, save the kale, and stir. You set the slow-cooker to high. You'll want to check it in five hours, but you'll have forgotten when it started stewing.
5. If you and your boyfriend stay at home watching Netflix, you'll anxiously check the chili all day, letting the steam and smells hit your face each time. If the two of you leave the house for a while, you'll anxiously spend all afternoon imagining that the slow cooker is going to burn the house down.
6. With an hour left in cooking, or when you get impatient, it's time to throw in the kale. You, of course, swipe a spoonful of chili for yourself as you stir the greens in, and decide it should be spicier. You throw in a bunch of red pepper flakes, multiple hot sauces, whatever is on hand.
7. Once the hour is up, the chili is ready to be plated. You fill two bowls to the brim. You top with dairy-free sour cream and cheese. And you enjoy!
8. Your boyfriend helps you spoon most of the leftovers into the biggest Tupperware you have. You freeze until forgotten and frostbitten. You dish the rest of the chili into two smaller containers. One container will become your workweek lunch. The other Tupperware will be delivered to your mom's house, where you stop by each Wednesday night.
9. When your mom texts you on Thursday morning telling you that your chili was the best she's ever had, you'll wish you'd learned to cook before your dad was diagnosed with

cancer and went on a strict macrobiotic diet, one devoid of spice and garlic, a love of which you inherited from him. Out of all his favorite flavors, onion is one of the few he can still eat, and you can't bring yourself to cook it.

## **Fruit Salad**

*Healthy, refreshing, and easy to make, you know that fruit salad is a great addition to even the worst of occasions. You stick to a pretty standard combo of fruit, avoiding variations Waldorf salad and ambrosia. The former contains mayonnaise (what?) and ambrosia is a sugary abomination all around. You still revere cooking as an art and a science, but you've come to recognize it really boils down to common sense. If you're preparing a dish for what will be one of the shittiest days of your life, you have the common sense to know that putting mayo in fruit would only make things worse.*

Prep Time: 27 Years

Cook Time: 30 minutes

### **Ingredients:**

2 cartons each of strawberries, raspberries, blueberries, and blackberries.

Dash of Sugar

1. On the morning of your dad's funeral, you wake up with the sun to help your mom prepare food for the gettogether at your half-brother's house afterwards. Your brother is

way older than you—you're closer in age to his kids. There's a chance his veggie option will be iceberg lettuce, so it's important to cook a few things.

2. After rolling off the couch you slept on the night before, you pet the dog while drinking a cup of coffee – anything other than espresso gives you the runs, but you haven't recovered from the nights you stayed at the hospital past 3AM a few days ago.
3. When the dog decides she's done hanging out with you (probably after thirty seconds), you wish the cat were still around. She could always sense when you were sad. But she's probably somewhere scratching your dad's legs up now, so you wash your hands and push all the empty beer bottles aside so that you have a clear working space. You rinse and drain the fruit. It gets chopped into small pieces and placed into a large mixing bowl. You add sugar to taste and stir.
4. You spoon the mixture into two tin serving trays and seal with plastic lids. You help your mom assemble her pasta salads. You pack them all in the makeshift cooler (really a plastic storage bin) you and your mom have filled with ice. After picking up Dave at the airport, he volunteers to load the tub into the back of your mom's car. The viewing is in one part of the city, the service somewhere else, and the burial clear across town. Your fruit salad will come with you all over the city, as the three of you drive around, largely in silence. Any other day, you'd be fussing all day to make sure it stayed cold, but today your mind is on if your dad has met Art Bell, that radio host whose shows you used to interrupt to feed your dad bread. Bell died a month before your dad did. You're comforted by the thought that your dad now has someone to talk about aliens with. Dave was willing to have those conversations, but then you went to Florida and Dave came with you.

5. After the burial, you drive to your brother's house and discover that the food has all submerged into a sea of melting ice. You wish that your house in Orlando wasn't so far away from Philly, so that you could run home and get the heavy-duty cooler you bought ahead of Hurricane Irma. You that Orlando wasn't so far away from Philly in general, that you'd have seen your dad more often in the two years that you'd lived in Florida.
6. You and your mom salvage what you can from the cooler and bring it inside, with an armful of plastic bags shielding the floor of your brother's newly-installed carpet from the icy, sugary drippings coming from the pan.
7. When your family compliments you on the fruit salad, you refrain from saying, "It was easy; just some fruit cut into pieces." On this day, it wasn't particularly easy to make. Since you've come to love the control you have over food whenever you open your fridge and get out a cutting board, it certainly wasn't easy to see most of what you made go Titanic on you. You can't stop thinking about all the fresh groceries you abandoned back in Florida—you'd just finished putting them away when your mom called and told you to fly to Philly immediately. You think about how everything will have rotted when you get home next week, how, being on a grad student's budget, you won't be able to replace them anytime soon.
8. When you and Dave do return to Orlando, you'll discover that, somehow, nothing in the fridge needs to be thrown out. You won't feel much like cooking that first night back, but the following night, when you drop the needle on a copy of *Rumours*, take a sip of Malbec, and begin cutting some peppers, your life will, for an hour, feel normal. In that moment you'll know that, as long as there's a cast-iron pan around, an eager blank canvas atop your stove-easel, you can always come back to this feeling.

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