



Agorafabulous!

* DISPATCHES FROM MY BEDROOM

Sara Benincasa

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WILLIAM MORROW

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Dedication

*For my parents, Lillian and Jonathan, and my grandmother Jean
And for Sam*

Epigraph

So keep fightin' for freedom and justice, beloveds, but don't you forget to have fun doin' it. . . . And when you get through kickin' ass and celebratin' the sheer joy of a good fight, be sure to tell those who come after how much fun it was.

— Molly Ivins, *Mother Jones*

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The Thing Before the Rest of the Thing

I didn't know what to call this part of the book. I guess you could call it a preface, but that sounds too fancy to me. I've already got an introduction (that comes later) and this obviously isn't a table of contents. You might call it a foreword, but don't *other* people usually write forewords? You know, like the author's famous friends. I've got some of those, but they're usually pretty busy signing autographs and swimming in great vats of their own money, Scrooge McDuck-style.

Anyway, I want to tell you some important stuff up front, before we get to the rest of this tragicomic journey into the depths of my lady-soul. This story is mostly true. I tried my best to keep it real, as the children say, but I'm not a fucking journalist. I didn't have a damn tape recorder on me during every conversation.

Please also keep in mind that when a lot of the stuff chronicled in this book actually happened, I was as crazy as a loon. On meth. In a crack house. I had to fill in some of the fuzzier memories with my best guesses as to what actually happened.

A few of the characters represent amalgamated mishmashes of people I once knew. I changed some names, places, and identifying details for a couple of reasons. I still talk to some of the people in this book, and I'd like to keep it that way. I don't talk to some of the others, and I'd *really* like to keep it that way.

Rest assured that the grossest, meanest, ugliest, most foolish things that *I* do in this story all actually happened in real life. I subscribe to the notion that if you can laugh at the shittiest moments in your life, you can transcend them. And if other people can laugh at your awful shit as well, then I guess you can officially call yourself a comedian.

That is all. Thank you. I hope you like the rest of my book. If not, feel free to use it for kindling to warm yourself in the cold night when the Revolution comes. And oh, it's coming.

Introduction

When I was seventeen years old, I met the hottest guy in seriously the entire *world* at a free academic summer program run by the state of New Jersey. The camp, held at a public university down the Jersey Shore, was called the New Jersey Governor's School on Public Issues and the Future of the State. It doesn't sound like the place to find Adonis, but there he was: a dreamboat straight-A football captain named Kevin, whose extracurricular activities also included coaching little kids' sports teams and volunteering at a convalescent home for nuns. When he turned seventeen that summer (he was young for his grade), his mom brought a cake with a car on it, because he and his twin sister were finally going to get their driver's licenses. He told me once that his sister was the only person he really trusted. She and I had the same first name, except hers had an "h" at the end and mine didn't.

He was very nice, too nice to be true, and the other students at Governor's School—Type-A student council brats, mostly—wondered what his deal was. You couldn't be *that* smart and *that* hot and *that* nice and not secretly be crazy, or a werewolf, or something. I found it deeply disappointing that he failed to offer to relieve me of my virginity. And at a certain point, his plastic perfection started to weird me out. Oh, I totally still would've let him put his fingers down my pants, but a strange kind of resentment arose within me, as well. As a funny (read: insufficiently hot) girl, I wasn't privy to the mating behaviors of popular alpha males. But I was savvy enough to intuit that I was never going to be Kevin's girlfriend.

Eventually, I did find a boyfriend. He wasn't as hot as Kevin, and we never had sex, but he played tennis and was good at finger-banging. Plus, we liked a lot of the same books, Philip Roth's *Goodbye Columbus* chief among them.

Governor's School ended, and we all went off to our respective high schools to start our senior year. Kevin entered a new high school in a new town and was immediately nominated for Best Looking, Most Likely to Succeed, and Best Personality—a stunning trifecta of high school laurels. I heard about it and thought, with slight annoyance, *Of course*.

Then, one night in the spring, he walked into his garage, filled a bottle with gasoline, brought it upstairs into the bathroom, locked the door, poured some of the gasoline down his throat, soaked himself in the rest, and lit a match.

When they broke the door down, he was still alive. He still responded to his name. The end took a little more time in coming—less than a handful of hours, but if you measure time in pain, I imagine it felt like years to him—because indeed he was still there, after the fire, still conscious, still feeling everything. I think he wanted it that way. Not for him the quiet chemical sleep of too many pills; not for him the instant, violent relief of the shot to the head. If his death taught me anything, it's that when life doesn't hand us the punishment we think we deserve, we are wholly adept at delivering it unto ourselves.

In the weeks that followed, I heard rumors about things he had supposedly done and things that had supposedly been done to him, but they were rumors only, confused teenagers' attempts at explaining the inexplicable. I have always regretted not going to his funeral. We were never very close, but maybe it would have made more sense, being there, seeing his family and all his friends. Maybe *he*

would have made more sense.

I've thought of him often in the intervening years, through friendships and love affairs, college and graduate school, times of joy and times of breakdown. I don't know if I believe in God. I don't know if I believe in Heaven. I don't know if I believe that Kevin is watching me, or that he hears me when I speak his name. He didn't watch me often on earth, so I don't know why he would feel the need to do so from any other plane of existence. Maybe I should've worn tighter shorts the summer I knew him.

What I do know is that Kevin was very much on my mind during the times when I walked myself to the edge of the abyss and stared down, feeling my toes curl over the lip, seriously considering giving myself over to the yawning absence of anything. And so Kevin has been with me, in one form or another, perhaps just as a thought, on numerous occasions.

He was with me when I stacked empty cans and jars against the wall of my tiny apartment because I was afraid to take the recycling outside—or do anything outside the confines of my home. He was there when I began urinating in cereal bowls and shoving them under my bed because I was frightened of using the toilet or even the sink. He was there when I admitted, finally, that sometimes I thought about doing secret and terrible things to myself—and I didn't put those things into words, because I didn't want to, and I didn't need to. He sat with me while the knives whined their siren song from the drawer and I rocked back and forth, gently, sort of ignoring them but mostly just waiting.

Kevin was there somewhere, perched in the back of my mind, reminding me that clear-cut choices are few and far between, and I had better not fuck this one up.

Chapter One

In Simplest Terms and Most Convenient Definitions

Lee Redmond of Salt Lake City, Utah, had the world's longest fingernails. She stopped cutting them in 1979, and, according to the Guinness World Records website, they measured a total of 28 feet 4.5 inches by 2008. At 2 feet 11 inches, her right thumbnail was the longest of them all.

When Redmond initially secured the world record, she announced plans to cut her nails. In the August 10, 2006, edition of the *Deseret Morning News* (Salt Lake City's more conservative paper), she described her daily activities, including grocery shopping, cooking, and taking care of her husband, an Alzheimer's patient. She said of her nails to reporter Tammy Walquist, "It's strange how they become you. It's almost your identity. It'll probably be a trauma after twenty-seven years to cut them off." She then changed her mind, unwilling to part with them. She turned down tens of thousands of dollars to slice them down to socially acceptable length on live television.

On Tuesday, February 10, 2009, the sports utility vehicle in which Redmond rode was involved in a collision. According to the SLC police, Redmond was ejected from the vehicle and sustained serious but not life-threatening injuries. She survived, but her nails did not. Each one broke off near the finger.

When I heard about Lee Redmond's accident, my first thought was *not* "Jesus, how the fuck do you insert a tampon with two-foot-long fingernails?" (That was my second thought.) My first thought was "Why on Earth would anyone *choose* to be a freak?" To my mind, freaks generally come in two categories: those whose freakishness was visited upon them and those who devote considerable time and effort to creating and maintaining their freak status. I am one of the former, and I have never been able to understand the latter.

When I was a child, I began to experience panic attacks that increased in frequency and intensity over several years. This condition eventually led me to develop a fear of leaving my small studio apartment, and finally of leaving my bed—even to go to the bathroom. The ensuing complications were, well, pungent.

By the time I was twenty-one, I was a full-on obsessive, cowering, trembling agoraphobe. How serious was it? Well, because I was too frightened to go to the hair salon, I let my roots grow out—which, gentle reader, is truly a sign of desperation in a born-and-bred daughter of New Jersey.

The word *agoraphobia* comes from the Greek *phobia*, or fear, and *agora*, or marketplace. In simple terms and most convenient definitions, my psychiatric diagnosis is that I'm afraid of the mall. Which I can assure you, is untrue. New Jersey claims to be a state, but it is actually a gigantic slab of cement upon which malls sprout like blisters and corns on the stubby, scrubby feet of overworked, chain-smoking strippers. These malls are interconnected by a complex, ill-conceived system of congested roads. You are not allowed to take a left turn anywhere in the entire state. If you try, the rest of us will run you over on our way to the Macy's white sale.

If you opened up my chest and examined my heart, I'm fairly certain you would find stamped there a precise map explaining how to get from the Bridgewater Commons Mall to the low-rent Quakerbridge Mall, to the high-endiest of high-end malls, the Alpha and the Omega, the Mall at Short Hills (valet parking! Neiman Marcus! Sit-down restaurants!). I feel at home in these temples to materialism. They have many bathrooms, and if you get anxious you can always find pain-numbing food or a soothing, well-chlorinated fountain.

In fact, my own life is so entwined with mall lore and magic that everything-must-go closing sales mall shops fill me with an unbearable sense of despair. There is nothing I despise more than a once-great mall gone to ruin, the victim of a poor economy or a competing mall in the neighboring town. These are ghost malls, and they haunt my dreams. Their stores—empty husks of commerce—are tragic reminders of our own mortality. I can't handle the recent spate of recession-era store closings. I'm still not over Structure, and that old warhorse died over a decade ago.

I believe that there should exist an end-of-year memorial montage for all the mall stores we've lost. You know, like they have at the Academy Awards ceremony each year. And I believe this montage should be set to Sarah McLachlan's "In the Arms of the Angels." A solemn voice—mine, perhaps—should intone the names of the deceased as images of their gone-but-not-forgotten merchandise flash across the screen. "Circuit City," I'll whisper. "Tower Records. Virgin Megastore." Viewers will weep. It'll be fucking beautiful.

To sum up: my diagnosis notwithstanding, I'm not really afraid of the marketplace. Quite the opposite, in fact. But I have been afraid of many other things. Here are some of them, in a handy chart form that will get you up to speed:

Things of Which I Have Been Afraid (Abridged)

Feared Thing	Degree of Fear	Am I Over It?	Solution
Leaving my home	Severe	Mostly	Prozac; Xanax; Klonopin; cognitive behavioral therapy; bringing a stuffed giraffe named Mary with me wherever I go.
Having a wet head	Moderate	Yes	Avoiding the shower; using a high-power hair dryer with a diffuser for less frizz and extra curls.
Driving	Severe	Mostly	Deep breathing.
Being a passenger in a car	Severe	Mostly	Insisting on driving.
New York City	Severe	Yes	Realizing that most people here are even crazier than I am. It's rather comforting, really. I'm among my own.

Lincoln Tunnel	Moderate	Mostly	Moving to Manhattan so I wouldn't need to use the tunnel to visit, as I am already here.
Holland Tunnel	Moderate	Mostly	See <i>Lincoln Tunnel</i> .
Flying	Severe	Mostly	See <i>Leaving my home</i> .
Taking the bus	Severe	No	Not taking the bus, except when it is absolutely unavoidable.
Taking the subway	Moderate	Yes	Taking cabs unless I'm in the mood for interaction in close quarters, in which case I take the subway and enjoy it. But I'm rarely in the mood for interaction in close quarters that does not involve consensual sex with another adult person.

	Vomiting	Moderate	Yes	Realizing that it can excuse you from leaving your house. Also, the feeling of relief that ensues afterward is the closest thing to a natural Xanax I've ever experienced.
Sex		Severe	Yes	Fucking people and enjoying it.
Being pregnant		Severe	No	Fucking men and enjoying it while using prophylactics. Alternatively, fucking women.
Having an abortion		Severe	No	See <i>Being pregnant</i> .
God		Severe	No	Consorting with atheists and other hell-bound types, like comedians.

Source: Personal storage bank of memories, 1982–present. (I don't really remember anything before that. I'm sure I was afraid of many things, including but not limited to light, shadow, and babysitters.)

When I say that I've been afraid of these things, I don't mean that I had a vague idea that it would be painful or distasteful to endure them. Nor do I mean that I simply disliked these activities or concepts. Rather, I developed, to one degree or another, a terror of these events/acts/experiences. In the case of leaving my home, flying, taking the train, taking the bus, taking the subway, driving, and being a passenger in a vehicle, I developed an actual phobia. There are funny Greek names for each of these individual phobias, but it's more convenient to group them together under the label of agoraphobia.

I didn't just wake up one day and realize that I was an agoraphobe. For me, agoraphobia crept up after a decade of experiencing panic attacks in a diverse and exciting array of situations.

Panic attacks happen when your body shifts into an ancient and somewhat entertaining state known as the "fight or flight" response. It's actually a good reaction to have if, for example, a bear is chasing you and it is the year 1000 B.C.E. and you live in the woods and have only a wooden spear to protect yourself. Your heart starts beating very fast and blood flow is diverted from your extremities to your heart and upper respiratory system, so you can breathe more quickly, and your legs get tense, and you start to get nauseous, because your digestive system goes out of whack (your body isn't going to waste time digesting your food—there's a fucking *bear* after you! Run!), and your pupils actually dilate a little bit to let in more light in case you have to run through light and dark. In the woods. Where you live.

It's all very evolutionary and interesting, and, like bicycles and electroconvulsive therapy, it can sti

be useful in some cases. For example, if you're walking down the street late one night and are approached by someone who expresses a sincere and heartfelt desire to rape you, you should probably go into fight or flight, and run the fuck away as fast as you can. Unless you're into that sort of thing, which case you probably write a blog that only appeals to a very small segment of humanity.

A panic attack is the fight-or-flight response in a situation that does not require fisticuffs or the hurling of primitive weaponry. Sometimes a situation triggers a painful memory. For example, a soldier who is home from a combat zone might find that he becomes frightened and has a panic attack when he hears a news chopper flying over his city. Post-traumatic stress disorder, or PTSD, sometimes includes this sort of response.

Quite often, however, the panic attacks are related to a more general feeling of not being in control of a situation. Many sufferers find they have panic attacks in crowds. I once had a doozy of a panic attack while driving through the desert in Texas. Having grown up among hills and trees, I found it terrifying and more than disconcerting to actually *see* the horizon. I later spoke to a tall Texan/Native American lesbian semi-pro softball player, who had freaked out on a car ride back East when she *couldn't* see the horizon for the trees. And if you know any Texan/Native American lesbian semi-pro softball players, you know they don't scare easy.

Somebody who has had enough panic attacks (and "enough" can mean one or one hundred) might start to avoid the places where he or she has had those panic attacks. After all, if every time you walked into a particular store you were punched in the stomach, you'd probably find another store to visit, right? (Again, unless you're into that sort of thing.) And thankfully, our homogenized chain-store culture enables one to find pretty much the exact same shit in half a dozen big-box outlets.

If you live in the average American town, you've got a Walgreens, a Rite-Aid, a CVS, an Eckerd, the drugstore at Walmart, and some local family-run pharmacy that's on the verge of closing due to the presence of the previous five. Unfortunately for you, the mysterious impulse that causes the panic attacks is within you, not the stores. You'll keep having those panic attacks no matter where you pick up your birth control. Eventually, there won't be any stores left to try. (Then you'll probably obtain it using the agoraphobe's greatest friend: the Internet. But you might miss actual human interaction after a while.)

For me, it was approximately a decade-long trip from "I'm afraid of X" to "I'm afraid of other places that look like X" to "I'm afraid of every place that is not my bed, and have resolved to stay there for the rest of my life, thank you very much." I prayed that this mysterious mental malady would be lifted from me spontaneously, or that I would somehow suddenly become normal. It didn't happen.

When I was twenty-one I finally concluded that I was a freak of the most terrible type, designed not to be displayed and celebrated but to be hidden in the darkness, an ugly, stinking waste of flesh. If college was supposed to be the best time of my life, I couldn't imagine how awful it must get afterward. It sure didn't seem like the sort of thing worth sticking around for. I wondered how it had taken me so long to realize that I was broken beyond repair, and that I didn't belong on this planet with all of the real humans. I imagined my future as one of dependence, fear, and disability. I would always be a burden on the saner individuals charged with my care. I would always be different, in a bad way. I might kill myself, if only I could summon the courage to choose death. Instead, I chose to do nothing but wallow in the rising swamp of my own shame. I hid in my bedroom, with garbage piling around me, rocking back and forth in bed, singing an old, half-remembered hymn as I prayed for sleep to come and blot it all out.

Of course there had been warning signs—plenty of them, over the years. Maybe I was too young or naive to recognize them, too afraid to speak up and admit that I needed more help. My brain sent up

one big, giant, flaming-red signal flare when I was eighteen, the week after the beautiful boy from summer camp killed himself. But everybody around me found ways to explain it away. It was heat exhaustion; it was fatigue; it was homesickness. After all, no one goes crazy on vacation.

Chapter Two

Sicily on Five Freakouts a Day

The story of American immigration goes like this: impoverished, oppressed peasants flee their respective filthy countries and struggle until they achieve the American dream of working sixteen hours a day, seven days a week. And as they toil in the fields and factories of this great nation, they say to themselves, “The Old Country was a terrible place. Here in America, I live in luxury!” They smile and shed a tear, partly from emotion and partly from the industrial airborne carcinogens that will eventually kill them.

A few upwardly mobile, American-born generations later, one of their descendants gets a bright idea. “Hey!” someone says. “We ought to visit the Old Country. We can smile at the adorable native people and eat the adorable native food and consume the adorable native alcoholic beverage of choice. Then we can vomit on the nearest historical landmark. If we’re lucky, we can buy a T-shirt at the site of the mass grave where Great-great-grandma was killed by opposition troops! Perhaps the charming locals will show us a bit of their famous hospitality rather than stab us on sight.”

Thus did I end up in Sicily, the Alabama of Italy. It is a fact that my grandmother, whose people were from southern Italy but not Sicily, used to refer to my grandfather’s Sicilian-American mistress as “that black bitch.” There is also a charming saying that ancient racists of mainland Italian descent enjoy repeating: “Sicily ain’t southern Italy. It’s northern Africa!” This is generally followed either by a knowing cackle or a disgusted wave of the hand. It is a unique pleasure to come to understand as a child that your elderly relative is not using the Italian word for eggplant in a complimentary fashion when describing citizens of Sicily or, more often, Harlem.

Since many humans have never actually heard of Sicily, it is perhaps instructive to do a quick tour through this large island’s colorful history. It doesn’t sound like the sort of place where one would willingly send one’s buxom virgin¹ eighteen-year-old daughter on an “educational trip” (at least not a trip from which one hoped she would return), but the real Sicily actually has more to it than pasta and automatic weapons.

In terms of conquest, Sicily is the geographic equivalent of the drum-circle bong—everyone’s hit it at least once. The Phoenicians and Carthaginians had it, as did the Greeks and Romans (who brought Jewish slaves). Then came the Vandals and Goths (not to be confused with the influential punk band and sad-eyed Hot Topic kids), followed by the Byzantines. After that, the Arab Muslims showed up. A few more Jews arrived and behaved nicely without bothering anybody, which has generally been an unsuccessful course of action for them throughout their history. Then the Normans staked their claim. Through marriage, Sicily passed to the Swabians, who are noted for having the goofiest-sounding name in history. Then the French took over—which didn’t turn out so well.

On Easter Monday in 1282, the Sicilians (whatever the hell that meant by then) decided to kill all the new French residents. The island was independent for, oh, six seconds, at which point the Kingdom of

Aragon (not Aragorn, the foxiest dude in *The Lord of the Rings*) kindly stepped in. Aragon and Spain joined forces, and Sicily became Spanish property. In the fourteenth century, the Black Death made its legendary European debut in Sicily. The plague killed a bunch of people, which made the Spaniards feel competitive. Bloodthirsty, mass-murdering Queen Isabella and her kill-happy hubby Ferdinand implemented their own extermination method, loosely titled “Get Out of Here, You Fucking Jew (Or I’ll Stab You).”

After a couple centuries of earthquakes and pirates, Sicily went to the Austrians (or, presumably, the Austrians went to it). Then the Spanish showed up again, but there were no Jews left to banish or kill, so their heart wasn’t in it. Sicily was independent for another brief moment, after which the mainland Italians popped in and took over. The economy collapsed, the Mafia rose to prominence, a fuck-ton of immigrants bounced and went to the United States, and you probably know the rest from your favorite Francis Ford Coppola educational filmstrips.

In short, Sicily is no stranger to illness, drama, or evil female overlords. My own trip would incorporate all three.

Surprisingly, my journey to Sicily was not a punishment but a reward. I’d actually asked for the trip as a pre-graduation present. My school was cosponsoring a journey to the *Regione Autonoma Siciliana* with an outside tour company, a business devoted to turning culturally illiterate young American rubes into sophisticated international travelers. Via bus, train, and ferry, we would take in the faded glory of the most violent segment of a majestically corrupt nation.

It was my first trip abroad, unless you counted the time we’d visited the Canadian branch of my family when I was eight. And while I’d long grown accustomed to the swirl of fear and nausea that always arose on car rides to Manhattan and bus rides to Philly and plane rides to Florida, it did not occur to me that a European vacation might magnify my usual troubles with travel. In fact, I rather thought it might diminish them. After all, those other trips had involved my tall redheaded Irish-American dad and short dark-haired Sicilian-American mother, who commenced vacations only after marinating in a highly acidic vat of tension for a solid seventy-two hours. This trip would put more than four thousand miles between my parents and me. It would be like a marinara-flavored preview of college, where all my homebred quirks would disappear. The thought gave me comfort.

A week before the trip came the news that Kevin, the heartbreakingly beautiful boy I’d met the previous summer, had doused himself in gasoline and died via self-immolation. I cried until my stomach ached and my eyes burned. As a good Catholic, I had been taught that suicide was the only unforgivable sin a human could commit.

“Do you have your passport case and your money belt?” my father asked. “Jesus, I can’t believe you haven’t packed yet.”

“You really need to check what time your bus leaves for the airport,” my mother said.

“I don’t think I want to go,” I said.

“Oh,” they said. “You’re going.”

Whether or not Kevin was bound for Hell, I was certainly bound for Sicily.

The plane ride wasn’t bad. I slept most of the time, relying on an extra-heavy dose of Dramamine, my drug of choice. I’d never smoked pot or been drunk, but I’d ingested impressive amounts of anti-nausea medication since I was very small. This was acceptable, because over-the-counter medication have been rubber-stamped by a completely scrupulous and unbiased government authority, while marijuana is typically stolen from the desiccated corpses of South American toddlers/drug mules, all of whom have been strangled to death and then ritually fucked by men with large vans and candy.

Dramamine wasn’t the only drug swirling through my system on that trip. I’d been taking a

prescription anti-depressant/anti-anxiety medication for two years. The pediatrician had written me a scrip when I was sixteen to treat my occasional bouts of intense depression and my more-than-occasional panic attacks. The irrational fear and crippling sadness kept coming, and the pediatrician kept increasing the dose. I didn't know that other drugs might help me. I was convinced that I was taking the only drug in the world designed to treat my weird problems, and that if the drug couldn't fix me, nothing could. But most of my friends didn't know I was taking it, and I certainly hadn't informed the other students on the plane. I kept the bottle hidden in my backpack, next to my carefully concealed stuffed giraffe, Mary.

When we finally landed, I rose unsteadily to my feet and trudged in a daze behind the other passengers. It wasn't until I'd passed through immigration and assembled with my schoolmates that I happened to catch a glimpse of the horizon through an airport window. As I watched intently, it wobbled. I caught a split-second glimpse of something menacing hovering just beneath the sun.

"I don't think I'm okay," I said to Mr. D'Angelo, the guidance counselor who'd volunteered to chaperone our trip.

"What, you got *agita*?"² he asked. "You want some Imodium AD?"

I thanked him politely and accepted his offer. I hadn't eaten in several hours and didn't have anything sitting in my stomach or bowels, but I was raised to put complete faith in the power of name-brand OTC medications.

As we waited for the bus and I chewed slowly on the anti-diarrheal tablets, I took stock of my fellow travelers. It was not a particularly promising crew. The crowd was made up mostly of students from the junior class, one year behind me. Some seemed lovely and some seemed dull, but I didn't know most of them particularly well. There was some loud kid so scarred by acne his face looked like a pizzelle iron. There was a cute boy from the lacrosse team. And then there was one small, tightly wound knot of females with whom I was all too familiar.

Every school has it, that group of Madisons and Michelles and Jennifers and Jessicas and Adrianas and Ariannas and Taylors and Tiffanys. I supposed the reincarnated souls of Spanish inquisitors, Naz commandants, and medieval Chinese proto-waterboarders had to end up somewhere. Our particular trip was enlivened by the presence of a foursome of bitchtastic bottle blondes from the girls' tennis team. This cuntsquare of future real estate agents and PR associates was led by junior class homecoming princess Amber Luciano. That she shared some DNA with the man who split New York into five crime families and ordered countless murders of his rivals—well, that was no surprise, once you got to know her.

I was generally liked in my own grade (I cracked jokes in class and wrote funny editorials about the cafeteria for the school newspaper) but had few friends on the trip to Italy. And I was certainly not loved by Amber, who seemed particularly irritated by people who liked clowning around for laughs. She disliked them even more than she disliked people who made art on their own time, people who wore vintage clothing, people who listened to non-Top 40 music, and people who read books. And Amber really hated people who read books. I once heard her say in an English elective, "I have a *boyfriend*. I don't have time to waste on a fuckin' *book*."

If I'd been accompanied by my own tight-knit coterie of friends, I would have taken delight in mocking Amber in whispers from across the bus. But I was alone, and my power as an outgoing senior was limited. Amber and her lieutenants knew a lame duck when they saw one.

We boarded the bus, and Amber immediately staked her claim in a set of seats far enough back to be cool, but far enough up to be away from any bathroom stink. I eyed her warily as I chose my own seat. When I struggled to put my bag in the overhead compartment, I heard a sudden burst of laughter from

the bitch contingent. Foolishly, I turned my head to look. They were covering their mouths and giggling to each other while staring straight at me.

“Oh my God, shut up, she saw,” one of them whispered loudly.

Great. Fucking great. I’d finally gotten a hearty laugh out of Amber Luciano. At least my bottle of crazy meds hadn’t popped out.

I sank into the seat and thought of Kevin, who would undoubtedly have been in these girls’ social circle if he’d gone to my high school. He might even have dated one of them—Amber, obviously. It was true that aside from their superficial assets, they had little in common—he was genuinely kind, and she had the soul of a troll. But the most attractive people in any school always had to pair off. It was like an unwritten law.

Mr. D’Angelo boarded the bus last. He was a guidance counselor at the school, a position generally awarded to football coaches and other paragons of emotional intelligence in order to justify their higher-than-average salaries. He had probably taken one requisite psychology course in college back in the 70s, in order to complete the requirements for his General Studies major with a Human Health minor. I assume some sort of nominal further training was required, like a half-hour workshop at the local Board of Education offices one random Sunday afternoon. If he had any legitimate expertise in dealing with the unpredictable twists and turns of adolescent development, he did an excellent job of hiding it.

“A-right, a-right everybody,” he boomed in his thick South Jersey accent. “Listen up. We got eight days together. That means we got 192 hours to accomplish the following goals: (A) learn something; (B) demonstrate respect for this ancient local culture; (C) have . . . A GOOD TIME, AMIRIGHT?” He smiled broadly at the last part, like it was a rabbit he’d pulled out of a hat. A smattering of applause emerged from the passel of ungrateful teenagers seated before him.

“And when do we go to the beach?” Amber demanded.

Mr. D’Angelo smiled and chuckled. He was the type of man who found the questions and “problem of teenage girls to be infinitely amusing. This is certainly a wonderful quality for a high school guidance counselor to possess, since he is unlikely to encounter any troubled adolescent females in his chosen line of work.

“Well, Amber,” he said. “We go to the beach on Wednesday.”

It was Sunday morning. Amber and her coven let out a burst of disappointed groans.

“Not ’til Wednesday?”

“I didn’t go to the tanning booth, ’cause I thought I’d get a full week at the beach here! Oh my God. I’m gonna be pasty by Wednesday.”

“This is bullshit.”

No one has ever really figured out why white people from New Jersey are so obsessed with staying tan. When MTV’s investigative journalism documentary series *Jersey Shore* became a hit, I fielded countless inquiries from friends, acquaintances, and even press, who wanted to hear an Italian-American female comic explain the mystery of tanning culture.

“Fucked if I know,” I told one reporter, who woke me up from my cherished pre-gig nap. “Most of the guidos I grew up with were racist idiots. They didn’t even talk to brown people, so I don’t know why they’d wanna look like them.” He chose not to run that quote in his newspaper.

“Hey hey, watch your mouth!” Mr. D’Angelo said sharply to one of the girls. “On this bus we say *bullcrap*, not that thing you just said. Or else we say *garbage*.”

“Fine,” the girl said. “Bullcrap. It’s friggin’ bullcrap that we can’t go to the beach ’til Wednesday. This whole place is an island, right?”

I've always over-identified with authority figures. Maybe it's because I desperately seek their approval. It is a fact that when I was getting laid off from a radio station, I spent half the meeting assuring my boss that he'd done a really wonderful job and that I totally understood why my show was being canceled. I added that he was handling the layoff quite nicely and that I was sure the New York State Department of Labor would provide helpful answers about unemployment insurance. And even though he'd decided to shit-can me, I genuinely liked the guy.

I didn't particularly like Mr. D'Angelo, but he was in charge and I'd long ago developed a disdain for students who flouted rules of hierarchy and procedure. I played by the rules because rules were the only thing that kept everything from descending into anarchy and chaos and violence. Why couldn't everybody else understand this? Amber's open defiance was so frustrating.

That's probably why, when one of Amber's friends opened her mouth to complain again, I found myself saying aloud, "Jesus, if you wanted a tan you could've gone to friggin' Florida. We're in Europe, for Chrissakes. Just enjoy it for what it is." I heard a sharp intake of breath around the bus. Even Mr. D'Angelo looked surprised.

I rarely use the terms *friggin'* or *for Chrissakes* in my adult life (unless I'm drunk or hanging out for an extended length of time with my family in our native homeland). However, at the moment, I was immersed in the curious pidgin jibber-jabber of New Jersey, and was not averse to occasionally groaning, "*Madonna mia!*" in public when irked. I didn't get that far, though, because I was stopped by the icy-cold stare of hatred that shot from Amber's eyes to my face like frigid poison. I had committed the highly unusual transgression of crossing a popular girl in public. This would have been normal for a person who genuinely didn't give a flying fuck what people thought of her. I, on the other hand, gave a desperate, needy flying fuck.

"Well, maybe if you could fit in a bikini you'd want to go to the beach, too," Amber shot back. Her friends giggled uproariously. In retrospect, I think Amber's primal instinct was simply to call any adversary fat, regardless of actual size. At the time, though, it was like a flaming-hot arrow had struck deep in my chest. I worked very hard to hide my pudgy little belly under my clothes, and was extremely self-conscious about the fact that I weighed nearly (gasp!) 120 pounds. Many years and several pounds later, I'd like to smack my younger self in the face, immediately after kicking Amber in the teeth.

"Everybody calm down!" Mr. D'Angelo boomed. "We don't want no attitude from any of youse on this trip." Mr. D'Angelo didn't usually speak like that, but the reality of his choice to spend a vacation with forty whining teenagers seemed to have hit him. It was enough to loosen anyone's grip on standard American English.

"She's the one being a fuckin' bitch," Amber said, just loud enough for me to hear. Mr. D'Angelo had already turned his back on the lot of us and ambled to the front of the bus to chat with our Sicilian bus driver in loud smatterings of messy Italian. I don't know if he had missed her words or if he simply didn't want to deal with the situation any longer. I leaned against the window and felt my stomach lurch within me. This wasn't good. This wasn't good at all.

The trip to the hotel took about two hours and saw us stuck in a tiny village that was probably far too accustomed to large tour buses full of Americans. Our driver had a bit of trouble with a particularly gnarly turn and nearly ran into someone's charming five-hundred-year-old cottage, which appeared to be part of the most recent wave of development. The entire town turned out to help, coaching the driver by shouting directions and offering the kind of wild gesticulations for which Italians and Sicilians are known the world over. When we finally inched past the cottage and straightened out on the road, the kindly townsfolk waved good-bye. I imagine that, as we sped away from the

miraculously unscathed fifteenth-century home, the butcher leaned over to the cheese monger and said, “At least it wasn’t one of the nice *old* places.”

This was my first trip to Europe, where everything is old. Everything is particularly old in Italy, and even older in Sicily. I guess that’s one of the bonuses of being rather close to the continent where human life began. After unpacking at the sixteenth-century hotel, where I shared a room with Leann, shy girl who kindly assured me that it was okay to be nervous and that it was nice to hear somebody stand up to Amber for once, we were off to see our first batch of ruins. We were joined by a jumpy, painfully sweet English tour guide, Mr. Brixton, who actually wore a tweed jacket in eighty-degree Sicilian heat.

Mr. Brixton said, “Over here you’ll see the remnants of an Arab settlement. The Moors had a distinctive architectural—Amber, your cell phone likely won’t receive reception here, I’m afraid. Would you like to use mine instead? Oh, it’s no trouble at all, Mr. D’Angelo, I assure you. Now, where were we? Ah yes, Moorish architecture . . .” Amber spent the next thirty minutes screaming at her boyfriend back home about a variety of perceived slights, including but not limited to not reserving a *white* stretch limousine (“With a fuckin’ sunroof so we can take cute photos, dammit!”) for the impending junior prom.

The trip continued on like this for a few days, and while I couldn’t sleep a wink at any hour, I found solace in writing. I dutifully took photos of all the historical sites we visited and then recorded my impressions of them at night in my little journal. There were the casual little slights from Amber: the loudly annoyed exhalation of breath whenever I made a comment, the rolling of eyes whenever I asked a question, the little whispers when I walked past.

In retrospect, maybe Amber was my first passive-aggressive heckler. Every comedian has to deal with the occasional rowdy audience member, but the passive-aggressive hecklers are the worst of all. They sit and sneer at you in disgust and whisper loudly to their friends while you’re onstage. You either barrel through your set and ignore them, or you call them out on their bullshit. I didn’t know I wanted to be a comedian until I was in graduate school, but it turns out I received my earliest exposure to shitty audience members way back in high school.

But Amber’s little demonstrations of disgust were all endurable compared to the ever-increasing dread that sat with me on the bus and walked with me through battlefields, gravesites, and churches.

Anxiety is a strange traveling companion. If you stop and consider the grisly stories you’ve heard since you were small, there are many terrible possibilities on any trip. The tired, overworked pilot could fall asleep and crash the plane (this was before 9/11, so I didn’t really pay terrorists much heed). The bus could plunge off a cliff. The hotel could collapse in an earthquake. All these things have really happened to real humans at various points in time, so why wouldn’t they happen to you? One can argue statistics and probability, but an unquiet mind predisposed to irrational terror is unlikely to be swayed by facts and figures.

Talking about one’s fears can alleviate the tension to a small extent, but who wants to air these concerns in the presence of thirty-nine of one’s adolescent peers? Teenagers are fully consumed with playing the roles they’ve so carefully crafted. They are unlikely to break character to speak gently to the crazy girl. Many teens need someone else to demonstrate cowardice so that they can know for sure that they are not the weakest member of the group. Display that kind of vulnerability and the Ambers of the world might pounce. Better to keep it locked inside, to pretend to have a headache instead of admitting you are afraid of the museum because there’s nowhere to lie down in case you actually do get a headache. Fear built on fear begets all kinds of little falsehoods.

Wednesday arrived, and with it a particularly harsh sun. This one was going to be extra hot, and we

had a flat, dusty field of pottery shards to explore. On the upside for the popular girls, it was Beach Day. Amber would finally get to reveal the bikini she'd bought especially for the trip and smile coquettishly at the Sicilian men who would undoubtedly approach her. She would say cruel things in English that most of them wouldn't understand, and her best friends would howl with laughter, doubled over in their own, slightly-less-adorable bikinis. I had been advised that bathrooms would be few and far between, and thus had resolved to take off my cover-up only to covertly pee in the ocean.

The field was as dull as expected, despite Mr. Brixton's attempt to enliven the morning with discussions of drinking containers throughout the ages. I felt really hot, tired, and thirsty. I hate feeling any of those things, and feeling them in combination is about as desirable as a bout of constipation. The only part I didn't mind was the sweat, because it cooled me down a little on the rare but lovely occasion that someone walked past me swiftly and created a tiny breeze. It became hard to focus on what Mr. Brixton was saying. Something was tugging at the edge of my consciousness, gnawing at me with increasingly pointy teeth.

I felt strangely light as we trudged back to the bus, as if my body were trying to detach from the earth but was held down by my sneakers. I was like a balloon attached to one of those little Baggies filled with sand. It sounds vaguely pleasurable, but there was no joy in the wholly unfamiliar sensation. It wasn't until I sank into my dark blue-upholstered seat that I realized a voice inside my head was growling at me.

I couldn't make out the words, exactly, but I didn't need to. When a fierce dog with gnashing fangs and a foaming jaw growls at you, do you pause and ask it to enunciate? Something very dangerous and unfriendly had a message for me, and it wasn't verbal so much as it was tactile. I could *feel* it. The feeling was the frightening evolution of the grinding travel anxiety with which I'd long been familiar. This was not my first panic attack (I'd had them since I was ten, though I'd only gotten the official diagnosis and the attendant pills at sixteen), but it very swiftly announced itself as the worst one I'd ever experienced. All of a sudden, I felt true, real, unabridged, non-condensed, fully realized terror. And as one might imagine, I found the sensation *slightly* disconcerting.

I was lucky. I'd grown up in a very safe environment with all the benefits and advantages any person could want: nice family, nice food, nice home, nice education, nice prospects. I'd never been mugged or assaulted. I'd never starved or fallen desperately ill. I'd never faced war or poverty. When I copied an attitude and my father yelled at me for being spoiled, I even agreed with him. Of course, I usually followed it up with a shout of "*You made me this way!*" but that just better served to illustrate his point. I had a job at a bookstore that allowed me 15 percent off whatever I wanted to read (and I wanted to read *everything*). I was headed for college in the fall, and I'd just gotten a secret, totally cool Celtic tattoo on my lower back, a very original place that no other girl I knew had yet decorated. Besides the wrath of Amber, the lack of a boyfriend, and the dead camp friend thing, I didn't have a single problem.

And yet there I was, choking on my own fright. I felt as if my lungs were constricted, as if I'd never be able to breathe properly again. I wondered what that would be like. What if I could never take a deep breath? What if this was always how it was going to be, this dry, squeezed gasp for scraps of oxygen? My fingers began to tingle and my palms began to sweat. And then the bus began to move.

Dying on a bus had never seemed like a good option to me. I'd considered it several times, simply because every panic attack felt like the prelude to a little death (and not the sexy French version of the phrase). I'd had a kajillion panic attacks on buses. It was why I sometimes "missed" the bus on purpose in the morning throughout middle school and high school, forcing one grumpy parent or another (usually my dad) to deviate from his or her own schedule and risk being late to work. I knew

inconvenienced them, but after a while it became such a habit of mine that I didn't even stop to think about what I was doing. It was an automatic impulse. Once I got older, friends had cars and were more than willing to shepherd me to and from school in exchange for a sympathetic ear during a pregnancy scare or a weekly free dinner at the Flemington Family Diner (a wondrous Jersey-Greek institution that we all nicknamed "Flem Fam"). I didn't have a car, myself; my parents opined that a car was something you earned on your own, through hard work and careful savings. I'd done none of the latter, preferring to spend my earnings from the bookstore on—well, more books.

While avoiding the school bus had gotten easier as I'd gotten older, avoiding the bus in Sicily was an impossibility. I had signed up for a "journey into history via air-conditioned luxury motor coach," which, as it turned out, was tourism-speak for *regular old bus tour*. And as our bus lurched into action, I knew once and for all that this journey would be my last.

We had all worn our bathing suits underneath our clothes that day, and I had donned a turquoise bikini top with matching boy-shorts that I hoped would de-emphasize my stubbornly protruding belly. The J. Crew bathing suit, like my Delia's T-shirt and Express denim shorts, was soaked with sweat from the trudge through the field. As I gripped my seat, willing myself not to writhe in terror, my body went cold. The sweat, formerly such a comfort, now felt like a thin layer of ice coating every inch of my body. I began to shiver. I realized with a start that my bowels were about to evacuate. This made sense, as I'd heard people sometimes crapped themselves upon dying, but I was tormented by the thought that I might not actually expire for a few minutes post pants-pooing. Propelled by the desire to *not* spend my last few moments writhing in my own shit while thirty-eight human teenagers and an adolescent monster named Amber looked on, I called out, "Mr. D'Angelo?"

"Yeah?" he hollered back over the noise of the bus. We were bumping over a mountain road that offered gorgeous views of the sea, which smashed against the rocks three hundred feet below.

"Could you come here for a second?" It was hard to push the words out. I had to close my eyes after the "Could you . . ." in order to finish. Thankfully, the other students seemed immersed in their own headphones and/or portable game players.

Mr. D'Angelo lumbered down the aisle and peered at me. He looked surprised, then concerned. "Don't take this the wrong way, but you don't look so good, kiddo," he said. "You gonna throw up?" I tried to speak, but I felt as if I were breathing lukewarm water. I was choking on my own words. "What was that?" he asked, putting a hand behind his ear.

"*Agita*," I got out finally, in a scratchy whisper.

A remarkable shift took place on his face. What had been confused concern was now replaced by a sort of confident, calm determination. I imagine it's the look a veteran firefighter gets on his face when he and his truck pull up to a blazing house in the woods. "First thing we do is we keep it from spreading," he says to his younger teammates. "We can lose the house, but it ain't gonna take the forest down with it. I want the three of you to spray down the trees to the rear. You two head to the left side and you two head to the right. I'll turn the hose on the house. With a little luck, we can avoid a real mess here."

"Change of plans!" he announced in a kindly roar. "Mr. Brixton?"

"Yes?" the tour guide asked, looked vaguely frightened.

"Tell the driver we gotta stop at a gas station. A filling—petrol—you know what I mean, yeah?"

"Certainly," Mr. Brixton said, looking relieved. This was a request he could handle. I wonder if he'd been scared that Mr. D'Angelo would announce a game of Shirts vs. Skins tackle football, with Mr. Brixton captaining Skins. I could sense that Mr. Brixton hadn't been the most accomplished student in gym class (we can smell our own).

“Who wants to use the bathroom?” Mr. D’Angelo asked brightly. Some of the kids were drowning in sonic oblivion, so he kicked his already considerable voice up a notch.

“HEY! WHO! WANTS! TO! GO! TO! THE! BATHROOM?!” he roared.

“I thought we were going to the beach!” Amber shot back.

“We are. We’re just making a quick pit stop, because somebody doesn’t feel good.” I suppose this was his counseling training kicking in—confidentiality, and all that. Of course, it wasn’t hard to figure out to whom he was referring, since he was standing beside my seat and I had long since taken on a pale-green hue.

He turned and walked to the front of the bus, leaving me alone to face the rest of the kids.

Amber groaned. “What the hell is *wrong* with her?” she demanded, throwing her head back and rolling her eyes. I sank lower in my seat and focused on holding my bowels tight. The nausea had cleared a little bit, replaced by stabbing pains in my gut. My heart still pounded fiercely, but the shenanigans in my lower alimentary canal distracted me from the growly inner voice that had so frightened me earlier. *If I can just get to a toilet, I thought, I’ll be okay.*

“Seriously!” Amber nearly shouted. “What is wrong with you? This isn’t just your trip. Everything doesn’t stop because you ate too much!” Through the thick fog that clogged my ears, I heard a few other kids grumble. Amber’s hot stare bored into me, and a couple of shameful tears spilled down my face. I could control my bowels or my eyes, but not both. One way or another, I was about to explode.

In my experience, angels arrive in the most curious form at the oddest of moments. They keep their wings folded neatly at their back, and save your ass using brains, brawn, or quiet calculation.

Leann, the nice girl with whom I’d shared a room the past few nights, said, “I could go. I want to wash my hands.” She held them up. They were covered in a fine dust from the field trip.

Amber looked at her. Leann was one of those girls who were so humble and quiet that even the mean kids like Amber didn’t pick on them. She posed no threat to the popular kids’ dominance, and she could be depended upon to do all the work for any group project. She would also spot you money if you needed some for lunch, and she wouldn’t ever expect you to pay her back.

“Just look at my nails,” Leann added. Amber’s eyes widened in dismay. In the handful of classes I’d been condemned to share with Amber, I had never seen her devote much energy to anything other than her fingernails, which she maintained through an elaborate ritual of filing, painting, and gluing. Teachers frequently sent her into the hall for disobeying their command to keep her bottle of nail polish sealed during class. If her parents had allowed her, I’m pretty sure she would have taken the cosmetology classes offered in our school’s vo-tech department. But they wanted her to go to college, so she slogged through French III while sketching nail designs in pen on the top of her desk. She was quite adept at intimidation and manipulation, but Amber’s one true passion was the female fingernail.

Amber moved toward Leann, grabbed her hand, and held it up to the light. “Ew, you’re right,” she said with a genuine look of concern. “They do look bad. You can’t go to the beach like that.” She examined her own nails. “Shit, I lost a rhinestone back there.”

“I have extras in my kit,” her friend chimed in. “With glue.”

“You think they sell those trucker pills at the gas station, NO-DOZ?” a third member of her contingent asked. “I fucking love those.”

“I have cramps,” said the fourth blonde. “You think they got Midol?”

And because the four most popular girls in the junior class were now also falling apart, it was okay to delay the beach in order to go to the bathroom.

The driver brought us to a filling station and parked in the sun-baked lot. Mr. D’Angelo helped me disembark, and Leann put her arm around me and walked me to the bathroom. The other girls rushed

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