

THE TEN BEST DAYS OF MY LIFE



Adena Halpern



A PLUME BOOK

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Stephanie Ellis

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*For my husband, Jonathan,
my seventh heaven*

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With my deepest gratitude,

Adena Halpern

aka:

Arlene and Barry Halpern's daughter

David Halpern's sister

Samantha Chaikin-Halpern's sister-in-law

Michael Halpern's sister

Jonathan Goldstein's wife and truest love

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Knocking On Heaven's Door

I died today, which is so weird. I honestly thought I was immortal.

It's not that I ever took fantastic care of myself. I did go to the gym three times a week (okay, two . . . okay, one or none on a lot of occasions). I ate well. I was very conscious of my figure (though I might have substituted Doritos for something more substantial more times than I should have). I kind of drank a lot on weekends and sometimes on weekdays (like last night and maybe the night before . . . I can't remember). I always got my full eight hours of sleep (with an Ambien). Still, though, it never occurred to me that one day I'd actually die, be dead, not be alive anymore, ever. You know what I mean?

Anyway, none of that matters at all. If I knew how, and had accepted the fact that I was going to end up here, I could have smoked and drank and done all kinds of drugs. I would never have gone to the gym or to the doctor for yearly checkups. All that worrying about what I was doing with my life was pointless. All the complaining to my girlfriends about the direction my life was headed was pointless. All those times my parents sat me down and told me they were worried about where my life



was heading were pointless. I should have slept with Steve (and without protection) before he dumped me instead of trying to look virginal and telling him that I never slept with someone until we'd been dating for a month. On the other hand, I feel so content that I maxed out my credit cards on clothes and shoes and bags. I'm so thrilled that I never saved a cent for retirement.

So, here's how I died.

The good news is that it wasn't a Mack truck that struck and killed me at four o'clock this morning, because I would never want to be an old joke. The bad, pathetic news is that it was a MINI Cooper. I can just hear my best friend, Penelope, laughing through her tears at the thought of my fat ass (which to be honest is not that fat, but you know how best friends are with each other) couldn't cushion the blow of a MINI Cooper.

In the end it was simple:

A red MINI Cooper hit me at about four in the morning as I was crossing Fairfax Boulevard in Los Angeles, with Peaches. Peaches is my miniature beagle. I normally don't walk Peaches at four in the morning, but that was when her bowel obstruction finally decided to clear. She was whimpering beside my bed for a good forty-five minutes before I finally got up to take her for the walk. I still feel bad about that. Peaches is such a good, sweet, wonderful dog. But you know that feeling when you're sleeping and nothing else in the world matters, even if your dog is holding it in despite a painful obstruction. Get up to take her out?

Obviously, I finally did take her out. I'm thrilled that I was tired enough to fall asleep in the clothes I was wearing the night

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before, my J Brand jeans and my favorite black, sexy cowl-necked sweater that drapes over my left shoulder, instead of throwing on some old sweats and a dirty T-shirt (I'll get to the why of that later). Anyway, Peaches died too, and she's here with me.

I feel awful about that, too. Little Peaches didn't deserve to die just as she was getting some relief.

Isn't it weird that that's how it all went down? Can you imagine all the things you'd do differently if you knew that a MINI Cooper was going to take you out at twenty-nine years old, at four in the morning, while you were walking your dog? I keep thinking about that. People up here keep telling me that's the way life goes. Would I have done anything differently? Yeah, no, probably not. Maybe I wouldn't have been so nuts with my teeth. I really brushed and flossed a lot because my grandmother told me on her deathbed to take care of my teeth because dentures are a bitch. I might have seen all the sights I meant to see, like the pyramids or the Sistine Chapel or the Mona Lisa. I grew up in Philadelphia and I never saw that Liberty Bell. I should have stayed with my tenth-grade class when we went to New York City to see the Statue of Liberty, instead of running off to Bergdorf's with Penelope. I probably wouldn't have had all those "age defying" facials that cost \$90 a pop and the twice-a-year Botox shots. I definitely would not have been so adamant with the sunscreen.

I know I should be really upset about my parents losing a child and my friends losing me. But you feel serenely okay about everything when you're up here. I don't think they give us any drugs, but that's what it feels like. You feel like you're hooked up to an Ativan drip. I asked if I could go down and look in on

everyone, even one last time, but all the people here say there's nothing I can do right now. They keep telling me that when my family and friends die, when they get here, they'll see that the whole mourning thing was pointless. Isn't that mean? They tell me that it has nothing to do with heaven. It has to do with the process of growing and learning on earth. Isn't that just awful? I know my parents are beside themselves right now. I really wish I could do something, scream out, "It's okay! I'm fine!" Truthfully, I miss them already. I mean, it's been a pretty busy day with dying and coming here, but I would really like to make sure they know how much I love them. People who die in accidents, like that terrible mining disaster, get to write notes to their families, but I never had that chance. What the hey? That just doesn't seem fair, though I'm glad for those miners and their families. At least someone's got some kind of peace.

Anyway, so by now you might be wondering where I am, what I'm doing, if I'm alive or dead or in some other dimension or something.

Well, to be honest with you, I'm not sure.

I only got here a few hours ago and I don't know everything yet. I can, however, tell you what's happened so far. (By the way, I'm assuming I can share this with you. No one has told me not to, and I can't imagine that I'm the first blabbermouth heaven has ever seen.) So here goes:

You know how everyone keeps talking about that white light after you die? Well, that white light is the gates of heaven. At first I thought it was the light from the sign over Canter's Deli, because that's where I was walking when the car came barreling into me, but the light was everywhere. The last thing I remem-



ber on earth is seeing that MINI Cooper, and then it hit me and I flew up onto the hood and that's when I saw the white light. I kept thinking of the movie *Poltergeist* when that little woman says, "Stay away from the light!" You can't help it, though. The light is everywhere; I looked behind me, to the right, the left, up: white light everywhere. I must have looked like such a moron, running in every different direction trying to escape the light. To tell you the truth, it really felt less *Poltergeist* and more *Wizard of Oz* during the tornado scene, only there wasn't an actual tornado. Peaches was there, though, playing the part of Toto. I guess that's when the serenity started, when I realized I had my Peaches and we couldn't escape the light.

Also, don't worry about the light being too bright. You don't have to shield your eyes from the light, like if you were coming out of a movie in the middle of the day. The light is actually very soothing. Remember Elizabeth Taylor in those eighties' perfume commercials where it looked like the camera had white gauze over it every time she came on the screen? That's pretty much what it's like.

Now, remember how I was saying I was so happy I had on what I was wearing the night before instead of repulsive sweats? That's because when you get up here you're wearing what you were wearing when you died. I'm told that you get to change once you get to your home. Evidently, you have clothes at this home. (Hope they're decent.) While you're checking in, though, you're wearing what you were wearing when you died. A lot of people are in hospital gowns; a couple of people are naked. The rest are clothed. No one looks sick or has blood on them or even has a paper cut. I was sure that I'd have some black-and-blue

marks. I mean, I'm sure I scraped along Fairfax for half a block before I finished. The lack of blood or cuts or bruises has something to do with being a spirit now and not an actual being, which I don't really understand yet.

So when you get up here, you're immediately put in a line. You don't walk over to the line, it's like you wake up and you're in this line, only you're not asleep; it's like all white and then boom: line. The gates of heaven are one big, huge, white space. You really do walk on clouds and air, and you can see for miles. You're not floating, you're actually walking. It sounds strange but it's true: they have gravity but they don't. I don't know, you'll just have to take my word for it. I'm told that I'll be taken to my home soon enough to settle in, but for now I'm still at check-in. I'm envisioning my home looking like a room in an Ian Schrager hotel: all modern and clean, with white walls and a great big fluffy white bed and a Bose stereo. I guess I'll report on that later, but back to the line.

Normally, lines really annoy me. This line was huge, like the worst day at the DMV times a thousand. There were like ten thousand people before me, and it should have pissed me off to no end, but since I had no idea what I was doing in the line, I wasn't flipping over it. That, and they make it really comfortable for you. There's the sense of serenity I mentioned earlier. Angels (yes, angels with wings, you heard me, the myth is true) come around with trays of hors d'oeuvres: canapés with caviar or pigs in a blanket, fried mozzarella, chicken skewers, chips and dip, crudités, bruschetta, shrimp cocktail—the list goes on. I ate nothing. I wasn't sure what was coming next and my grandmother always said, "Don't fill up on the appetizers."



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They also serve drinks: champagne, hard liquor, mixed drinks, wine, soda, fruit juices, tea, coffee. Whatever you want. I chose the champagne, which was wonderfully sweet and yet dry at the same time. I had five glasses.

Now, finally to the part about why I was glad I was wearing my outfit from the night before. I've already mentioned that I am single and was about to turn thirty before I died. For me, if there is anything I'd want heaven to have, it's a cute guy. Wouldn't luck have it, the cutest guy was, oh, about fifteen people down the line. Since you're in that line for quite a while, you get to know the people around you. I met the twelve school-children from Germany who died in a bus crash. They mostly played with Peaches. I met Harry and Elaine Braunstein, who winter in Boca Raton, Florida, but are really from Long Island. They died in their sleep, from gas poisoning, because Elaine didn't turn off the oven completely. Jean-Pierre from France had prostate cancer. Mrs. O'Malley from Ireland lived to be 104 before she tripped over a gap in the sidewalk, broke her hip, and died from complications.

To tell you the truth, it was less a line and more a party. Instead of asking, "What do you do?" we asked each other, "How'd you die?" I could see the cute guy a little ways down. It was one of those things where our eyes met each other at the exact same time, and then we each turned away because we were embarrassed. When I looked back and smiled, he was looking and smiling, too. Then he walked up to where I was standing, so I slouched my black sweater until it fell over my shoulder (my number one guaranteed move back when I was alive). He was hot, mid-thirties, a full head of dirty blond

hair—very Hubbell Gardner. Fantastic eyes, green. He was in sweats and a T-shirt.

“Is that your dog?” he asked me, bending down to pet Peaches.

“Yes,” I told him, cocking my head and smiling down at him. Then I was mortified when I realized that I was flirting like I was in line for a club in LA, not in a line for the gates of heaven.

“How cute,” he said. “I’m Adam Steele, by the way.” He straightened up and put out his hand.

“Alex Dorenfield,” I smiled.

“What do you think of this line?” he asked.

“What a pain.” I winced, as if waiting in line to get into heaven was something I did every day.

“How’d you die?” he asked.

“Car hit me. You?”

“Heart attack. I was at the gym, elliptical, Crunch. It sucks; I didn’t know I had a heart condition. I was only in my mid-thirties and I’m in really good shape, who knew?”

“Bummer.”

“Yeah, you too,” he said, adding, “Where were you from?”

“Los Angeles. You?”

“New York.”

We paused. Would he ask me for a date? Did people date in heaven? Where would we go? Was there a *Zagat Heaven Restaurants* guide?

“Well, I guess I should get back to my part of the line,” he said.

It was at this point that I wondered if I should have told

him to get in line with me. I envisioned asking Mrs. O'Malley whether it would be all right if the hot guy cut in line next to me so I could flirt more. It seemed sacrilegious.

"Maybe I could get in touch with you sometime," he said.

"Yeah, okay," I answered as I noticed the Braunsteins smiling at me in that way only Jewish parents who want to see a woman get a boyfriend can.

"That is, if they have phones up here," he chuckled.

"Yeah," I chuckled back. Ugh, pathetic.

And then he went back to his part of the line behind the German schoolchildren and the two old guys playing poker. I looked back at him a couple of times, and he waved and I waved, but that was it. Please let there be phones in heaven.

Now, believe it or not, for a line with ten thousand people, everything moves pretty quickly. It might have been all that talking and drinking and flirting, but I swear it only took about twenty minutes. They must have really worked on that. I'm sure people have complained throughout the centuries. You finally get up to the gate, which, by the way, really is a gate, and it really is pearly.

"Hi, Alex. Hello, Peaches," a lovely brunette angel with a clipboard greeted us. "Welcome to heaven. Check-in for you is at Building Blissful," she continued, handing me a map. I took a look at the map. All the buildings were named something heavenly: Building Divine, Building Harmonious, Building Idyllic, and so on. That made me laugh. Heaven is so cliché.

Now I'm in some kind of waiting room inside Building Blissful. The angel told me that here I'll find out where I'm going to

live. Adam was sent to Building Utopia. Mrs. Braunstein also got Building Blissful, but Mr. Braunstein got Building Idyllic.

"I'm so glad to get rid of him for a bit," she confided to me. "If he bugs me one more time about not turning that oven off all the way . . . What more can I say? Everyone makes mistakes."

So, now we're in this room, waiting. It's a lovely room, decorated with light blue walls and comfy butter-cream leather sofas. Looks like a clubhouse at any upscale country club. There're about twenty of us in here. Again, there's a full bar and more food. I went straight to the salad bar and made myself a vegetable salad with dressing on the side. Since I didn't have the hors d'oeuvres, I felt justified in having a salad. Mrs. Braunstein went right to the sundae bar. She nudged me as she passed. "I'm dead, why worry anymore?"

"Alex?" Another angel calls out just as I'm finishing the last of my salad. "They're ready for you."

I give Mrs. Braunstein a kiss good-bye, and we tell each other we'll try to get together as soon as we know where we're going.

"I'll look around for that Adam," she says. "You two made a great-looking couple."

Seriously, that guy was so hot. Please, *please* let there be phones in heaven.

I'm blowing her a kiss as I walk out of the waiting room. The angel and I are heading out to the common area and . . . wait, oh my God, is that, is it? Oh my God, it's my grandparents!



It's Like I Died and Went to Heaven

My grandparents are here! I'm still shaking. I was told that early on, like centuries and centuries ago, everyone just met up with their family right at the gates of heaven, but it became too much of a mosh pit with everyone screaming and hugging and being hysterical. No one could get anything done. So they built these buildings like Building Blissful to keep things moving along and organized.

I'm sorry that I cut off so abruptly back there, but when you see your grandparents who you haven't seen since they died some twenty years ago, it kind of takes your breath away (no pun intended). No one even told me that they would be here. I honestly forgot that I would see them. I just assumed I was in this whole heaven thing alone.

I walked out of that waiting room, and they were just standing there: my grandmother and my grandfather and my uncle Morris.

The feeling of seeing my grandmother for the first time, with no offense to my grandfather or uncle Morris, was the most hysterical feeling I've ever known. We had been so close before she died. I missed her so much. I'd thought about her almost



every day for the last twenty years and here she was. It was her, her high-pitched nasal voice, her smell of lilacs and Aqua Net hair spray. I couldn't stop hugging her. I couldn't stop looking at her. I kept staring at her face. Of course I had pictures of her in my apartment back on earth, but to see her in front of me, each line on her face, the way her red hair was hardened so perfectly into a helmet on top of her head and "high" like she'd tell the stylist at the beauty parlor when I was a kid, "The hair needs to be higher!" It was her, my grandmother, in the flesh . . . er, spirit. I couldn't stop crying and shaking.

"I missed you so much," I cried to her.

"I know, sweetheart," she said, "and now we're together again, and we'll be together for a long, long time."

"Look how much she's grown," my grandfather said, reaching his arms out to me. "She's a woman."

"I am," I screamed hysterically. "I am, I grew up!" And then things just started pouring out of me. "I went to the high school prom and I went to college and I moved to Los Angeles and, Grandmom, I took care of my teeth. Remember on your deathbed when you told me to take care of my teeth? I did! Look at my teeth, I never had a cavity and I brushed and flossed every day!" I screamed as I flashed my mouth at her.

"When did I ever say anything about your teeth?" She asked me.

"On your deathbed, it was the one thing you asked of me."

"Why would I tell you to take care of your teeth?" She started laughing.

"Well, you did. You told me to take care of my teeth and then you died."

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"I must have been so out of it," she said, dismissing the one thing I did to help keep her memory alive. "Well, I guess it wasn't the worst thing to ask of you."

This pissed me off a bit.

"Wait a minute," I winced. "What about the dreams? I used to dream about you a lot, was that really you in my dreams?"

My grandparents smiled at me.

"Yes, of course." My grandmother smiled at Grandpop and uncle Morris, who smiled back at her. They really did come into my dreams. I want to ask if I can do that too, but before I get a chance I'm being passed from my grandmother's embrace to my uncle Morris's. I guess they'll teach me how to do that later. I must check in on my parents.

uncle Morris is my grandmother's brother. He was her best friend and never got married because he felt he had to take care of my grandmother and her three sisters after my great-grandparents died.

"Did you know that I thought about you all the time?" I asked him, hugging him, smelling his usual cigar smoke and Life Savers Pep-O-Mint candies.

"Of course I did," he said, taking me in his arms. "I even shaved for you. Remember how you wouldn't hug me when you were a little girl because my beard would scrape you?"

I did. I always remembered how his beard scratched my face. uncle Morris shaved his scratchy beard for me!

"Whenever I ate a Life Saver, I thought of you," I cried to him.

I was literally bonkers with happiness at this point, but who cared? Everyone else around me was seeing their families for the

first time and was bonkers too. I caught a glimpse of Mrs. Braunstein with her parents. She kept hugging them, then screaming, then crying, then hugging them again like she was five years old and just found them after being lost in an amusement park.

My grandfather nuzzled his arm around me as we walked out of Building Blissful, and my grandmother pulled my sweater back so it wasn't draping over my shoulder. I love that my grandmother did that. I love that I got to see her again and she could fix my sweater the way she wanted it to be and clean the hot fudge sundae smudge on my face with her saliva (okay, maybe I had a bite of Mrs. Braunstein's sundae). It's always the little things we take for granted, isn't it?

The strange thing about this whole "spirit and not a being" thing is that people still feel like people. We're not ghosts. You can't put your arm through someone like they do in the movies. My grandfather felt warm and alive. As I buried my head in his lapel, he smelled exactly the way I remembered him: Old Spice, the pomade from his hair. My grandmother's saliva felt like saliva. How are we all so real if we're dead? Why doesn't anyone on earth know about this? (Yet they know about the pearly gates and angels. Who gave that away?) This is what was going through my head as we piled into my grandmother's old lemon-colored Cadillac Coupe deVille with the dirty plastic flower hanging off the antenna. "It's so I can find it in a parking lot," she had told me when I was little.

"Why do you still have this?" I asked, jumping into the backseat with uncle Morris.

"It still has a few good miles in it," she said, revving up the gas. "You know how I always loved this car."



She really did. I was just surprised that in all these years she never got a new one.

"I love this car," she said again, backing out of Building Blissful's parking lot. "Remember, honey, it's heaven. You get what you want."

I wondered if there were Porsche dealerships up here.

"What's the deal with money up here?" I asked them.

"Don't have it," uncle Morris told me. "Everything just appears. We worked hard enough on earth. In heaven you get everything your soul desires."

Freaky, yet true, because when we pulled up to a house, after my grandparents fought over the directions (some things never change), it was a split-colonial farmhouse with a small creek in front. I knew that house very well. It took me a second, but then I remembered.

"Wait, that's Len Jacobs's house," I said out loud.

Len Jacobs was a kid I grew up with outside Philadelphia. I wasn't crazy about Len. We weren't friends; he was in a totally different group in high school. Len was that guy in the eighties who got really into the punk scene and shaved his head into a Mohawk. Len always wore an army jacket with big clunky leather boots with chains dangling off the heels. You could hear him coming down the hall.

Anyway, I used to see this split-colonial farmhouse every day from the bus as we were going to school. I loved that house and I always wondered who lived in it. I grew up in an ultramodern home that my parents were nuts about keeping spotless and clean; it was never comfortable. There were no comfy pillows, and you always had to take off your shoes so you didn't scuff

the floors. Every time I saw this farmhouse with the creek going through the lawn and the rock bridge in the center of the walkway leading up to the house, it looked like a place where you'd want to kick off your shoes because the dress code was pajamas and slippers.

Then one day in high school, I don't remember why, I was in a car with Len Jacobs. Someone was driving us home after school, which was weird. I can't remember who it was or why we were together, but that's not the point. The point is that the farmhouse turned out to be Len Jacobs's house. Imagine my surprise when I saw that the house I always wanted was punk-fanatic Len Jacobs's house. Even years later, when I'd come home to visit my family in Philadelphia, whenever I drove by that house, I wondered if Len Jacobs's family still lived there and if they appreciated the house. It was in need of a paint job, and I noticed that some of the rocks had fallen from the bridge. I remember being really sad about that and wished that I could buy it and fix it up to the way it was when I was a kid. I don't think I ever mentioned to anyone that I always loved that house. Still, I never forgot it, and here it was and it was repainted and the creek was flowing and the rock bridge had been built back up.

"That's Len Jacobs's house!" I said again, looking at my family perplexed.

"It's yours now," they told me. "Boy, you had big dreams."

"What do you mean it's mine?"

"This was what you dreamed of having. This is what you got," my grandmother said matter-of-factly.

How weird is that?

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My grandmother pulled the car into the driveway, and we all got out.

“So wait, this is really all mine?” I asked, taking a step back and looking at the house in full view.

“It is!” my grandmother said.

All mine! Len Jacobs’s house was mine? How did they get it up here? How did they know? Do I just go in?

“It’s your house, sweetheart,” my uncle Morris repeated, clearly seeing the disbelief that was still plastered across my face.

“Do I need keys?” I asked. “Is there an alarm system?”

“Do you think anyone’s going to rob your house in heaven?” my grandmother asked, as if it was the dumbest question.

So we went into my house.

Who told them how much I love Shabby Chic? Everything is Shabby Chic! All French-country plush sofas and chairs and pictures of my family in frames and, oh, a picture of Penelope and me from summer camp in 1979! Three bedrooms, all with eastern king-size beds and white Frette sheets with tons of eye-let pillows; oh, I love that so much. The beds are so high and plush, I’m like the princess and the pea. Oh my God, plasma screens in every room, with every channel on earth (or heaven, I guess) and every movie you’d ever want to see!

I have a Sub-Zero refrigerator and Wolf built-in ovens with All-Clad cookware and Le Creuset pots! I don’t even cook! I wonder if they’ve got cooking classes. I wonder if I have to clean.

“You never have to clean!” my grandmother said, reading my mind. “It’s a miracle, it all somehow cleans itself. There’s no



soap to clean it! The beds, too. You get out of bed and the bed is made! There's no washer/dryer because everything just cleans itself."

"Watch this!" my uncle Morris said, throwing a glass of red wine onto his charcoal gray suit. As it disappeared right before our eyes, he said, "I did that for a week straight when I got up here. It killed me . . . well, it would have if the stroke hadn't gotten me first!"

Incredible!

"Same with your hair," my grandmother said. "Oh, this is the greatest thing. Go now, dunk your head in some water and see what happens."

So I did, and where? Oh yes, you're not going to believe this: I dunked my head in my luxury spa bathtub with nine (yes nine!) jets streaming out the softest, warmest water you could imagine. Or I could have just gone for the marble shower with the rainforest showerhead and nine (again, yes, nine!) jets in the shower. I'm going to use the sauna later.

Unbelievable! You dunk your head in the water and when you come up out of the water, your hair is dry, professionally blow-dried, like Sally Hershberger was here giving me a blow out. I had to try that a few more times.

Okay, now I must tell you the best and most incredible part about being in heaven. Oh my god, I have to sit down because you're not going to believe it. I can't even believe it myself. Obviously, it's not better than seeing my grandparents again or my uncle Morris, but it is wilder than any dream I could have ever imagined when thinking about what heaven could possibly be like. You might not agree with me, your heaven might



be a lot different from my heaven. In my grandfather's version of heaven, he's got the Philadelphia Phillies playing games 24-7. My grandmother has her old lemon Cadillac Coupe deVille and her hair is a foot high on top of her head. My uncle Morris has Cuban cigars. Me? Oh, if this isn't heaven, I just don't know what is.

Okay, ready?

ONE OF MY BEDROOMS IS A CLOSET! Not just any closet, *my dream closet!* Marc Jacobs, Valentino, Oscar de la Renta, anything you can think of: it's here! Theory and Diane von Furstenberg, Ella Moss, Rebecca Taylor, Rogan and Vince and Moschino Cheap and Chic line my closet. Chip & Pepper, Citizens of Humanity, James, Joe's, and True Religion jeans, and they all fit perfectly!

Let me take a breath before I tell you about the shoes.

Are you sitting down? Okay.

Christian Louboutin, Yves Saint Laurent, Chloé, Manolo, Antik Batik, Robert Clergerie, all in my size and none of them pinch! I know because I immediately started slipping them on.

And the bags! Marc Jacobs, Mulberry, ohhhh, Lanvin, the Louis Vuitton signature bucket bag, Henry Cuir—hello, my darling!

All of it is contained in a bedroom turned into a closet. Mirrored doors house everything, and if you'll excuse me, I see the red duchesse satin Vera Wang that Oprah wore to her Legends Ball and I have to try it on.

Okay, now I've really died and gone to heaven.

I just took off my clothes to try on Oprah's dress and I caught a glimpse of myself in the mirror. What the . . . ?

“Grandmom? Where’s my cellulite and my boob stretch marks? Where’s my extra ten pounds?”

“Oh, for the last time!” my grandmother howls at me, “It’s heaven! There’s no cellulite or boob stretch marks or acne or pimples or oily skin or dry cracked hands or calluses or bunions or moles or anything! You’re dead, a spirit!”

That’s when I passed out for a few seconds.

When I came to, she was standing over me.

“Is now a good time to tell you that you can eat whatever you want and never gain weight?”

Yes, it was. That’s when I went down to my Sub-Zero refrigerator and proceeded to eat the entire contents. The chocolate mud cake was particularly good. Graeter’s ice cream from Ohio, water ice and Pat’s cheesesteaks from Philadelphia, bagels and pizza from John’s in New York, Chinese chicken salad from Chin Chin in Los Angeles, french fries from McDonald’s!

After I finished my snacks, we walked out onto my patio with the stunning black-and-white awning, the edges blowing in the perfect seventy-five-degree breeze. At this point I decided to put on my Cathy Waterman pearls; it seemed only natural to wear pearls on a patio with a black-and-white striped awning and plush wicker benches and recliners.

With a bottle of chilled 1990 Krug vintage champagne from France and a bowl of the most delectable strawberries (don’t know where they were grown, they just showed up in my refrigerator), we sat outside under my awning, my grandfather listening to a Phillies game on his headphones, my uncle Morris quietly sipping his champagne between puffs of his Cohiba, my grandmother telling me about all of her friends who made it up

here. “Henny Friedberg refuses to see Mort Friedberg and she dates a nice gentleman from eighteenth-century England.” As she gossiped, I could see someone moving into the house next door, a three-story Hamptons-style home. He was opening his back door. Was it . . . ?

“Adam!” I screamed out.

Gram stopped talking and immediately looked over at the house. Adam turned and looked back, still in his workout gear.

“Hey!” he called out, running over to the white picket fence that separated our lawns.

I picked up my red duchesse satin Vera Wang dress and proceeded to run in his direction, or tried to since Manolos, Vera Wang, and Cathy Waterman pearls are not made for running, even in heaven.

“You live right here?” I asked him.

“Yeah, isn’t this crazy? This is a house I used to see in the Hamptons when I was a kid.”

“This is Len Jacobs’s old house!” I said, pointing to my home.

“How crazy is this?” he declared. “Who is Len Jacobs?”

“Oh, he’s some kid I went to school with. It doesn’t matter,” I replied dismissively.

“Is this the greatest thing or what?”

“I see you dressed up for the occasion,” he said, remarking on my outfit.

How completely embarrassing.

“So, is this your family?” he asked as I turned around to find my grandparents and uncle standing right behind me, smiling in the way that only Jewish grandparents and uncles can

smile when they see that their granddaughter/niece in her mid- (fine, late) twenties might have a boyfriend. (By the way, in case you're wondering what Jewish grandparents are doing in heaven anyway, when all along the rabbis have never breathed so much as a word about heaven, all I can say is that when you're standing face-to-face with your long-dead relatives, it's kind of hard to argue about why you're there. And we were never a very religious family anyway. I'm just going to point to what my grandmother said: "Remember, honey, it's heaven. You get what you want.")

"Yes," I answered, a little humiliated as I introduced them.

"This is Adam," I told them. "He was in line with me earlier."

"Adorable," my grandmother said, boldly stroking her fingers through his hair. "Look at this head of hair, just stunning."

"Thank you," he said, smiling obligingly to Grandmom, but I could tell he felt ridiculous.

"So listen," he added, turning to me. "I have some grandparents and aunts and uncles coming over a little later. Maybe afterward you and I can check out the neighborhood."

"I'd love it," I answered, maybe a little too enthusiastically.

"Great," he said, "I'll drop by a little later."

"A half a day she's here and she already has a boyfriend," my grandmother said. "Is this heaven or what?"

I didn't want to say it out loud, but. . . . yes, this was heaven.

All This and Heaven Too

I am alone for the first time since I got to heaven. Tomorrow my grandparents are having a big family-reunion party for me, but for now they've left me to settle in. I'll get to meet my great-grandparents and my great-great-grandparents and anyone else in the family who's there. I think I'll wear my Michael Kors white sailor pants and this fabulous Norma Kamali fitted, black, off-the-shoulder cotton blouse with my Christian Louboutin five-inch espadrilles. Peaches is out playing in the yard with all of her thousands of toys. I thought I spoiled her on earth, but in heaven Peaches has all the dog bones she could ever chew on. I went outside about an hour ago to see what she was up to, and she was playing fetch with these balls that automatically hurl themselves across my lawn the second she drops one out of her mouth, and a group of other dogs had joined her and they were also running after balls. Talk about dog heaven.

One funny thing, in heaven Peaches obeys all my commands, something she never did on earth. I tell her to sit, she sits. I tell her to roll over, she rolls. I tell her to play dead, though, and she stands there like she doesn't know what it means. I know how she feels.



Having left Peaches to play, I'm lying in my bed with the ultracomfy Frette sheets, snacking on a tub of Baskin-Robbins chocolate mint ice cream (no calories!). Adam is coming over in about twenty minutes and I have nothing I need to do to get ready. Heaven.

Adam said he loved pot roast, and when I looked in my oven, a pot roast was baking. I'm not touching it, and I'm assuming it will be ready when I want it to be since I don't know how it got there in the first place. I don't need to work out. I don't need to do anything to my hair. I can just lie here and think about how amazing death really is.

The only thing that's really bothering me is how upset my parents must be, and even though I know there's nothing I can do about it, I can't help but worry for them. I wish I could share all this with them. I mean, I don't want them to die, but I do wish I could tell them I'm in heaven and happy. I must ask my grandmother how she came into my dreams so I can do that for them.

I know Penelope must be upset, too. I bet she'll start some kind of charity, she's so like that. She'll have a benefit for me, something like a "Save People from Getting Hit by MINI Coopers" benefit, and she'll probably raise a million dollars. Penelope married and divorced Melvin (believe me, the name matched his looks) and didn't sign a prenup, so she has millions. She does these benefits to feel better about herself and about having money she didn't work for. That's so Pen. Personally, I only went for the gift bags. I know Pen must be really upset by my death though. I'll have to go into her dreams, too, just as soon as I find out how.

The Ten Best Days of My Life

"Hello?" I hear from downstairs.

"Hi!" I shout out, startled as I jump from the bed and hide my tub of ice cream. "Up here!"

It's Adam and I'm in my camel-colored halter top and Joe's jeans and, damn, my ass looks fine.

"Hi," he says, entering my bedroom. He's in a gray T-shirt and jeans, and his hair is combed but nicely disheveled, and he's wearing black Prada driving shoes. The man is stunning.

"This place is amazing!" he says, looking around my bedroom.

"I know. Believe me, it's going to take me weeks to get used to the fact that it's mine."

"I know," he agrees as we start to walk into the other rooms. "I have a movie theater in my house. I think of a movie and it starts to play, or if I say, 'French, comedy, something I'd like that I've never seen before,' it's the best French comedy I've ever seen!"

"Incredible! Why didn't I wish for that?"

"Because you seem to have liked clothes," he says, dumbstruck by my closet.

"I didn't ask for it, it was just here," I tell him, a little self-conscious—though why should I be? He's got a movie theater.

"It's every girl's dream come true."

"I'm quite happy with it," I tell him as he looks at my shoe closet.

Then he turns around.

"But meeting you and living right next door, I hope that's a part of the plan."

"Here's hoping," I tell him.

* * *

"I'm still pissed off that I died so young," Adam confides as I serve him the pot roast on my Kate Spade Pebble Point dinnerware.

"I'm getting over it," I tell him. "They make it really easy to accept," I say, digging into the garlic potatoes (crisp on the outside and tender on the inside, just like I like 'em, of course).

"I keep thinking about all the things I'll miss out on," he continues. "I never got married. I never had kids. I was about to leave my investment firm and go out on my own. I was excited about that. I could have retired in five years. Why was I so crazy about making money? At least my niece and nephew will have college paid for. Still, was that all there was?"

"That's all there was," I tell him. "It was life and it was all we knew. Me? I'm going to make the best of this. I don't know why, but I'm okay with the whole 'getting hit by a MINI Cooper' thing. I feel content. I guess I'm a little irked that I died so young, and, yes, I had plans, but now I feel like that's over, you know, 'such is life.' If I compared life to what I have now, this house, that closet, seeing my grandparents again instead of having to work every day and slave and worry about my future, I'm okay with where I am now."

"You have no regrets?" he asks.

"Sure I have regrets," I tell him after thinking for a minute. "My father and I weren't getting along for a few years. I wish that could have been straightened out. We were kind of on the way to fixing it when this happened. I don't know. I feel like I never did anything to make him proud, and I wish that I had



been able to do that, but what am I going to do now, sit and worry about it? There's nothing I can do about it now," I tell him as if I don't care, but I really do.

"So you've reconciled with it?" he asks.

"Yes," I lie, "I really have."

"I feel like I had more I wanted to do," he tells me as he takes a sip of wine, "so much more I wanted to accomplish."

I have some more things I'd like to say to Adam at this point, but I don't feel like starting some life-and-death debate. Yeah, sure, I had plans too, but when you're faced with all the good stuff that heaven brings, between you and me, truthfully, and I'm being totally honest here, my sincere feeling is, get over it, life was really freaking hard. Here, you think "pot roast" and one is cooking in your oven. I don't see what the problem is.

"The strangest thing about it is that I have this really calm feeling," he says, "like none of that matters anymore, but I still keep trying to worry about my family and how sad they must feel."

"Me too!" I exclaim. "How much of a gyp is that?"

"I know!" he says. "I feel like I should try to help them, but how do I do that?"

"I've been thinking the same thing. I'm going to ask my grandmother about that tomorrow."

"You'll let me know," he says, adding, "still, I really can't complain. I've got a whole game room in my house, but the only game I want to play is Pac-Man."

"I was the greatest Pac-Man player of all time," I tell him. I really was.

"No, I don't think so. I was the number one high scorer at Frank's Pizza in Greenwich for six months straight."

"Uh, hello. You might not have seen the Pac-Man machine at Lenny's Hot Dogs in Margate, New Jersey, in the summer of 1982. I believe the initials of the five high scorers were the same. Yep, AJD, that was me."

"Oh, get ready for a challenge," he dares me.

"You're on," I tell him as we jump up from the table at the same time and run out the door toward Adam's home.

After four games and three bonus rounds, it was a tie: 200,008 to 200,008.

"Must have something to do with this place," Adam says as we both agree, laughing.

"You know, I don't know how this is going to sound, but I'm just going to say it," he says, putting his arms around my waist. "I'm kind of glad you died when I did."

"And somehow, I take that as the supreme compliment," I say, looking into his eyes.

"Silver lining," he whispers, leaning into me.

I spent my first night in heaven at a hot investment banker's Hamptons-style house.

In the morning, as I started to try to sneak out, I caught a glimpse of myself in the mirror. No makeup smudges and my hair still looked perfect.

I got back into bed.

Adam turned over and put his arms around me. His breath was clean.

The Jig Is Up

I knew it! I just knew it!

This whole thing was too good to be true. I just knew it! Nothing comes for free in this world (or this world).

So I come back to my Len Jacobs's farmhouse after the best sex I've ever had in my entire life and death, and this frigging angel is sitting at my kitchen table.

"Oh, hi," I said, real nonchalant. "Are you here to clean up? I didn't sleep at home last night, but there are some dirty dishes on the dining room table and I believe I left a tub of ice cream upstairs in the main bedroom." What did I know? Why would some angel be sitting in my home?

"No, Alex," this angel, a woman, about sixty, with a bad dye job and feathered wings, said, smirking as she got up and put a coffee cup in my Len Jacobs's sink. "I'm Deborah, your guardian angel. You might remember me. Do I look a little familiar to you?"

I started to think. Now that she mentioned it, she was starting to look a little familiar.

"Were you at the Radnor Rolls roller rink when I was in the sixth grade and fell and broke my wrist?"



"Yes!" she exclaimed. "I played the part of the director of the roller rink. You might have broken your arm altogether if I hadn't caught you."

"Wait, was that you the other night? The night I died, I got really wasted at Jones and a cab pulled up? Weren't you the woman driving the cab?"

"Me again."

"You were a brunette."

"Sometimes I'm a brunette, sometimes a redhead. I change it depending on how I feel that day."

"I know what you mean," I said, pouring myself a cup of coffee. "Well, thanks for watching over me. You saved me from driving myself home from Jones the other night, but I guess you were a little slow a couple of hours later with that MINI Cooper, huh?" I laughed, but she didn't. "I was actually just about to make some midmorning waffles. I'm loving this no-gaining-weight thing. You interested in joining me?"

"Uh, sure, I'm never one to turn down waffles," she paused, "but to tell you the truth, I'm here to discuss some things with you."

I wasn't really listening to her as I grabbed bacon out of the Sub-Z.

"It's so nice of you to come and see me," I said, pulling out the waffle maker, which, as it goes here, was already full of perfectly light and fluffy waffles cooked to golden brown perfection.

I served two plates of waffles with blueberries and maple syrup on my MacKenzie-Childs blue-flowered, gold tipped Honeymoon plates.

“Oh, mimosas!” I suddenly remembered, jumping up.

“Alex,” she said, “why don’t you take a seat for a second.”

So I did. I honestly thought she was just going to welcome me to heaven and tell me some more things I hadn’t figured out yet. Maybe she was going to teach me how to get into my parents’ dreams so I could tell them that I’m all right and that I even met a hot financial advisor. They’d be so happy for me.

“Alex,” she started, “first of all, I want to congratulate you on a wonderful life. We here in heaven do take into account that you only lived a brief time, but we do have some concerns.”

That’s when I knew the jig was up.

“Of course, you never stole—except for that Bonne Bell Lip Smacker in the fifth grade. We excuse those petty things. Look . . .,” she said, taking my hand, “you never murdered or committed any sins that were punishable by law. You never hurt another human being deliberately. You were a good person in those respects.”

“Thank you. I was. I might have bounced a few checks, but who doesn’t?” I said, getting nervous. What was she getting at?

“Alex,” she continued, still holding my hand, “where you are right now is in the highest plane in heaven. You know the term *seventh heaven*, right?”

Duh.

“Of course,” I said, still unable to understand what she was getting at.

“Well, the seventh plane is reserved for people that we feel did an exemplary job on earth. Some are those who went through great hardships or through poverty or those who pulled themselves up from devastating occurrences in their lives.”

"Sure," I said. "I get it."

"Most, though, are on the seventh plane simply because they lived normal lives. They faced their obstacles and tackled them with pride. Take your grandparents for example. Your grandfather came from nothing and built his accounting firm. He provided for your grandmother and mother. You grandmother stood firm over your mother, teaching her to be a strong woman. Your uncle Morris forwent a family of his own so that he could take care of his sisters. These are exemplary lives, lives that were lived in teaching and taking care of those around them."

"Yes, of course, they were great," I said, still trying to understand what she was getting at. "I would have done things like that myself, but, as you know, I died very young."

"And that's why we're giving you a break," she told me, which made me breathe a huge sigh of relief.

"Whew," I said digging into my waffles, "I thought you were going to send me to hell or something. Hey, could you pass the bacon?"

"Noooo," she said, passing the crisp bacon. "Of course you wouldn't be sent to hell, but there are some things we just don't understand. Some of your actions in life concern us."

"What did I do?" I asked, getting a bit offended. I mean, could you blame me?

"Well, it's not what you did, it's what you didn't do. As I said, I watched over you your whole life, and it was a good one, but the one thing we, as your guardian angels, can't do is figure out why you lived your life the way you did, and that's why sometimes we like to give some people an entrance exam."

The Ten Best Days of My Life

“An entrance exam? There’s a test?” I said, dropping my fork.

“Nothing to be too concerned about,” she said, taking my hand again, “and the worst that can happen is that you go down a plane or two.”

“A plane or two?”

“Well, the fourth plane of heaven is what we’re thinking.”

“You just said ‘a plane or two,’ now you’re jumping three planes! How bad was I?”

“Alex, fourth heaven is still heaven, it’s just not *this* heaven.”

For the first time since I got to *this* heaven, I wasn’t hungry anymore.

“But I still get to see everyone?”

“Sure, you get to see your family, your grandparents, but I’m afraid Adam is out of the picture. You’ll still date, but I’ve been told it’s a bit harder to find a soul mate.”

“What if Adam and I fall in love? Isn’t there some sort of a thing like green-card status that would let me stay in seventh heaven where he is?”

“That’s funny,” she laughed, then paused and looked at me seriously, shaking her head, “but, no, I’m afraid not.”

“But I get to keep the house?”

“Well, you’ll have a home. It’s not this house, though. You’ll be in an apartment and it will have a doorman. There’s a gym but no pool. There is a community pool, however, that I hear is quite lovely.”

“A community pool? That’s disgusting. What about the clothes?”

"Of course you'll still be clothed. You won't have a bedroom that's a closet; you'll have a regular closet, not a walk-in. Unfortunately, however, the best clothes are for those in seventh heaven. The clothes won't be this year's styles, they'll be last year's, but they'll still fit and be reasonably well tailored."

"What about the shoes?"

"Again, they're last year's styles. Oh, and they may pinch."

"Okay, but I'll still be able to eat whatever I want."

"Well," she paused. "Sure, you can eat whatever you want, but you'll have to make it yourself. In fourth heaven the good news is that you can still eat whatever you want and you'll never have high cholesterol or high blood pressure. Unfortunately, you will have to watch what you eat if you want to retain your figure."

"WHO CARES ABOUT HIGH CHOLESTEROL? Can't we have a choice?"

That's when the anxiety started in.

"My plasma screens?"

"Analog tube."

"Dish?"

"Basic cable."

"Peaches?"

"She stays on the seventh plane. All dogs go to seventh heaven."

"I knew it!" I said, starting to cry. "I knew it was all too good to be true."

"Look, I'm not saying that it's all bad," she said, putting her arm around me as I sat looking over my three-thousand-calorie brunch. "It's not over. All you have to do is pass the entrance exam and you can stay. They just want to make sure you were

leading a life that was satisfying and would eventually lead to self-fulfillment.”

I put my head in my hands.

“Take today to think about it,” she said. “Remember, it’s not over. Think back on your life. Think about the steps you took in your life. Think about where you were going. You are a smart woman. You will figure out how to get through this exam.”

“Well, what’s the exam? Are there athletics involved? I can’t climb a rope. Is there math? I suck at math! Is it like the SATs?” I’m gulping for air at this point, just barely holding back the panic attack.

“It’s a simple essay, that’s all you have to do.”

“Oh,” I said, taking a deep breath. “An essay, well, that shouldn’t be too hard. What’s the topic?”

“The topic is, What were the ten best days of your life?”

“But how can that be judged?” I asked after thinking about it for a moment. “I mean, isn’t that subjective?”

“It’s judged by what those days tell us about where your life would have eventually taken you.”

“I don’t know!” I screamed out. “Look, this is some kind of mistake. Isn’t there someone I could speak to about this? Where’s God or Mary or someone else higher up? There must be a supervisor that I could speak to about this!”

“Look, I’ve got a new being I’ve got to look over, but I promise you it won’t be as bad as you think, and if you don’t pass, even the third or fourth plane of heaven is not so bad.”

“The third plane? Now you’re talking third plane? This is getting worse by the second! What do you get there, a trash bag full of trendy styles from three years ago?”

"It's a tote bag, not a trash bag," she answered, sounding offended.

"I'm going to throw up," I said, gagging and heading toward the sink.

"Alex, calm down. You'll be fine. Look, take today; look back on your life. You'll be ready. I looked after you for a long time and I have all the confidence in you."

"But I want to stay here," I shouted again, stomping my foot.

"Write a good essay," she said, taking a last bite of her waffle. "I left two notebooks upstairs in your bedroom. I'll be back in two weeks to pick them up."

And with that, Deborah the bad-dye-job guardian angel left my Len Jacobs's house. I didn't bother to show her out.

They Shoot People in Fourth Heaven. Don't They?

“For the last time, it’s nothing!” my grandmother said, trying to feed me her famous chopped liver. “It’s just a stupid test. What do you need that big house for anyway?” she said as I looked around her colonial oceanfront estate with its Kentucky bluegrass fields and horses in their stables.

“But I don’t get Adam. I don’t get the clothes. I’ll have cellulite again!”

“Jesus, Alexandra, if those are the things that were important to you in life, maybe you should be on a different plane.”

“Grandma?” I said, starting to cry. “How could you even say a thing like that? What if you couldn’t have your old lemon yellow Cadillac? What if your hair was flat?”

“So it’s flat. I still have you and Grandpa and uncle Morris and my parents and my friends.”

She had a point there, and I felt like a spoiled brat, but, still, what was the difference from being on earth? What’s the point of heaven if there’s no incentive?

“Why are you yelling at her? She’s upset,” my grandfather broke in. “She wants the heaven that she deserves.”



“Because she’s acting like that’s all she wants, like heaven is some kind of free-for-all,” my grandmother fought back.

“Alex,” my uncle Morris said, “all they want to know is if you feel you lived your life in a way that was fulfilling for you. They don’t understand why you never settled down or something. They want to know where you were going with your life.”

And that’s when I knew I was doomed. Where was I going with my life before the MINI Cooper struck me? I had no idea what I was doing with my life. All that time worrying about what I was doing with my life. All the complaining to my girlfriends about the way my life was headed. All those times my parents sat me down and told me they were worried about where my life was heading. All those times I looked at myself and knew that I was lost, caught up in my own world of circles that led nowhere. It was all coming back to haunt me now.

“You’re not stupid,” my grandmother said. “You are a smart young woman and the choices you made might not have been the best, but they want to know why you made them. If your motives were pure, you’ll be fine. You knew what you were doing. You knew what you wanted out of life. Write the essay and tell them what they want and be done with it already!”

So I decided to go for it.

I took the day and thought about it, and here’s what I wrote.

THE TEN BEST DAYS OF MY LIFE



BY

Alexandra Joan Dorenfield



I'm going to start my first "best day" at conception. This is not to say I believe that life begins at conception. I honestly don't know the answer to that question, and, as you might know, there's a lot of talk about it down on earth. (Incidentally, I would really like to know the official answer, if you wouldn't mind telling me sometime.)

I'm starting out at conception because for me it was a lucky day, the first "best day," if you will. Also, I think it's going to give you a better picture of my life, what I did and why I did it and what was eventually going to lead to a fulfilled existence on earth (or would have if I hadn't died so very young).

See, I was a mistake, and a really good mistake if I do say so myself.

My parents were told that they would never be able to conceive. Which one of my parents had the problem, I don't know; no one would ever say. But if I were a betting woman, I'd go with my dad, and here's why:

In the late 1960s they didn't have things like in vitro or test-tube this and surrogate-womb that. If you couldn't have kids, you had two choices: adopt or don't. By the time I came along,

my parents had been married for about ten years, and in all that time it was the “barren couple” life for them.

My dad, Bill Dorenfield, is a strong man. He’s a self-made man who started life without a dime. My grandfather, his father, was a door-to-door salesman who sold everything from pots and pans to children’s clothing. My dad used to say of my grandfather, “If he ever made a dime, somehow it would only amount to a nickel.” My grandfather wasn’t a drinker or a druggie or a gambler. Evidently, my grandfather was just really bad at making money (and if that’s hereditary, I definitely got the gene).

My dad says that he can’t remember a time in his life when he didn’t work. My dad loves to work (guess that skips a generation). He would tell me stories of how, as a young kid growing up in West Philadelphia in the 1930s, he’d get up before dawn with my grandfather and they’d drive deep into the farmlands of Pennsylvania or the opposite way through New Jersey to the shore and the farmlands and then work their way back to West Philly. Along the way, they stopped at homes and sold whatever my grandfather had to sell that day. This was coming out of the Depression and into World War II, and, as my dad tells it, bringing a young child along on the sales calls ensured “a couple of suckers” who felt bad for them. Sometimes my dad would play the part of the motherless child. Sometimes he would cough on cue, as the sickly kid who could get some medicine if the poor sucker would just buy the pot and pan set or the frilly little girl’s dress, even if they didn’t have a little girl. This was also the time that my grandfather gave my dad, as he put it, “the best piece of advice anyone could give.”

“It’s never going to be any of this crap we’re selling that’s



going to make us rich,” he’d tell my dad. “When you get old enough, start buying land.”

I know, so *Grapes of Wrath*. I think it’s safe to say, though, that neither my grandfather nor my dad ever picked up that book for pleasure. Therefore, even if my grandfather couldn’t sell anything and never read a book, he was still a smart man.

Now, on the other hand, my dad said he learned early on that my grandfather’s way of selling—“Oh, you’re not interested? Well, have a nice day”—was not the way to sell. My dad figured out that the longer he pestered the people, the higher his success rate. Finally, the people would get exasperated and buy something. My grandfather called my dad his lucky charm, though to hear my dad tell the story luck had nothing to do with it. It was sheer perseverance. The selling with my grandfather went on for years, and in all that time my dad still got straight As in school. He didn’t really have any friends, at least none that I ever heard about; they came later with the money he made. He was never one to participate in sports. He was a strong-headed young man who refused to let anything get in his way when it came to making a buck.

This is why I believe that it was my father who was incapable of producing offspring. My dad has always been incapable of admitting weakness or failure, so if it wasn’t his problem, wouldn’t they have just owned up to it being my mom? She’s a very open person about that sort of thing. But really, though, is it weakness or failure when it’s just some stupid mechanical problem? Why, anyway, does it always seem less terrible of a thing if the woman can’t have children? I’ve never understood it. What makes a man less manly if his sperm doesn’t swim?

Anyway, after high school my dad put himself through the University of Pennsylvania and then went on to business school at Wharton, and he eventually became one of the most successful real estate developers in the United States, if not the world.

Through all of his hardheadedness and his determination to make something of himself, there was one weakness in his life (well, except, of course, the obvious sluggish sperm setback).

Now, Achilles had his heel. Superman had his kryptonite. I had the entire third floor at Barneys New York (ha!). My dad's weakness: my mother.

Maxine Elaine Firestein was born into a middle-class family in the Wynnefield section of Philadelphia nine years after my dad was born. Like my own father, my mother's father worked his way through school and became an accountant. They weren't rich-rich or anything like that, but they were comfortable enough to have their own detached home, a car, and cashmere sweaters (the rage in the 1950s), whereas my father grew up with his family, including two younger sisters, in a one-bedroom apartment in West Philadelphia.

Maxine was the only child of Evelyn and Harry Firestein and, to hear my dad and others tell it, "the prettiest thing for miles and miles and miles."

"Maxine was the Grace Kelly of our neighborhood," my mom's friend Sally LaFair would tell me. She really was, though. She still is.

It always kind of irked me that I look more like my dad. My mom has this porcelain skin and these cheekbones that go on for days. Unlike my mom's, my skin could take on a nice tan, but when you have a mother who glows, you hate that your skin



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can tan. I've tried to find the cheekbones in me, but all I ever feel is flat bone.

My mom's hair shines, not one split end, ever, and she somehow never shows her roots, even though she dyes her hair blonde now. I had only split ends, not a clean end in sight. Roots grew in the second I paid the hairdresser's bill.

My mom could always eat whatever she wanted and never gain weight. I would look at a hot fudge sundae and gain five pounds. At sixty-five, she still has a perfect figure. I hadn't left the house without wearing a body shaper since I was fourteen.

My mom was also the most popular girl at Overbrook High School. I was not the most popular girl at the Friends School. Dana Stanbury was, and although Dana and I were friends, I was a follower and not the leader.

My mom got straight As in school. I slipped by.

They practically held out the red carpet on her first day at University of Pennsylvania. I got in when someone left the back door open.

My mom is the nicest person in the entire world. She takes in stray dogs. I bought Peaches for \$800.

Everyone in Philadelphia at that time knew that the girl to get was Maxine Elaine Firestein, with her perfect figure, her perfect clothes, and her perfect bubbly personality. My dad took note.

My mom says that the first time she ever saw my dad was in Bonwit Teller on Chestnut Street. She was shopping with my grandmother one day, at the scarf counter on the first floor, and he approached them. What she didn't know (but would find out later) was that my dad had spotted her many months before.

It was at the Latin Casino, some nightclub they used to go to then. My mom, of course, was with a date, and my dad was alone by the bar when he spotted her. He said he'd never seen a woman more beautiful: her blonde curls, the way her black strapless hugged her body. She was the main hottie of the Latin Casino.

By the time he approached my mom in Bonwit Teller, Dad had become something of a mini-mogul, buying small properties here and there. He wasn't rich at this point, but he was on his way. He had just moved his parents and two sisters into a bigger, two-bedroom apartment, in fact.

Unfortunately, both of his parents died before I was born, so I never knew them. (Hey wait, don't I get to meet them now? What's up with that?)

Anyway, here's how they met. By the way, this is my favorite story ever. I think I had my mother tell me this story about fifty thousand times, so you'll notice that I really know the particulars:

It was December 1958, and it was one of those bitter cold days where anything that's not covered, like your ears or your nose, is instantly freezing. My grandmother and my mother were doing some Christmas shopping. (Yes, I know, my whole family is Jewish, but what can I say? We always celebrated Christmas, too. Knowing my family, I chalk it up to embracing any excuse to get together and give presents and eat. Plus, my grandparents' faith was really lax. My parents definitely followed their lead.) Anyway, by the time they got to Bonwit's on Chestnut Street, they decided that anything they had to buy they'd buy there, because the thought of walking outside again

still made my mom shiver every time she told me the story. The thing you also have to remember, it was different in those days. A department store was a destination and not just a store you popped into for some panty hose. My grandmother and mother always looked starry eyed when they told me about Bonwit's. You'd start out with lunch and then work your way through the store. All the salesladies knew you by name and knew your taste, not like now when you have to hunt someone down to open up a dressing room. There were lots and lots of Christmas presents to buy that year. The people in my grandpop's accounting firm, cousins, neighbors, and friends. Both my grandmother and my mother had been invited to so many Christmas parties that year, so buying some new dresses was also high on the list.

My mom always says that had she not met my father that day, she still would have remembered it as being one of the most special days she ever had.

"Everything about that day was magical," she'd say with her eyes shining. "The store was full of people and everyone had the same problem of what to buy for who and, of course, what to buy for themselves, so there was a lot of chatter and comparing what other people were buying." My mom forced my grandmother to buy a black-sequined chiffon dress with bell sleeves for New Year's Eve. She always says, "I'll never forget how beautiful she looked in that dress as she stood on the boxed step in front of the three-way mirror. The tailor worked around her, cinching in her waist and gathering the full crinolines underneath." My mom bought a maroon eyelet dress with a teardrop front and spaghetti straps. Then they went into the lingerie de-

partment and fitted that dress with more crinolines than you would have thought possible. She said she looked like a flower in full bloom, but not in a good way, which is when she'd always tell me a fact of life that, as much as I try to remember it, I always forget: moderation is the key.

So, after lunch, they went down to the first floor where they decided on scarves for all of the secretaries in Grandpop's office. My grandmother and mom were deliberating between a sky blue scarf or one with little orange polka dots for Miss DeMarco, Grandpop's secretary at the time, when Mom heard this strong voice say, "Nothing could make you look more beautiful."

At this point she would always add this aside to the story: "Now, it wasn't how handsome Daddy looked, even though he was. It wasn't the gorgeous suit he was wearing, even though that was a part of it. It was the way he said those words to me in that deep assertive voice he has when I hear him talking to clients on the phone: 'Nothing could make you look more beautiful.'"

"Excuse me?" Grandmom said. Grandmom was wary of this man from the first moment.

"Mrs. Firestein," he said, extending his hand. "I'm Bill Dorenfield," he added in that same self-assured voice. "I'm going to marry your daughter."

My grandmother took a step back and looked him over. He was leaning over the scarf display like he was lounging at the pool.

"Not with that swagger you are not," she said, taking my mom's hand.

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Grandmom and Mom talked about it later. Grandmom heard all about Bill Dorenfield from Lil Feldman because he had taken out Lil's daughter, Rona, and tried to have his way with her, which in those days meant a kiss. Rona always joked whenever she ran into my parents in later years, "I would have given him more had it not been the fifties."

The next day two-dozen white roses arrived at the house, one bunch for Mom and one for Grandmom, with no card attached.

"No card," Grandmom said, dumping the flowers in the trash. "Who does he think he is? Doesn't he know that a woman needs to hear the words?"

From that moment, my mom said, she stayed out of it. She knew. If he could get through to my grandmother then he was going to get the pretty Maxine Elaine.

The next day he sent my grandmother's favorite tapioca pudding from Horn & Hardart's, the one with the huge pearls, not the runny, bitsy ones everyone else sold.

Then he sent tickets to the symphony.

"No card," she said, throwing them in the trash. "He's sky out of his mind."

The next day he sent Grandmom's favorite perfume. He never told anyone how he knew it was her favorite.

"It's not my favorite anymore," Grandmom said, dabbing some on her wrists and throwing it in a drawer.

The next day it was a bottle of French wine.

"Cheap," she said, looking at the bottle.

Then he appeared at the door.

"What's it going to take?" he asked her.

"Why don't you just say the words?" she demanded.

"I want to marry your daughter," he said.

"Take her on a date first!" she said.

"Fine!"

And so he did.

My parents were married the following May. Word has it, you never saw two people in this world who were happier than my grandmother and my father.

Don't you just love that story? Don't you just love how my mother knew from the first second she saw my dad? Don't you just love how she let my grandmother take over? That's my mom. Feminine, beautiful, and able to get what she wants without ever saying a word. I was never like that. Like my grandmother, I always had to repeat the words over and over until someone got the point. All my mother had to do was rely on her grace and femininity.

When I was about ten, and my parents were celebrating their twentieth wedding anniversary, I had come home from school to find a brand-new lemon-colored Cadillac Coupe deVille and, oddly enough, my father. He was never home so it was really strange to find him there.

"Did you get a new car?" I asked him.

"No, I've got to drop that off someplace," he told me. "Why don't you come along?"

So I did. To be with my father in the middle of an afternoon on a workday was prize enough for me. To go for a ride, well, that was another.

We drove up to my grandparents' house as my grandmother came outside.

“What’s this? Another new car for yourself? What about one for my daughter?” she shouted out as she crossed her arms.

“It’s for you,” he said, agitated, handing her the keys.

“What am I going to do with this car?” she complained to him. “It’s too nice. People will think I’m showing off.”

“Tell them your son-in-law gave it to you for twenty years of wedded bliss.”

“Fine,” she said, adding, “I suppose I have to give you a ride home now.”

That kind of bickering between my grandmother and my dad went on and on and on, by the way. The day my grandmother died, though, I don’t think anyone cried more than my dad. Come to think of it, I guess she must have really loved him, too, since she’s still driving that car up here.

So now you know the ins and outs of the love affair between my parents. You can imagine how they must have felt when they couldn’t have children.

To tell you the truth, they never really talked about what they went through. My mom said that after I was born all that talk didn’t matter, but I can only imagine it was awful. I’m assuming that tests and procedures were performed and tries were made, but with no success. My dad has always had it out for doctors, and I can’t help but think it has something to do with that time.

So here’s how my first best day happened, which is kind of sad, but, as you know already, it has a really good ending. My parents, by the way, never told me this story; my uncle Morris did when he was babysitting for me once. When I asked them if it was true, they didn’t say it wasn’t, but they brushed it off in

the way parents do when they don't want to talk about difficult times with their child. That's how I know it's true.

My mom had gone to the doctor for her yearly gynecological checkup, real routine. My mom always goes around Thanksgiving, and so do I (or I did) because she took me with her for my first visit and I just started on that schedule.

Anyway, this particular year, 1968 to be exact, there was a problem. uncle Morris told me they'd found a lump in her breast.

Now remember, this was the late 1960s. Women weren't banged on the head to check their breasts every month like they are now, so if it was a lump, it was even scarier, and according to my uncle Morris, my father was petrified. My grandmother was hysterical. The only one who wasn't as scared, as you could imagine, was my mom.

"If it's something, we'll take care of it," uncle Morris said Mom said at the time. That's so my mother. I bet she was nuts inside though. Knowing my mom, she probably cried in the bathroom then dried her tears and put on a smile before anyone caught her. She's just never been a public freaker about anything, unlike me.

Anyway, my dad called all the best doctors he could find in Philadelphia and New York. He even called some as far away as London and Paris. A biopsy was done. They still weren't sure. My father insisted that a doctor in New York check it out, so my parents and grandparents went up to New York. My father rented suites at the Plaza.

The doctors needed to dig even more. So my mother let them. Another biopsy.

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Days went by before the results from the biopsy came back. Everyone was on edge, especially my dad, who didn't go to work for three weeks, something that, as you know, never happened again.

Finally, the tests came back.

Benign!

My father wanted another test. They went back to the doctors in Philadelphia.

Benign!

He went back to New York to check with the doctors one more time.

Benign!

That night some kind of big celebration went on with my parents.

It was only a few weeks after that, though, that my mother wasn't feeling well again and everyone feared the worst, especially my dad.

"Damn doctors get everything wrong! All of them are no good," my uncle Morris told me Dad shouted.

My mother couldn't keep anything down. She was tired all the time. My dad was out of his mind. They went back to New York; they went back to the doctors in Philadelphia. Tests were done.

"There is nothing wrong," the doctors in New York and Philadelphia told my parents.

"Then why is she upchucking in the bathroom all the time, smart-ass doctors?" my dad complained.

"She's pregnant," the doctors in New York said.

"She's pregnant," the doctors in Philadelphia said.

And nine months later, I was born.

Now if you are a doubter, and you believe like I do that my parents' previous difficulty conceiving was the result of dad's malfunctioning sperm, you might start to wonder if my mother had an affair with Frank the mailman. If you knew my mom, though, you'd know she had no affair. If you knew how much love there was between these two people, you'd know that neither would ever stray. I truly believe that it was their love that got them through my mother's breast cancer scare and then brought them together that exhilarating night to conceive me.

My parents were always much older than the other parents at school. My mom was thirty-three when she had me. My dad was forty-two. Today that's nothing, but back then it always irked me a little. I was always afraid they would die when I was young. (Ironic, huh?) I loved the times they came from though. I loved when they would tell me about decades past, before cell phones and iPods and the Internet—before television, if you can believe it! I loved that I got a firsthand account of what department stores were like in the fifties. I loved that my house was filled with Sinatra and Ella and Gershwin and Cole Porter all the time and how they danced cheek to cheek, instead of like my generation who grinds butt to butt. In other words, whatever might have happened between us, I don't know how I got so lucky as to have them as parents.

When I think about it sometimes, I wonder what gave me the strength to be the only sperm that could swim hard enough to come into this world (or that world). I've never been

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a good athlete, so those other sperm must have been some real weaklings.

You know how you inherit your dad's nose or your mom's laugh? Maybe you also inherit their love for each other and that's what gave me the strength to get through . . . I don't know. You'll have to let me in on what the deal is with that.



SOS from Heaven!

Did that suck?

Seriously, did you like the first day I described, or did it suck?

Am I doing a good job so far?

Normally, in situations like this, when I'm at my wits' end, I usually call Penelope or my mom to talk me off the ledge. That usually works, but of course I can't do that. I need my mom. If I could just hear Penelope say, "That was so good!"

Should I have mentioned that I was a C-section baby? Do you get sympathy points if you're a C-section baby?

Why can't I contact my mom? On earth they were able to put a man on the moon and build the Internet. Here in heaven they have shoes that don't pinch and no cellulite. You mean to tell me in all this time that heaven has existed, no one has ever figured out a way to talk from heaven to earth besides appearing in people's dreams? Where's that Alexander Graham Bell? I'm sure that guy's in seventh heaven just lolling his days away sipping mai tais when he could be figuring out a way to make a cell phone work from my Len Jacobs house to Penelope's apartment in Manhattan or my mom's bedside table.

Lazy-Ass Graham Bell. That's what they should call him now.





There are two big questions that are always in my mind. The first one: how much money makes you rich?

I saw that on a billboard once. It was an ad for some homeless charity. Right next to the question in big bold letters there was a picture of a homeless guy, unshaven, crackly looking, but he had this huge smile on his face. His two front teeth were missing, a couple on each side, too. I imagined him with a photographer holding a camera in his face and people around him holding meters and shining reflectors at his body. I wondered if in that one moment in the guy's life, none of the bad stuff mattered. It didn't matter that he was homeless or had to go through Dumpsters for food. At that point he was the richest man in the world, and it had nothing to do with money: all eyes were on him and that's why he was smiling.

Then again, the whole picture could have been staged. He might have been an actor making \$500, the crackly face was makeup, and they blacked out his teeth. I go back and forth with these conclusions from time to time. It depends on my mood.

Either way, I sent them ten bucks and then they bombarded



me with junk mail for the rest of my life (addressed to Mr. Alexander Dorenfield, which was annoying in its own right), but that's beside the point. They did bring up a remarkable question.

The second question I've always thought about is this: how many friends do you really need in the world? Remember that famous Lee Iacocca quote? He was the president of some car company, was it Chrysler? It doesn't matter. Anyway, he said . . . actually, it wasn't even him who said it, it was his dad, but he paraphrased it. He said, "My father said, 'If you've got five real friends, you've had a great life.' "

I think that's bull.

I think if you have one real friend, you don't need any backup. And you can quote me on that (just make sure the quote is attributed to Ms. Alexandra Dorenfield and not Mr. Alexander, ha!).

I had a lot of friends in my short time on earth. When I look back, I see a lot of dinners, a lot of clubbing, a lot of partying. I see shopping and gossiping. I see the friends I made in Philadelphia and Los Angeles. Some of them were really nice people. Still, none of them were friends with a capital *F*.

See, I have the greatest friend that anyone could ever have. After her there was no point in getting close to anyone else.

I met my best friend, Penelope Goldstein, in the fourth grade at the Friends School. But before I tell you about her, I have to give you a little more background so you can get the whole picture.

I've always been sort of misunderstood (at least I felt that way). As you know, I'm special. I was a miracle baby. Not only was I a

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miracle baby, I was also an only child. I was also an only grandchild and an only niece. I had no cousins or even a distant cousin. Sadly, the Dorenfield line ended with me. (Gosh, that just made me really sad to realize.) So here's the thing. If your child/grandchild/niece was not only the miracle child but the last heir to the throne, wouldn't you treat this girl like a fragile princess?

If you wouldn't, well, whatever, my family did.

From birth to the age of twenty-five, I got everything I ever wanted (materially and, sure, yeah, lots of hugs and kisses). When I look back on my childhood, if there was a doll or a toy or some clothing I wanted, I got it. Not only was I the miracle child, but my father was the miracle real estate man. We were rich, no bones about it.

There goes that question in my head again though: how much money makes you rich?

Was I a happy kid? Let's look at the evidence: I had a carnival at my fifth birthday, with a merry-go-round and a Ferris wheel. For my sixth birthday, fifty clowns came out of a tiny Volkswagen and then circled around me with balloons, presents, and cakes. (That actually scared the crap out of me. *Errsshh* . . . thinking about it still freaks me out.) On my seventh birthday, a helicopter picked up my parents and me, and we had lunch as we flew around Philadelphia. My eighth birthday was a trip to New York to the FAO Schwarz toy store. The store shut down just for me, and I had five minutes to pick out anything and everything I wanted. The first gift I picked was a life-size giraffe. My parents were laughing hysterically, watching little me trying to drag that thing while also trying to grab a Barbie paint-by-numbers set off a shelf.

How cool were all those birthdays?

And really, how amazing was my childhood with all the toys FAO Schwarz could provide? Well, it was okay. See, there was one problem: for all those birthdays and all that stuff, I never had a friend to share them with.

Poor little rich girl. That was me. It goes back to the question I asked in the beginning: how much money makes you rich?

Now you get where I'm coming from.

I'm not saying it wasn't awesome to have all that stuff. It was like seventh heaven on earth. It would have been a bitch of a decision if my parents came to me one day and said, "You get a choice: all this great stuff or five really good friends." Thank goodness that question never came up.

(Wait. I just thought of this. Is this something I'm supposed to learn from writing this essay? Does all my stuff in seventh heaven equal my childhood? Is that the reason for this essay? Are you giving me a choice? Fine. I'll take seventh heaven, with my grandparents and Adam. That wonderful guy and my family make seventh heaven worth all of it. If fourth heaven had five really great friends, though, I'd have to think about it. From what I've heard about fourth heaven, though, I strongly doubt it. It doesn't, does it?)

Now, back at the Friends School the kids didn't like me very much. I didn't like them much either. Truthfully, they didn't understand me and I didn't understand them. My friends were my parents and grandparents and uncle. When my parents went out on the weekends, either my grandparents or uncle Morris babysat. I never had a nanny or a regular babysitter—what outsider could be trusted with the miracle child?

While I suppose the other kids were having sleepovers and playdates on the weekends, I was learning how to play bridge. I was pretty good at it, too. Other kids got to go to McDonald's and Roy Rogers, but I developed a distinct taste for kasha varnishkas. I heard stories from my grandmother about growing up in Strawberry Mansion (which you'd think was a mansion, but actually it was the name of a poor neighborhood in Philly). Because of uncle Morris, I know the difference between the smell of a cheap Phillie Blunt and a Cuban Montecristo, how they're rolled, and why one is so much better than the other. My grandfather taught me to recognize the voice of the old Philadelphia Phillies play-by-play man Andy Musser so well that once when I dialed a wrong number and somehow accidentally called Musser, I knew it was him immediately, just from his "hello." We talked for an hour and a half about his retirement and the glory days of the 1980 World Champion Philadelphia Phillies with Tug McGraw, Pete Rose, and, of course, Mike Schmidt.

From all the Saturday nights watching Channel 12 with my grandparents, I know every Hitchcock, Cary Grant, Jack Lemmon, Billy Wilder, and William Wyler movie so well I could teach a class.

Now, all these things seem warm and loving, and when my grandparents and uncle Morris died, I missed my Saturday nights with them. But as a child, all I wanted were the trips to McDonald's and slumber parties my classmates got to have. Not to mention the teasing I endured at school. I was a sixty-five-year-old eight-year-old who had prune juice for lunch and loved it. No matter what fantastic toy I boasted having, they weren't going to accept me.

I only cried to my parents once about the kids teasing me. They had one piece of advice: tell.

Needless to say, the kids didn't like me any better as a result.

So if a kid was upsetting me during recess, I'd tell. If a kid was trying to cheat off of my paper, I'd tell. I was always the consolation kid when they picked teams for dodgeball, and I was always the first kid to get rammed with the ball. And I told, which in turn, I am proud to say, got dodgeball scrapped from the gym curriculum at the Friends School for generations to come due to its severe psychological and excruciatingly painful consequences. Needless to say, the kids didn't like me any better as a result. I honestly didn't care though. These kids weren't my type. Olivia Wilson and Kerry Collins and Dana Stanbury were perfect little girls with their perfect hair. They stood behind the basketball court and berated me about anything and everything. Those bitches teased me about my lunch with the four-square meal packed in four separate baggies and the way my blue and white Friends uniform was always wrinkle free, with my blue tube socks pulled perfectly all the way up. Bitches.

Seth Rosso and his twin brother, Tom, and Greg Rice used to pull at my pigtails. No, this wasn't because they liked me, as little boys sometimes do to little girls they like, this was because they truly hated the sight of me and I them. Boy, did I tell on them.

My mother finally instructed me to just ignore everyone and though it was hard, I did it. I read, I drew, I spoke to the teacher about great restaurants in the Philadelphia area. I was not about to let those losers bother me.

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One day, though, the kids staged an all-out attack. They must have prepared for it given the roughness of the situation.

But the day they hoped would be the worst day of my life turned out to be one of the best. (Finally! We're getting to the second best day in my essay. Who knew I had so much to tell?)

This was the day I met my best and truest friend.

It was October. I was in the fourth grade. It was around nine in the morning, in homeroom, when Penelope Goldstein entered my life. I always sat in the front row (as if you couldn't have guessed that). The principal, Mrs. Macknicki, peeked into the classroom just as our teacher, Mrs. Hoffman, was finishing roll call.

"Students," Mrs. Macknicki announced, "we have a new student joining the fourth grade this morning, and we should all welcome her. Penelope Goldstein just moved here from New York City."

That's when I looked up. I hadn't even noticed Mrs. Macknicki and Pen step in. I was too busy with the book I was reading, *Are You There God? It's Me, Margaret*—a classic.

I did look up at this point, though, not because it was going to do me any good—I knew by now that no one was going to be my friend—but because I had reached the end of my chapter and the class was suddenly silent, so it seemed like a good time to look. Then everyone started to laugh. It was a subtle giggle first, then a whispered guffaw, then full-on chuckling.

I wanted to laugh along with the other kids, but I didn't. Why was everyone laughing?

I'm going to be blunt about this, because if Pen was here she'd

say the same thing. The kids were laughing because Penelope Goldstein was an extremely unattractive and odd-looking kid.

First of all, she was like five foot five. To be in the fourth grade and be five foot five was outrageous. No one was near Pen's height. I think she weighed like two hundred pounds, and if she didn't, she sure looked like she did. Pen had really greasy, curly, boring brown hair and round John Lennon glasses with gold frames. In her blue and white uniform, the Peter Pan collared blouse was tested by her rolls of stomach fat, and the pleated skirt looked more like a pencil skirt as it gave way to her thighs. Her dark blue kneesocks only made it halfway up her calf. Frankly, Pen looked like Frankenstein's child (that's her joke by the way, not mine).

And all the other kids laughed, except me—not because I took an instant liking to her or was a better person, but because I couldn't be bothered.

"Class!" Mrs. Hoffman shouted as she banged on her desk, causing the room to fall into complete silence. "Is this the way we welcome new students? Not in my class! I expect you all to greet Penelope in the gracious style we have taught our fourth-grade students."

"Hello, Penelope," the class, except me, said in unison.

"Hello, class," she smiled back with her oversized gums peering out of her mouth. To be blunt, Pen was a gene malfunction. There was not an attractive thing about her. Thing was, though, she didn't even seem to be upset by the outburst. While this should have been my first tip that this was my kind of gal, *Are You There God? It's Me, Margaret* was getting really good and I was too into it to take note of anything else.

The Ten Best Days of My Life

Mrs. Hoffman led Pen to the back of the room (no doubt because she would have towered over whoever was in back of her, leaving them unable to see the blackboard). I forgot about her. She was just another kid.

Then came lunch.

Now, as I said, I was a skinny kid. I was also the shortest, scrawniest kid, barely topping three foot nine. The elders were always worried that I wasn't eating enough (though no one had to worry once I hit puberty).

I was sitting in the lunchroom with my four-square lunch set on top of the table in front of me. I remember being really hungry that day and hoping that lunch would be a meat loaf sandwich. As I opened the box, I noticed first that my four baggies were bunched up. This was odd because whenever my mother or grandmother packed my lunch, the baggies were always nicely wrapped tightly around their contents.

As I looked into the box, there was no meat loaf sandwich at all. There was no honey crisp apple (this was late fall when, as I'm sure you know, honey crisp apples are at their peak). There was no side of pasta salad or corn or Snyder's pretzels, my fave. Someone had eaten my lunch!

I got up out of my seat and directed myself to where I thought the nearest supervisor would be sitting. Oddly, there was none to be seen. Where were the teachers? The lunch ladies? Where the heck was the grown-up world?

I looked around the room. No one was looking at me, though the room was very quiet. I noticed Seth Rosso, that ass, crack a smile at his twin brother, Tom. I noticed Kerry Collins and Olivia Wilson snickering at each other.

I walked out of the lunchroom and down the hallway to the teacher's lounge to find an adult to hear my grievance. A sign was on the door: "Teachers Meeting," it said. "For emergencies, please see Vice Principal Berg."

Oh, my parents were going to hear about this. Leaving the children without any supervision, even if it was for a few minutes, was not only irresponsible but also negligent and most likely cause for a lawsuit.

I walked back into the lunchroom, ready to face that evil-doing progeniture. I could handle this on my own. They didn't scare me.

As I entered the lunchroom, fists clenched and ready to blow, all the kids were ganged up in front of the door.

All of a sudden I was trapped in a ten-minute version of *Lord of the Flies*.

"Who ate my lunch?" I shouted out to the gang in front of me. I wasn't afraid of them. They weren't about to scare me.

"What's the matter?" Dana Stanbury asked. "No grown-ups here to fight your battle?"

The class started laughing.

"Who ate my lunch?" I repeated. To tell you the truth, I was beginning to feel a little intimidated. It was like fifteen kids against me.

"It was just a smelly meat loaf sandwich," Greg Rice cracked as he patted his stomach. "I think I've got food poisoning from it. I should have known, you're such a bitch that your parents are trying to kill you, too, with week-old meat."

On the contrary, the meat loaf was not a leftover; my mother



made it specifically for my lunch. Remember, I was a miracle child. Miracle children do not eat leftovers.

"She's poison, just like the meat loaf," Olivia Wilson added.

"She needs to be thrown in the garbage," Kerry Collins laughed.

"Yeah, let's throw this trash in the garbage!" Tom Rosso shouted as the kids cheered.

That's when Tom Rosso and his twin brother, Seth, came at me. I started to scream, but Greg Rice put his hand over my mouth.

"THROW THAT TRASH IN THE TRASH AND DUMP HER DOWN THE INCINERATOR!" Dana Stanbury screamed out.

I have to break here and just ask: can you believe how mean little kids can be?

I was throwing my body in every direction I could as I saw Kerry Collins shutting the doors to the lunchroom to keep out the noise. I could see the delighted looks on Olivia Wilson's and Dana Stanbury's faces as Seth and Tom Rosso managed to hold on to my little squirming body with Greg Rice holding his hand to my mouth so tight it was getting harder to breathe. I was not about to let these assholes see me cry. Actually, I didn't have the time because the next thing I knew I was thrown head-first into a trash can.

I was trying with all my might to get out of there, but Seth Rosso was pushing down on my head and up against some old onion peels and pasta salad. I still remember the distinct smell of tuna fish.

That's when they closed the bag and proceeded to pull it and little scrawny me out of the can.

That's when I started to cry.

Where they were taking me, I'll never know. They might have been heading to the incinerator, though I'm not quite sure the Friends School had one. They might have been about to throw me in the oven or the dishwasher or maybe just outside. I'll never know.

Just at that moment I met the greatest friend. I met the one friend I would ever need in the world, and the reason I think Lee Iacocca's father was full of bunk. If I'd had a choice between five really good friends or just her, I would have picked the latter. You're about to hear why:

"YOU EITHER PUT HER DOWN OR I'M GOING TO COME AFTER EACH OF YOU ONE BY ONE!" I heard from inside the bag.

"Shut up, ugly!" I heard Tom Rosso scream out.

And that's when I heard the punch. I was inside a trash bag with macaroni in my ears, and I could still distinguish the punch. The bag and me went plop on the ground in a swift drop.

As I pushed my head out of the trash bag, she was like Wonder Woman and Superman all rolled into one. An overweight, four-eyed, bad-haired crime fighter in a way-too-tight blue and white Friends School uniform had taken up my cause, and she was going at it with such force, I didn't even get out of the bag for fear that I would be next.

She was popping every kid that got in her way, every kid that tried to fight back. Dana Stanbury and Greg Rice got bloody



noses. Tom Rosso had a wallop of a black eye. Olivia Wilson was crying over the hair that had been ripped out of her head. I was still sitting in the bag in shock.

"You okay?" the mammoth nine-year-old asked as she helped me out of the bag.

"Yes," I said, taking her hand.

Besides Olivia Wilson's whimpering, the room had gone silent.

Just then, Mrs. Hoffman, our teacher, entered the cafeteria. She saw the bloodbath before her and screamed out, "WHAT HAPPENED HERE?"

No one said a thing.

After lunch Mrs. Macknicki held us all in the lunchroom and asked again. "We're not leaving here until someone tells me what went on here."

No one said a word.

"Alexandra?" Mrs. Macknicki singled me out. "You're always the one to tell. What went on here?"

"I was . . .," I started to say. "I was . . . just eating my lunch. I didn't see anything."

"Why do you smell like garbage? Why is there macaroni salad in your hair?" she demanded.

"I was . . .," I began. "I was . . . I was given liverwurst for lunch. You know how that stinks," I told her.

"Penelope," Mrs. Macknicki asked. "You seem to be the only one here that looks undamaged. You want to tell me what happened?"

"I'm new," she said confidently. "Do you really think that's the way I'd like to start off at a new school? Telling on the other

kids? I don't think so. I plead the Fifth and that's my right as an American."

Yes, she was smart. Pen's father was a lawyer and taking the Fifth was a big thing in her house. I had to ask her later what "the Fifth" was.

Now, normally, if any other kid had said this, they would have been given a severe talking-to with threats of expulsion or worse: in-school mornings and afternoon detention for three months. Pen, though, made a point with no room for discussion. How could anyone start off their first day at school by admitting that she beat the crap out of the entire fourth-grade class? Pen had balls . . . er, ovaries of steel, still does.

So Mrs. Macknicki excused her and went on to the next kid.

That afternoon, after a long hot shower, even though my parents kept asking why I smelled like compost, I never told.

"Something's going on at that school that I'm not liking," my father said sternly from the phone when my mom told him I stunk. "Let's get her out of that school, Maxine."

"Are the kids being mean to you?" my mom asked. "Would you like to go to a new school?"

I didn't even have to think about it.

"Nope," I told them. "It's not so bad. I'll stay there."

The next day at school I had someone to eat lunch with, and that afternoon I had my first playdate.

My parents thought Penelope was the weirdest-looking girl they'd ever seen.

"That girl needs a good brush to her hair and a good diet," my dad laughed after he met her.

The Ten Best Days of My Life

They didn't know her though. Pretty soon they came to see what I saw. She was the coolest girl anyone could ever know.

Penelope Goldstein is everything I never was. Even from that young age, Pen was never afraid to fight for anything if she felt it was worth fighting for. She wasn't the prettiest girl, she never had the prettiest face, but you would never have known it by the way she carried herself. Pen has the ability to make people believe that her ample thighs are the ones to envy. That's why I love her so much. That's why everyone loves Pen. A couple of years ago I asked her why she fought off the other kids for me. She said, "The kids really hated you. I figured they must have been jealous of you. If they were jealous, there must have been something really cool about you." That's Pen. She's always had this insane gift for seeing the world in a way that no one else ever thinks to look at it.

I don't know if it was because of Pen, or that I had learned my lesson that telling was not the way to go through life, but eventually Dana Stanbury and Kerry Collins and Olivia Wilson also became lifelong friends. Every so often, as the years went by, either Olivia or Kerry or Dana would say to me, "I always felt really bad about that day and I want to apologize." I told them it wasn't necessary to apologize after all these years, but I let them anyway. I wondered, though, had Penelope not beaten the crap out of them, how would my life have been different?

So I go back to those questions I asked in the beginning: How much money makes you rich? How many friends do you really need in this world (or that world)?

Come to think of it, I think I've made the answers pretty clear.

Heaven Help Me

I need a break.

This is all getting to be too much.

Is this what they want to know? If they know my best friend was the big fat kid, will they really let me stay in seventh heaven?

What do they want from me?

I'm so stressed.

Ugh.

Maybe Peaches will go for a walk with me. Peaches has been totally ignoring me lately, now that she's got her new gang of dog friends and an endless number of dog toys. I feel so discounted. Even my dog thinks I'm a failure.

"Alex?" I hear from downstairs.

It's Adam. Ugh. This is all I need.

I throw the essay into my desk and look at myself in the mirror before heading downstairs and then remember, why bother? I'm perfect, though not in a vain way of course. I'm in heaven, I always look perfect.

"Hey, Adam," I shout to him. "I'll be right down." Before I can do that, Adam's in my bedroom, and if he doesn't look more



adorable than he did the day before, I don't know what. He's dressed in distressed Levi's and a black T-shirt, and if I wasn't so beyond being in the mood, I would have jumped him already.

"Hey," he says before giving me a prolonged kiss on the lips. "I haven't seen you all day, what have you been doing?"

"Oh, I was just configuring this bedroom," I lie. "I'm thinking about moving the bed under the window."

"That might look nice," he says. "You want me to help you move it?"

"Move it?" I ask him. "Do you forget where we are?" I state the words, "Move bed under window."

Suddenly, the furniture in the room starts to move. The bed situates itself under the window.

"And while I'm at it," I say aloud, "turn the mattress."

The sheets lift in the air as the mattress flips over. The sheets and comforter set themselves back onto the bed, perfectly made.

"I feel like I'm stuck in an old episode of *Bewitched*," Adam laughs. "All you need to learn now is how to wiggle your nose."

I chuckle at his joke, but, as you know, I'm in no mood for laughing.

Adam plops himself on the bed.

"Hey, I was thinking, maybe tomorrow we should take my new Ferrari out for a test drive. I'm dying, no pun intended of course," he chuckles then pantomimes a rim shot, "to see more of this place. I was thinking that we could pack some lunch or something and see where the road takes us."

"You got a Ferrari?" I balk as I start to become even more miserable. In fourth heaven you probably get a Yugo.

"I didn't *get* it," he says, recoiling. "It was sitting in my garage. Why, do you hate Ferraris or something?"

"Yes, I do," I lie, though it's not so much that I like or don't like them. I'm indifferent on that matter. I'm just so stressed and glum that even the thought of taking an afternoon with a gorgeous guy and a Ferrari is not enough to make me feel better.

"Hey," he says, putting his arm around me and sensing the glumness, "are you okay?"

"I'm fine," I tell him, even though I don't want to lie. I want to tell him all that's happened to me. I want to tell him that I'll probably get demoted to fourth heaven because I didn't live a fulfilling life on earth. I want him to read my essays and tell me if they suck. I want him to tell me that everything's going to be okay and that even if I get sent to fourth heaven he'll visit me and bring me some of the new fashions. I want to cry in his arms and tell him that even though I've only known him a very short time, I think he could be the love of my death. I want to tell him everything, but I just can't. He'll think less of me. He'll think I'm a loser, a failure.

So I pick a fight with him.

"Look," I say, "it's not that I don't think you're great or anything, because I do. I just feel like this is all too fast. You know, us."

He looks at me like I'm crazy, which I very well might be.

"*Okay*," he sort of sings, and I just know he's gotten the point and is ready to leave and never come back, much to my deep chagrin.

"Look, I need some time to think about things," I say, trying

to let him off easy. "I did just die, you know. I've got to think about my future."

Again, he looks at me like I've gone mad, which I'm now pretty much certain I have.

"So, let me get this straight," he says. "You're not interested in spending any more time with me because you're in a weird place right now?"

"Exactly," I concur, thinking his reasoning sounds good enough.

"Where do you think I am?"

I have no answer. He's got me there, and, thankfully, before I have to answer the question he poses another one.

"Is there someone else?" he asks.

"What do you think?" I shoot at him like it's the stupidest question I've ever heard, but it's exactly the question I would have asked had the tables been turned. "Do you think I went out clubbing last night and met some other guy?"

I'm being so mean. I hate myself right now.

"I just need some space, okay?" I shout at him like I can't stand the sight of him, when actually I want him more than I've ever wanted anyone. "Can't I just have some space?"

"Fine," he says, throwing up his hands. "I won't bother you anymore."

He walks out of my room and heads down the stairs. I want to scream, "Please come back!" I don't though. I just don't want to hurt him any more than I have. I want to tell him the truth, but I just can't. I don't want him to think less of me when I'm sent away. I don't want him to wake up a few mornings from now and see that I'm not there anymore. I don't want to have

to leave him that note: *Dear Adam, I've been demoted to fourth heaven. See you around.* He'll get over me. He'll find someone else, someone better, some other more fabulous woman who led a more fulfilling life on earth.

I hate her.

I hear my front door shut. He didn't even slam it. What a gentleman. I love him so much. I'm watching him from my window as he goes into his garage. I wait as I see him pull out in his red Ferrari: damn, it's a convertible, too. I would have loved to have ridden in that. He's got such a pained look on his face as he heads out of his driveway.

Ugh.

I need to talk to someone, anyone. Should I call my grandmother? I can't call her. I know exactly what she'll say: "You picked a fight with the most perfect man in heaven? What the heck's the matter with you? Just tell him the truth. If he doesn't get it, he wasn't worth it."

I don't need my grandmother right now. I don't know anyone else who's dead though. I'm the first of anyone my age I know who died.

I see Peaches running through the yard with the other dogs.

"Peaches!" I scream out.

Peaches stops and looks up at me.

"I need a hug!"

Peaches resumes running.

"Wait, I've got treats! I have enough for your friends, too! We can have a party!"

No luck.

Now I'm really pissed off at her.

The Ten Best Days of My Life

You know, come to think of it, there is this one woman that died. She's my mom's age, but maybe she's good at listening.

My mom used to tell me about one of her best childhood friends. This girl, Alice Oppenheim, who died when they were sixteen. It was one of the saddest things I ever heard; that's why I remembered it.

It was right after Alice's sweet-sixteen party, and evidently the party was a really nice one. My mom had gone with Alice and her mom to get her dress, a pink ruffly number, which sounds revolting, but my mom said it was better than it sounds. The party was held at the Tavern Restaurant's party room, and my mom went with Sy Silverman, who later became really good friends with my parents. Anyway, as my mom tells it, Alice's family lived about two blocks away from my mom and grandparents, and in the middle of the night my mom woke up to hear all these fire engines. Evidently, there was some kind of short in the wiring in the house and the whole place caught on fire. Mr. and Mrs. Oppenheim had some burns, and Alice's brother, Butch, got really bad burns on his leg and chest. He was in the hospital for a long time, but he was fine eventually. My mom and I ran into him once at Famous 4th Street Deli. I had heard about the family so many times that seeing Butch was like seeing someone who had been in a favorite movie of mine. You know how that is? Anyway, when he saw my mom, he didn't start to cry or anything, but he said really softly, "She'd be married by now. She'd probably have a daughter like yours."

Isn't that sad?

My mom put her arm around him. I was like eleven or twelve

at the time. I just acted like I didn't know what was going on, even though I did.

Anyway, Alice died in the fire. My mom said it was the first funeral she had ever been to. She'd never known anyone else who died. Every now and then Mom would talk about Alice. They had this ridiculous ongoing feud about some crinolines that my mom took from Alice's house.

Come to think of it, my mom would probably want me to call up her old friend. She'd probably appreciate it.

I go into the kitchen, pick up the phone, and dial 411.

"This is 411 heaven connect, what plane please?"

What plane? It follows me everywhere.

"Uh, hi, I assume seventh heaven, the number for an Alice Oppenheim?"

I hear the operator typing.

"I have three Alice Oppenheims: one who died in 1482, another in 1823, and one in 1953."

"Um, 1953."

"Hold for the connection."

That was kind of fun.

"Hello?" I hear the voice say.

"Uh, hi, is this Alice Oppenheim from Philadelphia?"

"Yes it is."

"Hi, Alice, uh, you don't know me. I'm the daughter of a friend of yours. I'm Maxine Firestein's daughter, Alex?"

"Oh go away! No way! Maxine had a daughter? How fantastic! How's your mom?"

"Oh, she's great. She married my dad and they had me. I'm

sure she's a little upset right now, you know, I died recently, but otherwise she's great."

"She got married?" Alice asks like it's the craziest thing. "Who'd she marry?"

"Bill Dorenfield."

"She married Bill Dorenfield, that lady slayer?" she laughs. "I remember him, what a player! He was friends with my brother, Butch. Not great friends, your dad was kind of a hard guy. Of course he married your mom, she's so his type. She's gorgeous. Is she still gorgeous?"

"Oh yes," I tell her, but I'm still stuck on the fact that she thought my dad was a hard guy, too. Did that guy ever let up?

"Your mom was always the prettiest one in the class."

"She still is."

"Did she ever tell you about the time she stole all my crinolines?"

"Yes, she told me."

"I'm sure she said that she left me one. That was always her excuse."

"Yeah, well, I guess I'll have to hear your side of the story."

"Oh, another time for that story. Let's see, I'd be about sixty-nine or seventy years old by now so, gosh, she's old."

"She is, but she doesn't look seventy."

"I hear that. Seventy is the new fifty, fifty is the new thirty, blah blah. I aged to thirty because I didn't want to stay sixteen forever, and I'm glad I did, but I didn't want to go beyond that."

"I'm twenty-nine!"

"Get out! How'd you die?"

"Car hit me."

"Oh, what a shame, sorry to hear that. Sorry for your mom."

"Yeah," I say, concluding the catching up. "So listen, I don't really know anyone here except my grandparents and my uncle. My mom always talked about you and what great friends you were and stuff, and I thought maybe you'd like to get together for lunch or something."

"I'd love that! How does tomorrow sound?"

"Sounds great to me."

"Great. There's a really good French place in town. When you get into your car, just say, 'French place in town' and it will take you there."

"Great, do we need a reservation or something?"

"We're in seventh heaven, we don't need to make reservations."

"Oh, yeah," I stutter.

"What, you're not in seventh?" she asks, sensing my glumness.

"Well, for now, but . . ."

"Oh, you're in one of those limbo things. Not to worry, we'll talk about it tomorrow."

"Really? Don't worry? Because I'm worried," I tell her.

"Really, don't worry. We'll talk about it. Your mother was one of my best friends. I'll take care of you. Listen, I'm just off right now for a tennis lesson, but I'll see you tomorrow. Let's say one o'clock and we'll talk. It will be so nice to meet you."

"You, too, and one o'clock is good."

"And, Alex . . ."

"Yeah?"

"Really, don't worry. I'm here for you."

“Okay.”

“Tootles until tomorrow!”

“Bye.”

Tootles? Whatever. Well, that made me feel a little better, a lot better actually, sort of.

I hear Peaches’s dog door rumbling as I see my little dog come through.

She stands there and looks up at me like she’s sorry, with the tips of her ears bent over.

“Well, look who it is,” I say to her. “I feel so fortunate that you could spend some of your precious time with me.”

She jumps up on my lap and starts licking my face.

“I’m sorry, too,” I say, petting her.

I grab a box of éclairs from the fridge, and Peaches and I head into the den to watch TV. I turn it to my favorite heaven channel, Your Favorite Television Episodes. *I Love Lucy* is on, the one where Lucy tries to tell Ricky she’s pregnant with Little Ricky. My fave episode, of course. I watch my favorite *Mary Tyler Moore* episode next, the one where Rhoda brings Henry Winkler to Mary’s house for a dinner party and Mary doesn’t have a place for Henry, or enough veal Prince Orloff. Henry has to sit at a table by himself, at the window, while everyone else has a seat at the dinner table. What a crack-up. I start to get a little tired in the middle of my favorite *Brady Bunch* episode, the one with Davy Jones. Love that. Somewhere in the middle of my favorite *Taxi* episode (the gang tries to get Jim his driver’s license), I’ve fallen asleep. I wake up a few hours later. It’s the middle of the night. Peaches is still there beside me. My stirring wakes her up.

Adena Halpern

“Thanks for being here, buddy,” I tell her.

She rests her head on my stomach as we both fall back to sleep.

Maybe you only need one friend on earth, but in heaven I need all the friends I can get.





Back on earth, I had five proud names beyond my own. I was:

Bill Dorenfield's daughter (that was my middle name, Alex
"Bill Dorenfield's Daughter" Dorenfield, as you can imagine, but that's not important for this particular "best day" chapter)

Maxine Dorenfield's daughter
Evelyn Firestein's granddaughter
Harry Firestein's granddaughter
Morris Salis's niece

I'm pretty sure you're aware of my grandparents and my uncle. Everyone knows my grandparents and uncle. On earth, even after they'd been gone from the planet for some twenty years, in certain situations, I was still referred to as Evelyn Firestein's granddaughter or Harry Firestein's daughter or Morris Salis's niece. I always loved when someone would come up to me and say, "Aren't you Evelyn Firestein's granddaughter? What a great lady she was."



I always loved that.

See, while I had a nice amount of friends, my family had truckloads. They ruled the social world of Philadelphia. I cannot remember a time at any of their homes when the phone wasn't ringing, except of course when someone was on it, which was always.

My father used to tease my mom when she'd be on the phone all night.

"It's inherited," he'd laugh. "Between your mother and grandmother, the phone company will never go out of business."

It was true though. When I envision my grandmother, I see her sitting by the yellow phone on the wall in her kitchen, talking until all hours about who was wearing what to the party (and what were they thinking) and the plans for dinner and trips to the Jersey Shore. There were always invitations to events, whether they were weddings or bar mitzvahs or charity this and benefit that, plastered on my grandparents' refrigerator. Uncle Morris, who lived right next door to my grandparents, either always had a date or could be found at the neighborhood watering hole with his crowd of perpetual bachelors.

And there was always a dance.

My grandparents loved to dance. Even when they'd babysit, the record player would be turned on at some point in the night and there they were mamboing or rumbaing or doing a simple two-step. They were really good dancers, too. Everyone who ever knew my grandparents and uncle knew they were great dancers.

The last piece of Super 8 home-movie footage that we have of my grandparents is a short segment of Grandpop dancing with

The Ten Best Days of My Life

Grandmom in our kitchen. The movie cuts, and my Grandpop is then dancing with my mom and uncle Morris is dancing with my grandmother. Then four- or five-year-old me runs into the frame and I'm dancing with Grandmom and Grandpop, and Grandpop picks me up in his arms as we all do a two- or, rather, three-step. I don't remember this movie being shot; I assume it's my dad filming since he's the only one who's not in it. There's no sound on the footage, but everyone is talking into the camera, smiling, making funny faces. I used to look at it when I was down. It was only about three minutes in length, but that was all I ever needed. It always brought me back to that time when Grandmom and Grandpop and uncle Morris were still alive and life in my family was at its simplest. These were party people and the party was nonstop.

I wish I could use that whole time with my grandparents and uncle as my third best day. Next to Penelope, they were my best friends (though I don't count them in the friends category since they were related). No one in my life was ever as close to me or understood me better than those three people. Until I was twelve, it felt like my family life was nonstop laughter.

Now, as I told you, the miracle child was not to be trusted with a babysitter, so everyone took turns babysitting for me. It was a rotation thing. One Saturday night my grandparents would babysit, the next uncle Morris. As I told you in my second best day, there were bridge games to be played and movies to be watched, so my parents were rarely home on a Saturday night.

The others were always at our house though. Saturday nights were the most special, but truthfully there was rarely a day that



I did not see my grandparents and uncle. My mom told me that when she first got married, my dad got so sick and tired of her family always being there that he told her to tell my grandmother to stop coming around so much. (Knowing my dad, it's interesting that he had my mother tell my grandmother. I think . . . no, I know, my grandmother was the only person in the world he was intimidated by.)

"You tell him that when he married you, he married the family!" Grandmom told my mom.

When my mom told my dad, he said nothing. My grandmother never had to say anything ever again. He knew the consequences of marrying the pretty Maxine Elaine.

I used to call uncle Morris my Santa Claus. Whenever I saw uncle Morris, he always had a gift for me, and I'm talking about seeing him almost every day. It could have been anything from Life Savers Pep-O-Mint candies to a life-size Raggedy Ann doll (who married my FAO Schwarz giraffe in a simple ceremony that I officiated and was attended by all the Dorenfield/Firestein/Salises when I was eight).

uncle Morris had a liquor store at 2301 South Broad Street in South Philadelphia. It was said that when Prohibition was over, he was one of the first to get a liquor license. No one knew how. I should remind myself to ask him sometime. I felt that uncle Morris had this secret life that no one knew about. Like I told you, he never got married because he felt he needed to take care of my grandmother and her sisters after my grandparents died. When my grandmother's sisters all died, Grandmom would say, "I can take care of myself. Get yourself a girl already, Morris!" He was like eighty at this point.

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He never did though. I saw pictures in his albums of him out on dates with different women, but he just never married. To him nothing got in the way of taking care of the family. I admire that, don't you?

During World War II, uncle Morris made sure my grandmother got stockings and my mom got bubblegum (both were hard to come by at that time). When cashmere sweaters were all the rage in the 1950s, my mother had six. He was our Santa Claus.

So, now that you know the ins and outs of the Firestein/Salis clan, you can tell that they were really special people.

Like I said, I wish I could give you a bunch of different days, but since I can't, I'll give you the last one I remember (and if you're keeping track, the third best day of this essay).

I should mention something before I start though. Both my grandparents and uncle had heart issues. They weren't huge problems, mind you. Nothing that probably couldn't have been prevented with a good diet and exercise (of which there was none except the occasional dance). I just remember none of them eating salt in those last years. Nothing in their homes had salt in it. You don't really realize how much flavor salt brings to a meal until it's taken away, and when it was, dinners at my grandparents' house were never the same. Corn without salty butter or potatoes without salt, ugh. There was no more brisket marinated in ketchup or kosher legs and thighs of chicken full of brine or matzo ball soup with extra cubes of bouillon to make it thicker or even a slab of butter on an onion bagel. From then on it was egg whites with wheat toast, and dry white-meat chicken and fish that tasted like nothing. That was the only

thing, though, that was noticeable through my eleven-year-old eyes, and I wasn't necessarily pissed off about it, it's just what was. Grandmom would ask if I wanted salt, but I wouldn't have any part of it when I was at their house. The thought of generously pouring the white taste sensation on anything and everything made me feel bad, like a slap in the face, because I could have it and they couldn't. So I stayed away from it, too. Oh, that, and Grandmom had to wear this bandage on her arm. It was like this big Band-Aid patch that she wore above her elbow. I asked her what it was, if she had fallen or something, and she said it had glycerin in it, medicine to make her feel better. How a patch of medicine on her arm could have made her feel better, I didn't know at the time, but I found out later in life.

Everything, though, was normal in our family. There was no stink made about the patch or the salt. Maybe there was, it just wasn't in front of me—don't upset the miracle child—but I can't remember that there was ever any cause for alarm.

Anyway, that's all you really need to know about that.

So, the last time I can remember all of us being together, the show *Annie* had come to Philadelphia's Walnut Street Theatre and I was psyched as psyched could be. We were going to make a party out of it. Penelope was allowed to come, and I was allowed to pick the restaurant. First I picked Murray's Deli. I was always a cabbage borscht fanatic, but Grandmom said, "I can make you better cabbage borscht at home. Pick a better place." So I picked Benihana.

"With all that salt in the food?" Grandmom complained. "You can do better."

So I picked a place that I knew she loved.

“How about Bookbinder’s?” I said, trying to please her.

“That’s a great idea!” she said, hugging me. “You are the smartest girl in the world.”

Bookbinder’s, if you don’t know, is a very famous seafood place in Philly. It’s been around for like a million years. My grandparents and uncle went there when they were younger; so did my parents. It’s an old standby. It’s got everything anyone would want, even if you don’t want salt in your food.

The best thing about the place is their strawberry shortcake, the second main reason I picked it, other than my grandmother coaxing me to go there.

We all got dressed up for the theater that night: Grandmom, Mom, and Penelope and me, in dresses; Daddy, Grandpop, and uncle Morris in suits. Grandmom always said that when you go to the theater, “You must dress nice so you can pay respect to the people on stage doing their job.” She even called Pen’s mom to make sure she wore a dress. Whenever I go to New York to see a show, I still dress up (or at least I did). It pisses me off that people don’t get dressed up for the theater anymore. It’s so sad. I’m the only one dressed up when I go (or used to).

Back at Bookbinder’s, I had the snapper soup, which is something that Bookbinder’s is famous for. Pen had the fried shrimp and we split french fries (without salt so Grandmom could pick a few). I don’t remember what my grandparents and uncle got, but I’m sure it had no salt in it.

Everyone talked at the same time in my family, and this particular night was no exception. I actually never even noticed it until Penelope pointed it out that night. When she said it, though, I could suddenly see it was like a blanket of words

thrown up into the air and directed to anyone who wanted to comment on it.

"It's like a secret language your family has," she said at the time.

How could Pen not hear what everyone was saying? Mom and Grandmom talked about the latest gossip, and Daddy broke in occasionally and said, "You're out of your mind, Evelyn, Mort Gainsburgh is not cheating on Sylvia." Daddy and Grandpop talked about the Phillies, and uncle Morris broke in, "Harry, you're crazy, the Phillies have a major advantage over Detroit in Mike Schmidt." uncle Morris talked to the bar about their liquor stock, and Mom would break in, "Morris, is that the vodka you had me try last week? It was great." And there were people in the restaurant to say hello to, a lot of people. That was something that always happened. Whenever all of us were out, people came over to the table nonstop to say hello.

"It's Carol and Richard!" Grandmom would shout out as Carol and Richard ran over to the table to say hello and talk about the Philadelphia gossip of the day.

"It wouldn't be a Saturday night if Evvie and Harry Firestein weren't out on the town," Ruth and Lou Goldman would announce as they came over to our table.

"Bill Dorenfield," some lesser real estate guy would announce, coming to the table. "We were just talking about your Spruce Street project the other day."

That was how it always was. I ignored everyone (but heard everything) and talked to Pen and ate my snapper soup as the parade of people went by. Occasionally, someone would refer to

me. “Look how pretty she is, just like her mother,” Ruth Goldman would say, but I’d just keep to myself and crack an embarrassed smile at Pen.

“I’ll call you on Monday about that proposal,” the guy would say, trying to land some business from my dad.

“We’ll have lunch next week,” Carol would say to my grandmother.

That was my family.

After dinner, we all went to see *Annie*. Do you know anything about the play *Annie*? You probably do, but just to give you some backstory, *Annie* is based on this cartoon character, Little Orphan Annie. Annie is chosen by the orphanage to spend Christmas with this really rich guy, Daddy Warbucks (a single rich man, which could make you wonder what some grown man would want from spending Christmas with a little girl, but we all bought it and I digress). Daddy Warbucks takes a liking to Annie (cough, cough—but, again, I digress) and wants to adopt her, but she thinks her real parents are going to come and get her. There’s this whole thing about Miss Hannigan (the head of the orphanage) who is jealous that Annie might get adopted by Warbucks, so she and her brother pose as her parents to get her back, but, as all great stories go, in the end they are found out and Annie stays on and gets adopted by Warbucks and it’s all happy and wonderful.

Girls my age were consumed with *Annie* mania when it hit Broadway. Everyone was sure that they would be the next Annie to appear in the show. Dana Stanbury and Kerry Collins started taking singing lessons, and when the talent show came around, it was wall-to-wall renditions of “Tomorrow.” I knew I had no

voice though (unlike Dana and Kerry and Olivia). My grandparents asked me to sing to them, but I refused. Once, when no one was around, I sang the song to Penelope.

"You have the worst voice I've ever heard in my entire life," she said as we both laughed. Pen was the only one who could ever set me straight.

Still, I loved the show. I loved the story about this little orphan girl getting to be showered with everything she ever wanted. I didn't realize it then, but I do now. I was what Annie got to be.

We all sat in the theater's private side balcony as we watched the show. Grandmom snuck cashews in for us to eat (sans salt, of course). When Annie was forced to leave Daddy Warbucks and go with Miss Hannigan, Grandmom and I both cried.

What a show. (Just out of curiosity, do they have shows up here? They must. If so, I'd love to see this show again. It's been years.)

After the theater, we dropped off Pen, and we went back home and ate chocolate mint ice cream from Baskin-Robbins, my fave, on our patio behind the house. It was a really warm night. You heard crickets and saw fireflies light up in the air, and I sat between Grandmom and Grandpop and listened to the grown-ups gossip about Ruth and Lou Goldman and Richard and Carol and asked who that greasy guy was who was trying to get business from my dad. At some point, someone told me I had to get ready for bed, so I brushed my teeth and went into my pink room with my pink canopied bed and my dolls from all around the world and my Snoopy doll, my constant sleeping companion.

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I went to sleep that night (as I did many, many nights before that) with the sounds of my family laughing and talking outside:

“How many times do I have to tell you that Mort Gainsburgh is not having an affair behind Sylvia’s back,” Dad screamed at Grandmom.

“I know for a fact that Mort Gainsburgh can’t get it up for anyone,” uncle Morris said.

“Where do you get your information?” Mom and Grandmom shouted at the same time.

“Everyone down at the bar knows that Mort Gainsburgh has a weak peter. He had that prostate trouble a few years back!” uncle Morris said. “He complains about it all the time—the women he used to cheat on Sylvia with.”

“So he is cheating on Sylvia! I knew it!” Grandmom laughed.

“Well, he might have been, but not anymore,” Dad, uncle Morris, and Grandpop said at the same time.

The patio erupted in laughter as I laughed from my own bed.

This was the last night my family would ever be the same. It wasn’t anything so out of the ordinary. That’s why I’ll always remember it as being one of the best days of my life.

Because after that, everyone started to get sick.

It started out small. I came home one day and my mom said that Grandpop was in the hospital, but he would only be there a few days.

Days turned into weeks and pretty soon uncle Morris had moved into our house to take care of me because my parents

were always down at the hospital. I never got to visit Grandpop in the hospital. In all that time, except for when I was at school, I rarely saw anyone except uncle Morris. Never take the miracle child to a hospital where there are sick people.

It was always the most fun when uncle Morris would serve me breakfast. He used to make French toast or pancakes. He'd play the part of the French waiter with this heavy accent and say, "Mademoiselle Dorenfield, I have taken zee liberty of adding fresh-squeezed orange juice to your breakfast this morning."

"There's pulp in this," I'd act, shoving it away.

"My sincere apologies," he'd beg. "I promise this will not happen again."

"See that it doesn't," I'd mock. Then we'd burst out laughing and give each other a big hug.

I took the biggest delight when he would flip pancakes up in the air and then right back into the pan. The best was when they fell on the floor and the five-second rule would come into effect. If uncle Morris couldn't get the pancake within five seconds, the pancake was thrown out. If he could, he threw it out anyway, but it was fun counting.

That didn't happen this time though. When Grandpop was in the hospital, uncle Morris served me cold cereal and left the room.

Finally, Grandpop came home to his house, and I got to go visit. He was much thinner than he had been, and Grandmom made him stay in bed all the time. He gave me a hug and I tried to sit on his bed with him, but Grandmom wouldn't let me. All I remember is her propping up his pillows all the time and her

saying to everyone, "He needs his rest, leave him be." That was also when I noticed the patch on her arm. "What's that for?" I asked her. "Did you hurt yourself?"

"It's just medicine for me," she said. "It helps me so I can take care of Grandpop."

It was during this time that I got used to hearing the phone ring in the middle of the night. Sometimes it got to be such a common thing that I would just sleep right through it, but that wasn't often. The phone would ring and I would wake up. I'd see my parents' bedroom light shine from my door. I could hear the rumblings of my parents getting dressed. I'd get out of my bed and go to their door.

"Is Grandpop all right?" I'd ask them.

"He's fine. Go back to bed, sweetheart. Uncle Morris is here if you need him."

So I did.

I'd find out later that it was something like Grandpop's temperature getting too high or that he was unable to breathe and an ambulance had to come pick him up. I wouldn't find out, though, until years later when it came up in conversation with my parents.

This became routine for the next six months or so.

I rarely saw Grandmom anymore. I finally said one day, "I want to see Grandmom," so they took me over to her house. She was lying in bed with the patch on her arm when we got there, and she let me get into bed with her.

"Look at your teeth," she said. "Such beautiful teeth. Do me a favor, always take care of your teeth because dentures are a bitch."

"Mom!" my own mother said, horrified hearing the *b* word used in front of the miracle child.

I didn't think anything of the teeth thing until later. I didn't think anything of Grandmom being in bed until later. I just thought she was tired.

And then one night the strangest thing happened.

The phone rang. I woke up. The light went on and shone from my parents' bedroom into mine.

I heard my mother start to cry. I heard uncle Morris walk down to my parents' room. He started to cry. I got out of my bed and went into their room.

"Is everything okay?" I asked.

"Sweetheart, come over to the bed," Mom said, sobbing while motioning me to where she was sitting.

"I have some very sad news for you. Grandmom has gone to heaven."

"You mean Grandpop?" I corrected her.

"No, sweetheart." She had to pause and blow her nose as she went on. "Grandmom's heart started to hurt her this afternoon and now she's gone to heaven."

I didn't get it. Why would Grandmom die? She wasn't sick. She ate everything without salt in it. She wore that patch on her arm.

"But she wasn't sick," I said, really perplexed at this point. What the heck was going on here?

"We didn't want to worry you with anything," Dad said calmly. "When people get old they can get sick very quickly and this is what happened to Grandmom," he said with tears in his eyes.

That's when I started to cry. I had never seen my father cry before. To this day, I'm not sure what had me more upset, Grandmom dying or seeing my father so upset.

"What about Grandpop?" I asked them. Maybe it was all a ruse. They thought I could handle Grandpop dying and not Grandmom.

"He's still in the hospital," Mom eked out.

Three days later we had the funeral for Grandmom. Grandpop wasn't there. For five days after that, the house was wall-to-wall with people.

"Your grandmother was one great lady," Carol and Richard told me.

"We'll never know anyone more full of life than your grandmother," Lou and Ruth Goldman said to me.

"Your grandmother was so kind. She never talked behind anyone's back," Sylvia Gainsburgh said, standing with her husband, Mort Gainsburgh.

Two days after everyone left, I came home from school and they were back again.

Grandpop had died.

My grandparents died two weeks apart. Some said Grandmom had to get to heaven before him to get the dinner reservations in order. Some said she had to set up the house.

When I got up here, I asked Grandmom, "What did you say to Grandpop when he got here?"

Grandpop imitated her answer.

"Jesus, Harry, you can't give me two seconds of peace and quiet, can you?" he mocked in her high-pitched nasal voice. We had a laugh about that.

uncle Morris moved into our house full-time after that, but there was no dancing anymore. The wonderful smell of his cigar no longer wafted through the house. There were no pancakes to be flipped. He sat in his bedroom most of the time, watching television. He wasn't taking care of me anymore. I was taking care of him.

I served him pancakes with lots of syrup. I missed the smell of his cigar so I cut one for him. He cried while smoking it.

We watched a lot of television. I didn't care what was on. I don't think he cared either. I just wanted to be with him. His best friends had died and he was too sad to think of anything else.

I asked him to dance with me once, but he said, "I don't feel like it," and he shut his bedroom door.

Then one day I came home from school and Matilda had come into our lives. Matilda was uncle Morris's nurse. She later became our housekeeper.

"What's wrong with uncle Morris?" I asked my parents.

"He's just sad," my mom said. "He needs some help."

uncle Morris lasted six months without my grandparents. It was a Saturday, and I was in my room watching *Mildred Pierce* on Channel 12, a favorite of my grandmother's. uncle Morris had a stroke sometime earlier that morning. Mom found him in his bed. I wasn't allowed to leave my room. I didn't want to anyway. uncle Morris was dead in the other room. It was years before I ever walked into that guest bedroom again.

I heard the sounds of my parents murmuring to each other. I heard some people come to the door to take uncle Morris.

There would be a small, graveside funeral for him. Some

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of his friends came over afterward, but we'd had enough of funerals so it wouldn't be the elaborate function we had for my grandparents. We'd had enough of funerals.

After that, besides the sound of the phone ringing, you could have heard a pin drop in the house. Mom didn't want to talk on the phone. I was to tell people, "She's indisposed right now," and even though I didn't know what the word *indisposed* meant, I said it anyway.

There was no more dancing on the linoleum in the kitchen. No more home movies made. Later, when I asked Mom to buy me some prune juice, she looked at me cockeyed. Babysitters started coming to the house on Saturday nights. None of them wanted to play bridge. I've totally forgotten how to play.

Sometime after they died, I wondered if maybe I was sort of making them more than they were. I tried to remember their worst moments. My grandmother could be really annoying. As I've said, she had (has) this high-pitched nasal voice and everything that comes out of her mouth sounds more like a question or a demand than a statement. My grandfather was (is) a quiet man. It might have just been that my grandmother was always talking over him though. Maybe he was a real talker before he met my grandmother. Really, though, he was just an even-keeled guy who worked as an accountant and brought home the bacon (or dance shoes, as it were). Maybe it was weird that uncle Morris never got married or never even had a serious girlfriend and lived next door to my grandparents. I knew all those excuses were crap though. They were (are) three of the greatest people I'll ever know, possibly *the* greatest, because, no matter what their flaws were, those people knew how

to live, and seeing them again, even in death, it still couldn't be more true.

Now you know why that last night with my family sticks out as the third best day. Now you know why I love snapper soup and the play *Annie*.

It was the last time I'd have five parents instead of two. It was the last time everyone talked over one another and laughter and dancing existed in our house instead of silence.

It was the last time I'd ever be the miracle child.

Dear Alice in Heaven

“Grandmom?” I say with tears in my eyes as she picks up the phone.

“Al, what’s the matter?” she asks, frantic.

“What’s the matter?” I hear Grandpop ask in the background. This is the way conversations have always been on the phone my grandparents. Everything has to be repeated to Grandpop. Why he never picks up an extension, I’ll never know. I’m used to it though.

“Nothing, I just wanted to hear your voice.”

“Al, I’m worried about you. This essay is too much for you. Do you want Grandpop to come over and write it with you? He’s always been good with a pen.”

“I’ll leave right now,” I hear him say.

“No, that’s okay. I just finished the part where you die. It just made me sad and I needed to hear your voice.”

“And that’s the best day of your life?” she raises her voice, offended.

“What’d she say?” I hear Grandpop ask in the background.

“She put our deaths in her essay test as one of the best days of her life!”

"No, I didn't," I have to repeat three times so she'll hear me. "It's not about your deaths, it's about the last great night we spent together."

"Oh," she says, adding to Grandpop, "our dying wasn't one of the best days of her life, my mistake."

"Oh," I hear him say.

"Gram?"

"Yes, sweetheart."

"Do you think that I could come over tomorrow night and we can all play bridge?"

"Sure we can. I just have to make sure that uncle Morris isn't busy, but you can count on it. On second thought, why don't you invite Adam?"

"Oh," I think quickly, "he's got plans."

"Who's he got plans with?"

"Who's he got plans with?" Grandpop repeats.

"His great-great-grandfather. They're going fishing."

"Okay, then I'll call uncle Morris."

"Thanks, Gram, and can we have prune juice?"

"Of course we can. A bottle just showed up in my refrigerator this morning."

"And can we watch *Mildred Pierce*?"

"Will that make you feel a little better?" she coos.

"Yes."

"Then that's what we'll do. Anything for our Alex."

"Thanks, Gram. This is just hard stuff," I say, wiping my tears.

"You'll get through it, sweetheart, and just know we're always here for you no matter what plane of heaven you're on."

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“Promise?”

“We’re always here for you. What are your plans for today? Why don’t you go into town or something? You haven’t even seen anything since you got here.”

“Oh, I am, actually. I’m going to meet Alice Oppenheim. She was Mom’s friend.”

“Alice Oppenheim?”

“What about Alice Oppenheim?” Grandpop asks.

“She’s meeting Alice Oppenheim for lunch.”

“Where’d she meet her?”

“Where’d you meet her?”

“I called her on the phone.”

“You called her on the phone?” Grandmom repeats like it’s the strangest thing she’s ever heard. “How’d you get her number?”

“The operator, 411.”

“You can do that?” she asks, mystified, as she repeats, “The operator gives phone numbers!”

“How else do you think you get phone numbers, Evelyn?” Grandpop asks, starting yet another fight between the bickering Firesteins.

“I never heard of such a thing.”

“What do you mean?” he asks. “How do you get your phone numbers?”

“I have my address book. People give me numbers.”

“But what if you needed a number that no one gave to you?”

“It’s never happened before.”

Can you imagine what this woman would have gone through had she lived with the Internet? Forget universal remotes.

"I'm actually going to be late, but I'll call you later," I interrupt.

"Wait, what's the number for the operator?" Grandmom asks.

"It's 411!" Grandpop and I scream at the same time.

"And this is where I get the phone numbers?"

I have to hang up. I'd shoot her if I didn't love her so much—that, and she's already dead.

"I have to go, Gram. I'll tell Alice you said hi," I say, but she doesn't hear me.

"For Christ's sake Evelyn," I hear Grandpop say. "You dial 411 and the operator asks you the name of the person you're looking for . . ."

I hang up.

"And so if I write a good essay they'll let me stay here in seventh heaven, and if I don't, they'll send me down to fourth heaven with no Adam, or bedroom for a closet, and I'll have to make reservations for dinner," I tell Alice, wiping my tears while grabbing a french fry from my steak frites.

Alice's eyes had been focused on me like I was telling her the most incredible story she's ever heard. Her mouth gapes open. She pauses and takes a deep breath.

"Do you understand? You're like . . . you're like a rock star! All the famous people are in fourth heaven!"

"Who?" I asked, perplexed.

"OMG," she said, literally saying the letters *O*, *M*, *G*. "Jimi Hendrix and Elvis and Janis Joplin and Jim Morrison and Billie

Holiday and Judy Garland. It's a party down there every single night!"

"Didn't all those people die from drug overdoses?"

"Did they? Well, they sure played some great music. Fourth is a really cool place to be."

"But I don't want to go down to fourth heaven. I want to stay up in seventh!" I started to cry again.

This was a mistake, meeting this girl. This girl seems like one of the most immature people in heaven.

First of all, she told me just to get in my car and say the words, "French restaurant in town." Well, there are like eight French restaurants in town! I had to get back in the darn Porsche and go, "Next French restaurant in town." I went through all eight French restaurants until I finally found the one she was talking about. Luckily, there's no such thing as parking meters up here and there's always a space in front or else I would have gone ballistic.

So, I arrive a half hour late, and no Alice. Twenty minutes later, just as I was getting really annoyed, a young woman came in. She spoke to the waitress, who escorted her to a table across the room. Not Alice, I assumed, right? Another twenty minutes go by and I realize that it *is* Alice across the room. The idiot girl asked for Alex Firestein, my mother's maiden name. She thought it was the funniest thing when I finally asked her who she was, after watching her eat three baskets of bread by herself. What a moron. She's cute though. Nice figure—I'd say a solid size six. She's wearing white Juicy sweats, a white tank, and a white knit three-quarter-length sweater jacket, probably DKNY. I'm in my black leggings and an Alexander McQueen plaid miniskirt, black Robert Clergerie boots, and a black long-

sleeved T-shirt. We look like yin and yang, and I feel like our personalities are the same way.

"Look," she says, taking my hand. "I know it seems like the worst thing in heaven that you might have to go down a few planes, but really it's all heaven, all of it is good. All the material stuff is great and everything, but on any plane in heaven, the feeling of being loved, of knowing that you did a good job, is what's important. That's what heaven is all about."

She's throwing her hands all around like she's saying something mystical.

"I just feel like I'm being punished." I start to cry again. "And for what? It's not like I did anything so awful."

"First things first. Why are you assuming that you're not going to pass this test? Jeez, you're such a downer," she says, taking some of my fries. "I've seen this happen before. I was a guardian angel for years, you know."

"And did the person you watched over pass the test?" I ask.

"Oh no, the person I was watching is still alive. I'm just saying I knew someone who had to take the test. He didn't pass, and the guy lives on the fourth plane, but he gets to hear some great music."

This girl is of no help.

"Wait, why were you a guardian angel?"

"Well, when I got up here, I had no family. I was only sixteen, you know. I had some great-grandparents, but they really weren't my scene. I was sad for a time that I died when I did. You know, I never fell in love or got married or got to have children of my own. I just wanted to experience all of that, so I signed up to see life on earth. It was fun. I got this girl from

Chicago. It was the 1960s and man, did we go to some great places. That's how I know all those great musicians."

"What ever happened to her?"

"Sheila? Oh, she's great. She got into the women's movement in the 1970s and then she met this guy and fell in love and they moved to Dallas. She's got three kids now. I think she might even have a grandchild. I stopped looking after her when I turned twenty-five and someone else took over my angel duties. My mother died then, and I wanted to be with her. My brother, Butch, died a few years ago, so most of my family is back intact. I got to see Sheila fall in love and have a child. It was really beautiful, and I got to see what life would have been like. It was really worth it."

"So you don't regret dying young?" I ask her.

She pauses and thinks about it for a second.

"You know what I'm pissed off about?" she kind of whispers, leaning over the table and looking right into my eyes. "I'm pissed off that I didn't get a chance to change the world. I'm really pissed that I didn't get to be part of the women's movement. It was amazing what all those women were doing, equality and all that. In my time, it was all about the men. I wanted to burn a bra so badly."

I think she's done, but she's not.

"Anyway," she says, taking a breath, "that's also when I decided I didn't need to age anymore. I like being thirty. Thirty is kind of that point when you're still considered young but you get to sit at the big people's table. Thirty is a great age, the best of both worlds," she says, sitting back in her chair like she's just made peace with herself.

"What big people's table?"

"The big people's table. You know, at family dinners when the kids sit at one table and the grown-ups sit at another? That's the way I look at it anyway."

"I get it," I tell her. "We just never had a kid's table when I was growing up. I was the only kid."

"Oh, that's right, you were an only child. How are your grandparents, anyway? I remember your grandparents, they were wild."

"They still are," I smile. "They're fine."

"They must have been happy to see you."

"They were," I smile again.

"So, let me ask you," she says, leaning in again and looking into my eyes with this intense look of eager anticipation, "did you get to change the world? What was it like being a woman at the end of the twentieth century? Do you know how lucky you were to grow up in a time when women were treated equally?"

All of a sudden I realize where she's coming from, and I feel like a jerk. She might look thirty, but she's really only sixteen and a 1950s sixteen at that.

"Did you get to change the world?" she asks me again.

I have to think about that for a second.

I wore the LIVESTRONG yellow bracelet, and I voted in the last three presidential elections. I wore the pink ribbon for breast cancer and the red one for AIDS at charity benefits.

Aw, crap. Did I do anything to change the world?

"Well, young women in the last part of the twentieth century didn't have to change the world for ourselves. Our mothers did it for us," I tell her.

“So what did you do?” she asks.

“To change the world?” I ask her.

I want to joke that I bought a lot of shoes and bags, but I’m not sure she’ll get it and it’s not really a joke exactly. Consumerism is what keeps us thriving, isn’t it? I don’t say that though. Frankly, I have no idea what I did to change the world. Was I too young? Was I too lazy? Did I really have to change the world anyway? I read the *New York Times* (okay, just the Style section, but I did glance at the other sections from time to time). I kept up with things, all that stuff going on in Africa. I watched *Oprah*. Wait, is this why they might demote me to fourth heaven? Because I didn’t change the world?

“I don’t know,” I say softly.

“Maybe the essay will help you find that answer,” she says.

I don’t say anything. I’m starting to get a big headache. Can you believe I’m getting a headache in heaven? Do they even have Advil here?

“Hey,” she says, getting really excited, “let’s go shopping!”

“I don’t know, I kind of have to get home,” I lie as I think of my not-such-a-joke earlier about buying bags and shoes. Maybe I’ve done enough shopping for one lifetime. But Alice is determined.

“Oh, come on,” she says, pulling me up. “Your mother would get mad at me if she heard I hadn’t cheered you up in some way. Don’t tell me you hate shopping.”

This makes me laugh, and before I know it we’re off.

Here’s the thing about shopping in heaven. Duh, it’s a delight. I told Alice I needed some more wifebeaters. There’s a store that just sells wifebeaters, only they’re not called wifebeaters here. I’m not kidding you. There’s an actual store called

Ha-Ha Now You're In Hell Beaters. There are wife . . . er, ha-ha-now-you're-in-hell-beaters in every size and shape: racer back, plain old tank—like thousands of them.

"Hi, Alex," the saleslady says, giving me an air kiss. "I was waiting to meet you. We just weren't sure if you wanted formfitting or loose."

"I'll take them both," I laugh with Alice.

"That's what we figured," the saleslady says, putting ten of each into a bag.

"I love your all-black look," Alice tells me as we head into Sleek and Chic. "I'm still used to wearing all white from my guardian angel days."

Everything, as you can imagine, in Sleek and Chic, is black.

"Welcome, Alice, to Sleek and Chic, where black is always the new black."

I try on a pair of black oversize trousers with one of my new ha-ha-now-you're-in-hell-beaters. Alice puts on a Jean Paul Gaultier military peacoat with gold buttons, from the 1980s.

"It's fantastic!" I shriek.

"Fabulous," the salesperson says.

"You think?" Alice asks me.

"If you don't get it, I will," I tell her.

She really does look adorable in it, but, as you know by now, whatever you put on up here looks amazing.

I'm starting to have fun with Alice. Maybe I was wrong to judge her so harshly. She is just a kid after all.

We decide on matching four-carat diamond studs at Four Carats and Up because, if you had the choice, would you ever go under four carats?

We take in Dolce & Gabbana's new fall collection at the Skinny Mini Store (where a size two fits everyone). I buy (or take) the lower-cut numbers, and Alice takes the more subdued items. I'm so not into puffed three-quarter sleeves now that my saggy arms are gone, but Alice is.

"I'll just never get used to the way you younger women dress," Alice says, suddenly sounding older than her sixteen-going-on-thirty persona.

I'm trying on a silver bustier with cropped pants when I realize how much fun I'm really having. In the last two hours, I haven't thought about the essay or fourth heaven or any of it. My mom would be having such a field day up here.

"Hey, Alice," I ask her as she tries on some Cole Haan moccasin flats and I strap into some Louboutin six-inch black spikes, "what's the deal with getting into my parents' dreams? I just want them to know I'm all right."

"Well, you know, it takes a lot of practice," she tells me, checking out her shoes in the mirror. "It's the kind of thing that has to come from within you. You just concentrate and balance your mind and spirit and suddenly you're there."

"So, how do you practice?"

"Well, it's not exactly practicing. It's really hard to explain. You know how you can ride a bike one day and you don't know how you do it? It's like that."

"Okay, so it's like riding a bike," I say.

"Once you get good at it, though, the big thing is actually going down to earth and being among everyone else."

"What do you mean? Like in the movies where a person walks around and no one sees him?"

"Yes!" she exclaimed. "It's so much fun! When you first learn how to do it, you want to spend weeks on earth, just hanging out. I once caught my parents having sex though; ugh, that was awful. I got right out of there. Let me tell you something, you know all those times you thought you were completely alone, sitting on the couch, picking your nose, and wiping it on the other side of the cushion?"

"No, I can't say that I ever did that."

"Yeah, sure you didn't," she deadpans. "Well, let's just say that maybe someone was watching."

"Oh, how awful," I wince.

"Trust me, when you're able to go back down to earth, stick to the big things: weddings, bar mitzvahs, presidential inaugurations," she says as she turns to the saleswoman. "I'll take nine pairs of these shoes, all in purple."

"Because, why not?" the salesperson says as she hands her the bag full of shoes and we all laugh.

"I'll take these," I say to the saleswoman, pointing to my Louboutin spike heels. "In fact, I think I'll wear them out."

"They feel like sneakers, don't they?" the saleswoman asks.

"They do. They're so comfortable!" I smile, jumping up and down in them.

I get home that night and throw my new stuff into my closet. Peaches is back from a long day of fetch, and we're lying on my bed under the window. You can see every star from my bedroom window.

Just then, my phone rings. Let it be Adam.

"Hi, sweetheart," Grandmom says. "How was lunch with Alice today?"

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"Oh, it was fun. She's nice. A little strange. She says hi, by the way."

"She's a sweet girl. A little odd, if I remember. I'm glad you got out today, Al. It was good for you."

"Yeah," I say, lying back in bed. "How was your day?"

"Oh, it was great. I called 411 and got so many numbers. It's the most incredible thing. Who knew?"

"She's been on that phone all day!" Grandpop shouts to me.

"Oh, Harry, go listen to one of your baseball games. Your grandfather is getting on my last nerve, Alex. I'll be glad to see you tomorrow so we can gang up on him. I just conjured up your favorite kasha varnishkas."

"I can't wait. I'll talk to you tomorrow. Love you."

"Okay, darling. Grandpop sends love, too."

"What?" I hear him ask.

"You send love to Alex," she tells him.

"I send her all the love in heaven," he says.

I hang up, but then pick the phone back up and dial another number.

"Hi, Alice. I just wanted to say thanks for today."

"No problem," she says. "It was fun. I was actually going to call and see how you're feeling."

"I'm good. I'm feeling a lot better."

"Oh good. You know, I know what it's like to die so young. It can be very lonely and confusing, and especially with everything that's going on with you right now. Call if you ever just want to talk, okay?"

"I will," I tell her. "By the way, if you're not busy tomorrow

night, I'm going to my grandparents' house. I'm sure they'd love to see you."

"Sure!" she says. "I'd love to. That'll be fun."

"Sounds great. See you tomorrow."

I'm trying to rest my eyes and concentrate, like Alice told me to, but other thoughts crowd into my head

"Should have gotten five more racer-back tanks," I think to myself.

No, concentrate, concentrate on Mom and Dad.

I keep picturing my parents over and over in my head.

"Are those spike heels too slutty?" I think to myself.

Concentrate.

Concentrate.

Mom.

Dad.

Concentrate.

"Peaches!" I shout angrily, giving her a little shove. "You're snoring."

Concentrate.

Concentrate.

In my mind, I'm outside of my parents' room. They're sleeping. I see their feet at the bottom of the bed. I try to get into the room, but I can't seem to break through.

Concentrate.

I'm trying with all my mind. I see my mom's foot sort of twitch.

Ugh, I can't get in there.

I'm back in heaven. Peaches has shifted over to the other side of the bed.

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I try it again.

Concentrate.

Concentrate.

It's no use. I'll try it again tomorrow, I think to myself as I roll over to try and get some sleep.

I lie there for a good half hour. My mind is still racing.

Darn it.

I'm sure I must have done something to change the world.





When I was fifteen, I asked my dad, “How do you know when you’re in love?”

He said, real angry too, “Is someone pressuring you to do something you don’t want to?”

“In what way?” I asked him.

“You tell me if some boy is bothering you,” he instructed sternly.

Truth was, I only wished some boy was bothering me.

See, when I was a teenager, I couldn’t get a guy if I drugged him (not that I would have, mind you, but I’m sure if I’d slipped a guy a roofie he still would have found the strength to kick me off of him).

Penelope got her first boyfriend when we were fifteen. She was still heavy, but she’d grown these enormous breasts and loved her body even more as a result of it. Every guy took notice. She ditched her wire frames for contacts. Her hair, usually stringy and unkempt, was still stringy and unkempt, but now that it was the eighties it somehow looked cool teased out with the strands she dyed pink and purple. For all the curves and cuteness that Pen gained from puberty, I lost both. Cookies and



Pop-Tarts somehow found their way to my thighs. French fry grease seeped from my pores, creating a lunar landscape of zits and blackheads on my face. I made the tremendous mistake of getting a perm. Dana Stanbury and I both went to get perms together and hers was fantastic. I think the hairdresser kept my tonic in too long or something because the lustrous curls I'd begged for turned into nothing less than an Afro. While the other girls were out with their boyfriends, I was busy pouring conditioner into my hair or popping and mopping up zits (okay, mopping is an exaggeration, but it's darn near the truth). In other words, puberty had turned me into a genuine American tragedy.

So when my father asked me if some boy was bothering me, I chose not to tell him that the only way they were bothering me was when they called me "pizza face."

The girls felt sad for me, especially Pen.

"You don't look that bad," she lied as she helped me comb mayonnaise into my hair, a tip we'd picked up from some magazine. It was supposed to soften and define curls, but all it did was make me crave an egg salad sandwich.

"It's kind of cool in a way," Kerry Collins said, looking at my hair up close.

"You're just not used to the look," Olivia Wilson added. "Maybe you don't look as bad as you think you do."

"You know I do," I cried.

"Okay, you do," Pen said, "but you're still my best friend no matter how bad you look."

That's Pen. She was always the best at giving backhanded compliments.

Somehow my mother couldn't see it. "You're gorgeous," she told me. "You're the prettiest girl I've ever seen."

But Dad saw me clearly. "She's beginning to look like one of those sumo wrestlers, Maxine," he said right in front of me one night as I grabbed a tub of chocolate ice cream out of the freezer.

That pissed me off. My father has never been a svelte man. He actually has the body for it though. My dad has the kind of body that looks like it's built to be thin, but he's had too many big lunches, so his stomach protrudes over his belt. Everything else is kind of thin, though, you know how that is? Anyway, I just looked fat. I took the ice cream and ate half the tub. That would show him.

Now, in addition to my body being bent out of shape, so were my hormones.

I would have gone out with any boy who asked me. I had this urge to make out and be kissed and hugged and be felt up and get to third base like you would not believe. I had never even touched a penis. The closest I'd come to seeing one was the pictures in my health class book all with herpes lesions on them. I had reached the stage parents call "boy crazy." Unfortunately, there was not a boy in that world who wanted to be Alex crazy.

Now, as I said, along with the other girls, Pen got her first boyfriend, Andrew McAuliffe, when we were in the ninth grade. Andrew didn't go to our school. He went to the Haverford School, an all-boys school (dream come true). He was about a foot shorter and about fifty pounds lighter than Pen, but that didn't stop either one of them from falling in love. By the way

she'd drag her arm over his shoulder and he'd set his hand on her large derriere, you could tell they didn't care about their physical differences.

Still, Pen and Andrew were in love and their destiny seemed eternal. Andrew knew, though, that if he were dating Pen, he would have to deal with the fat, pimply third wheel that insisted on rolling behind them wherever they went. He was actually okay about it; sweet in fact. He might have felt sorry for me though; I don't know. Either that or Pen might have really given it to him and told him that wherever she went, I went too.

I tagged along with them a lot on the weekends. Andrew was two years older, so he had a car. Hours were spent in the back of his Volkswagen Rabbit watching them hold hands in the front seat as Andrew drove. There was always some Saturday-night kegger, some kid on the Main Line who was throwing a party while his parents were out of town.

I hated keg parties. Everyone was crazy drunk, and since every kid was rich, these huge mansions were always trashed. Some ass kid would say in a grumbly cartoon voice, "Hey hey hey, it's Fat Alex," alluding to my new and what seemed permanent weight gain.

Still, there was nothing else to do on the weekends except go to these parties. To tell you the truth, I would have rather been at home, but I couldn't shake that *carpe-diem* feeling that maybe this would be the night I'd get felt up, or at least kissed. It never was. Pen and Andrew and myself had the same MO every time. They would find some vacant bedroom and have sex, and I'd drift around the house, rolling from couple to couple, leaving a trail of mayo hair in my wake. Olivia Wilson, Dana Stan-

bury, and Kerry Collins (who all of course developed perfect postpubescent figures) were usually there, and I checked out who they were dating or trying to date at the time. The twins, Seth and Tom Rosso, and Greg Rice, in their Friends School varsity soccer jackets, would be doing bong hits in some corner of the house. Zach Mason and Joshua Roberts and Joshua's little brother, Mike, sat playing quarters and drinking themselves into stupors until one of them finally threw up or passed out. And then there was fat, pimply, Afroed me who would end up (and very uncomfortably I might add, as that's when I started wearing girdles) watching it all and hoping that some guy (not from my school, of course) would take me to one of the vacant rooms. I wasn't ready for sex yet, but I wouldn't have said no to third base.

I never had a curfew at this point. It didn't matter anyway. I was always home at a reasonable hour because there was nothing else to do.

"We trust you," Mom would say as she dabbed on some Chanel No. 5 before her own night out.

"Just don't let any of those boys touch you," Dad would warn, fastening his cuff link.

Plus, all my girlfriends had to be in by midnight on Saturday nights, so it wasn't like I was dying to stay at the party after they all had to leave.

Then my parents told me they were going to New York for the whole weekend. This was not something uncommon per se. See, by this point my parents were always flying someplace or going somewhere and our housekeeper, Matilda, came and stayed. This time, though, they were leaving me alone.

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"We trust you, Al," my dad said. "You're fifteen and you can take care of yourself."

"We're only a phone call away," mom said.

"Can't I go with you to New York?" I asked them.

"Now, what are you going to do when we're at the gala? You're going to sit alone in a hotel room all night? Go out with your friends, have fun," Dad soothed. "You can take care of yourself here."

"Penelope can stay over if you want," Mom offered.

Any other kid would have been doing cartwheels to be left alone, but, for me, it had been forever since my parents and I had done something together. I wouldn't have said that to them though. It would have sounded too sappy. Like the time I asked if we could go to Bookbinder's on a Friday night, just the three of us.

"Come on, Alex, you know we have to go to this benefit tonight. A lot of important people are going to be there. Don't you have any friends who want to do something with you? Where's that Penelope?"

So, I held my tongue and called Pen, and I told her that the 'rents were going away and she was staying over. What did she say?

"Andrew and I call your parents' room!"

Great. Now I was going to sit on my own couch, in my own living room, while I heard my parents' bed creak.

So that Friday night came. I ordered two pizzas, one for Pen and Andrew and one for myself with extra cheese (because I was already corpulent and repulsive, how could it get any worse?). I rented *Sixteen Candles* on video for my own enjoyment. I had

just combed a bottle of conditioner through my hair and put it in a shower cap when my phone rang.

"Hi," Pen said, sounding worse than I'd ever heard her sound. "I think I got food poisoning from the steak sandwich at school today . . . Hold on, I have to throw up again."

When she finally finished hacking, she said, "I can't leave the toilet. Andrew said he would come over to keep you company."

"I don't want Andrew coming here alone," I yelled at her.

"What else can I do?" she said. "You know you get scared of the uncle Morris death room when no one else is there."

She had a point.

"I've never been alone with Andrew," I complained. "What are we going to talk about?"

"Rent a movie or something."

"I rented *Sixteen Candles*. Is he going to want to watch that?"

"He loves *Sixteen Candles*. He thinks he's Jake Ryan."

Twenty minutes later, Andrew was at my door. I didn't care that I had the shower cap full of conditioner on my head and was in my flannel pajamas. As if I wasn't beautiful enough, I had just popped a zit that was growing on the side of my nose.

"You're bleeding," he said when I opened the door.

I shrugged it off and let him in. What did it matter if I spruced myself up? Even if Andrew wasn't Pen's boyfriend, I wouldn't be attracted to him.

First of all, Andrew was like my height. I don't know if you're familiar with this, and maybe there's a reason for it—you'll have

to let me know—but almost every guy on the Main Line is less than six feet. I analyzed this through the years whenever I was out of state, and it's something I never saw anyplace else. I don't mean to put anyone down when I say this. It's just something I've noticed.

Anyway, Andrew was short. He had dirty blond hair; it was very thin even back then, so you knew he would lose it all someday. I ran into him years later when we were like twenty-eight and he was totally bald except for some hair on the sides.

He was a nice kid, though, and he really liked Pen so I liked him. It was a real menschy thing he did, coming over to keep me company like he did.

Right when he got there, he called Pen. She was still hacking it up in the bathroom.

"Don't worry, I'll take care of her," I heard him say as I blotted some toothpaste onto my bleeding zit. "You just make sure you're okay."

Like I said, a really nice kid.

Now, I know exactly what you're thinking: Andrew comes over and he sees through the plastic shower cap and the toothpaste on my face and the thirty extra pounds and we make out, right?

Sorry, that's not what happened. You think I'm the kind of person who makes out with her best friend's boyfriend? I'm trying to stay in seventh heaven, for crying out loud, not get sent to first!

What happened was, about twenty minutes after Andrew came over, we were still waiting for the pizzas and we were just starting to watch *Sixteen Candles* when my phone rang.

"Can Andrew go over to Babis Pharmacy and get me some Pepto?" Pen barely got out before hacking it up again.

I gave the phone to Andrew and tried to listen to his conversation as the sounds of Molly Ringwald's cry, "Grandparents forgetting a birthday? They live for that shit," blared on the television.

"Okay, I will. I'll see you in a bit," he said, hanging up the phone.

"I gotta go over to Babis to get Pen the Pepto, but she doesn't want me to leave you here all alone. You can come with, or my brother is home from college and he could come over."

I had never actually met Andrew's brother, Bobby, before. Andrew had mentioned once or twice that he had a brother at Princeton, but that was it. I honestly don't know why I said it was okay for Bobby to come over. Thing was, I didn't feel like going over to Babis, and it was time to get the conditioner out of my hair. I hated being in my house alone. The place was so big. Every time the house made any kind of a sound I thought it was uncle Morris from beyond the grave. Actually, I just asked uncle Morris yesterday if it was him spooking the house and he said, "You think I had nothing better to do than spook my teenage niece?"

Anyway, I told Andrew to call his brother. Why Bobby was sitting at home waiting for his little brother to ask him to watch his girlfriend's fat, pimply friend was beyond me, but when Andrew called him and asked if it was all right, Bobby said he'd be over in a half hour.

A couple of minutes after I got out of the shower, my doorbell rang and I went to answer it. Again, who cared how I

looked? I had a towel on my head and my big terrycloth bathrobe on and those cliché fuzzy rabbit slippers that Pen said were the gayest looking things she'd ever seen, but I didn't care, they were comfortable.

When I answered the door, my first thought was that Bobby looked nothing like Andrew. He was still short, as you know most boys from the Main Line are, but he had dark hair that was really full. It looked like he'd never lose it. As a matter of fact, that time when I ran into Andrew years later, Bobby was with him and he still had all his hair. I wonder if that bothered Andrew.

Anyway, while Andrew had brown eyes, Bobby had green. Also, he was dressed in an oxford shirt and khaki pants. Nice. Though I recall the pants being pulled up too high on his waist, which was very geeky, and that was so unlike Andrew, who always wore a T-shirt and jeans and was never without his Haverford varsity soccer jacket.

"Thanks for coming over," I said as he walked in.

"No problem," he said, giving me a once over and taking in my terrycloth bathrobe and fuzzy rabbit slippers.

"I just took a shower," I excused myself. "I'm just going to throw on some sweats," I added, walking back into my bedroom. "If the pizza guy comes, the money is on the table."

Now, what sweats were going to be cute enough for a college boy who most likely had no interest in going to third base with me, but might? I needed to look a little more attractive.

I remember clearly being pissed off at myself that I said I'd put on sweats. Had I come out in anything more special than sweats, it would have meant that I thought he was cute, which I did, but I had to play coy. You know how that is?

Okay, the truth must come out. Bobby wasn't actually that cute at all. He was really thin, first of all. All boney. You could literally see the bones in his face. Didn't this kid eat? He also had zits, not as many as mine, but, still, the face was nothing to write home about. His khaki pants were pulled a little too high for my taste. No, he wasn't cute, but the fact remained, a boy was in my house.

I must have been in my bedroom trying on every pair of sweats I had for about half an hour when I heard the doorbell ring and Bobby answer it. *Sixteen Candles* was at the point where Jake found Farmer Ted trapped under the coffee table and Farmer Ted told him that Samantha had a crush on him. I loved that the pizza guy saw a guy answer the door. The pizza guy from Boston Style Pizza had been to my house many, many times. We never said anything beyond, "How much?" and, "Thank you," but, still, how cool would the pizza guy think I was to have a guy over, a college boy at that, even though he wasn't that cute and had visible bones in his face?

"The pizza's here," Bobby screamed out.

I had finally found the perfect pair of sweats, my red Champion sweats—they seemed to make me look a half a pound thinner—and my Friends School blue sweatshirt. I headed out into the kitchen where Bobby had put the boxes on the table.

"I actually already ate," Bobby said, which made me think he might have been anorexic, "but you can dive in if you want."

As if.

I really wanted to though. The smell of that pizza wafting through the box was enough to make me float over to it, but

never in front of a guy, no matter how thin or unattractive he may be.

"I ate too," I said. "That was for Andrew."

There was a pause.

"Thanks again for coming over," I said again.

"It's fine," he said. "I'm actually studying for finals right now and my little sister had some friends over. Andrew said it would be really quiet here."

"Yeah," I said, not knowing what else to say but feeling vaguely insulted, as if Andrew had told Bobby I lived in a funeral home. "It's really quiet here. Well, I'll let you study. I have to dry my hair anyway."

"Thanks," he said, looking at the books he brought in. "Then again," he stopped, "I could make room for a slice if you're game."

A half hour later we were three-quarters through the first pizza.

"Frat parties suck," Bobby said, digging into his third piece. "I even thought about joining a frat, but what's the point? It's just a continuation of high school, and how much beer can a person drink?"

"I totally get it!" I replied enthusiastically. "I mean, do these people know how stupid they look?"

"I thought it was just me," he said, smiling at me. "It's fine to get drunk once in a while, but every night?"

"Exactly!" I agreed as I started to become a little more attracted to him. Maybe I could teach him not to pull his pants so high.

"Anyway, I'm planning on going into the ministry after col-

lege,” he said. “How would it look if I were drinking my way through school?”

“Exact . . . What?” I stopped. “The ministry?”

“Yeah,” he said, real emphatic, as if he was proud of himself. “I’m planning on being a minister. My parents don’t want me to, they want me to be a doctor or a lawyer, so that’s why I go to Princeton, but my real calling is to God.”

“So, does that mean like you can’t have sex or anything?”

What did I know? I was fifteen and Jewish (and a Hebrew-school dropout to make me even more clueless about what he was saying).

“No,” he laughed. “I’m not going to be a priest, I’m going to be a pastor. Pastors can get married and have kids and all that.”

“Oh,” I said. “Well, that’s cool, I guess.”

We sat in silence, eating our pizza for another few moments. I guess he sensed that I didn’t think becoming a pastor was the coolest thing in the world. He turned to me and smiled.

“You know,” he said, “you’re kind of cute. Andrew didn’t mention that.”

“Thanks,” I said, not knowing what else to say. I honestly didn’t think he was hitting on me though. I mean, I was a fifteen-year-old uneducated Jew and he was a future pastor who heard the calling, I think. I could have asked if it was against the rules to hit on someone of a different religion, but I decided against it. I had already made it perfectly clear that I was pathetic both physically and scholastically, why dig the hole any deeper?

“I hope you don’t mind,” he said.

And that’s when he leaned in. Where he was going, I wasn’t

sure. He had put his slice back in the box and he was leaning into me, me with my wet hair and sweatpants on and my pink fuzzy slippers, with toothpaste on my face.

“What, don’t you mind?” I asked him seriously. I mean, I honestly had no idea.

And that’s when he kissed me.

My first kiss (and the fourth best day of my life).

At first it was just a little peck on my lips, the lips with pizza grease still on them. It was the tiniest kiss, but the fire that went through my body from that little touch made me want to jump on top of him (though first I had to put down the slice of pizza I was holding).

One little peck, and he stopped in front of my face and smiled at me.

Then another little peck.

The fire, the fire!

The next kiss was all mine, I couldn’t help myself. The feeling of throwing my lips on the future minister was too much for me to handle. Maybe it was a part of his future job, giving a first kiss to a fat girl was like those priests who wear shirts made of hair and whip themselves on the back, but who cared? The feeling, the fire, I wanted more!

So I threw my lips into his and he threw his right back. We were hugging and kissing and our tongues were circling around each other with this frenzy like they were magnets that couldn’t keep apart. I wished the pizza delivery guy could see us now. Bobby’s saliva was all over my face. He licked my cheek, ugh, but again I didn’t care. I just wiped it off and kept going.

It went on and on and on. Standing there in my kitchen,

I could hear Molly Ringwald say to Jake Ryan, “Thanks for getting my undies back,” and Jake saying, “Happy birthday, Samantha.”

Happy birthday, Alexandra!

We were throwing our arms all over each other, and he kept licking me and I kept wiping it off my face like the only way we could ever live was if we kept kissing and kissing and getting saliva all over each other.

“You wanna go to your room?” he asked.

So I grabbed the future pastor’s arm and we ran down toward my room, throwing ourselves onto the pink bedspread under the pink canopy. He had toothpaste all over his face and on his shirt, which I remarked at and he laughed at.

The kissing went on all night. Our faces were raw, but neither of us cared. There was just this intense need to keep on kissing and kissing. I heard my phone ring a few times, but I didn’t bother to answer it. It was like that whole hormonal need to be kissed and touched just exploded in me and I couldn’t help but keep puckering my lips all over his face. The phone calls turned out to be Pen, who was feeling a little better, but she had a feeling as to why I didn’t answer the phone so she stopped calling.

My parents never called. They trusted me. Besides, I don’t think my father would have minded that a future minister was bothering me, though I guess he would have preferred it be a future rabbi.

Sometime around two in the morning, Bobby finally touched my boobs: oh, the feeling. Having my breasts touched became my one huge weakness. I think it’s because my breasts are so

small. If they're touched by a man they're like buttons that send off the most intense sexual desire. That's when I started to moan like a wild boar, but, again, I didn't care. Years later, I do admit that we were grinding our bodies into each other, but I'm really embarrassed about that. Dry fucking is what they call it, and down on earth it's kind of an embarrassing thing to admit you've done. That night, though, neither of us cared.

I tried to touch his penis, I really did. Through the kissing, I had this running monologue going on in my head, "Just put your hand down there." So I tried to slowly work my way, but I just couldn't. I know, really immature, but I just couldn't, so the whole night was spent grinding with him touching my boobs, which seemed to be fine with both of us.

I think we both fell asleep at around 4:00 a.m. I woke up at about 6:00 a.m. unable to sleep with this guy in the bed with me. He looked so peaceful sleeping there in my white eye-let sheets. I couldn't believe he was there! I wasn't sure which looked more out of place at that point, the guy in my bed or all the dolls from around the world lining my walls. It was the last time I'd ever have my Snoopy doll on my bed again. I threw it under the bed when I saw it. It might still be there to this day.

Besides the sound from the television in the living room still blaring static from the night before, there were no sounds in my house. I wanted to get out of bed and turn off the television, but I didn't want Bobby to wake up. I wanted him to stay there, but I kind of didn't at the same time. I didn't feel like I was in love with him or anything, but the fact that a boy was in my bed, a college boy—I wished I had a camera. The sound of the

television was bothering me too much, though, so I got up to turn it off. When I came back, Bobby was up.

"Oh hi," he said, sitting up in my bed, giving me sort of a half smile. His pants and shirt were still on, wrinkled but still in shape. He got out of bed to smooth them and tuck in his shirt. He pulled his khakis up high again. What a nerd, but he was a guy in my bedroom so I had to excuse it.

"Hi," I said with a half smile, really embarrassed.

"So I didn't get a lot of studying done last night," he laughed.

"No, I guess you didn't," I agreed from my doorway.

"Well, I gotta go," he continued quickly. "I have a lot of studying to do today," as if he was going to really start studying at six thirty in the morning. I didn't care though. As much as I wanted to be with a boy forever, it just wasn't him. I really didn't feel bad that he wanted to leave. Frankly, I was tired.

"Okay," I said.

I walked him to the door.

"Nice meeting you," he said, embarrassed.

"You too," I said, opening the door.

And then he left.

Would he call me? Did I care? Nah. It seems cold, but I got what I wanted from him and I think he got what he wanted, too.

When I went to look at myself in the mirror, though, I nearly died (though, as we all know, I didn't). My hair, which was a disaster when I went to bed, had now been made even worse by bed head. One side was plastered flat to my skull and the other was poofed out like a science experiment gone wrong.

Here was the thing that made me forget about him all together. I saw what was in the mirror and that thing was scary. What person in their right mind would be so hard up as to want to kiss something that looked like me? I'm not feeling sorry for myself, I'm telling the truth. I needed a makeover.

He never called me again. I never saw him again until all those years later when I ran into Andrew. As it turned out, he hadn't become a pastor. He sold dental equipment. I wasn't attracted to him that night all those years ago, and I wasn't attracted to him when I saw him all those years later, but to me he was always my first kiss and that was wonderful and special. Now that I've had the opportunity to kiss a lot of other guys, as unattractive as Bobby was then, he is still one of the best kissers I ever kissed.

The next day, Pen asked me what happened. She wanted details, but how many details can you give? We kissed for five straight hours and he touched my boobs. I never went near his pants (except for the mortifying grind).

Still, though, it changed my life. I had been kissed and held and, most of all, a guy wanted me . . . at least for one night.

It took eight more months for the perm to grow out. Pen and Andrew eventually broke up. Pen broke up with him. I forget why. I think she was just sick of him. Pen could never be with any man for long. She always wanted to be free. It would be nine more months until I was kissed again, and that time I lost my virginity. It doesn't matter who it was with, some Haverford boy if you really must know. It didn't matter, though, who it was. I just wanted to get it out of the way, just like the first kiss.

After that, I never minded that my parents went out a lot and left me alone.

Frankly, I was very rarely alone.

I've never been a person who thought that sex was a big deal. I still don't.

A kiss though. A kiss to me is the most intimate thing two people can share, and I think I spent the rest of my life searching for another kiss that was just as good as the first one.

Thank Heaven for Small Favors

What the heck is that noise?
What the heck is that?

I keep hearing this rackety tap then a huge tap—what the heck is that?

Oh, it's Adam.

He looks so adorable. Look at him in his little baseball shirt and cap. The cutie even has cleats on. He's got some baseball cage set up in his backyard. I'm watching him from my bedroom window as the baseball comes toward him. Great swing. Grandpop would be very impressed. He's hitting these baseballs clear over his ten-acre yard. He's really good. You think that's a heaven thing or could he really hit baseballs out of a ballpark when he was alive?

This is crazy, I should be down there with him. Had it been he who dumped me, I would have set that batting thing so I hit the balls right into all his windows.

He's such a good person.

I am such an idiot.

"Um batter batter batter, swing batter!" I scream from my window, trying to get his attention in a cute way.

This scares the bejesus out of him, not what I was trying to do, and rather than hitting the ball, the ball (which must have been going ninety miles an hour) clunks him in the head.

"Oh no!" I scream as I run down the stairs and out the door.
"I'm on my way!"

By the time I get outside, he's just hit another ball.

"Are you okay?" I scream, running toward him.

"I'm fine," he says, hitting yet another ball. "It didn't hurt."

"Oh yeah," I say. "Forgot where we are for a sec."

Now I'm standing here, outside of his batting cage, not knowing what else to do. He's ignoring me as he keeps hitting those balls.

"Listen, I want to apologize," I start.

"I don't want to hear it, Alex," he tells me.

"No, I've been thinking and I really am sorry. I just got scared. I was being stupid."

"You know, don't you think it's hard for me up here, too?" he says.

"Of course I know it's hard," I tell him. "This dying thing was really shocking, and it's tough getting used to it."

"So what's wrong with going through it together?" he asks, not looking at me as he hits another ball.

"I want to," I tell him. "I really want to, but I've got some things that are going on right now and I don't want to get into it."

"What could possibly be going on?"

It's on the tip of my tongue. I want to tell him so badly, but something is stopping me. He's so good. I'm so rotten.

"I just . . ."

Tell him, you idiot!

“Look, I can’t tell you what’s going on, but hopefully it will all be behind me soon enough.”

“There’s really something going on?” he asks as another ball jolts him in the shoulder.

“Yes.”

“Was it not your time or something?”

“No, this is my time. The MINI Cooper was supposed to hit me. I’m dead, it’s not that . . .”

“So what is it?” he says as another ball hits him in the back.

“Can you just turn that off? I know we’re in heaven, but I just don’t like the balls ramming into you like that,” I tell him, and he goes over and turns off the ball machine.

“Adam, look, it’s . . . it’s just some stupid thing that I’m going through right now. I’ll let you know later, but can you just let it lie for now? Can you just trust me?”

He takes a deep breath like he’s thinking about it.

“Okay,” he says. “I guess you have your reasons. I respect that. Whatever is going on, though, I hope you’re okay.”

“Yeah, I’m fine. It will all be over soon and then we’ll laugh at it.”

“Oh, it’s one of those things.”

“Yeah, something that now seems like the end of the world but will seem funny a couple of months from now.”

I hope.

“So, are we friends?” I ask him.

He pauses.

“Yeah, okay.”

We stand here for a good long minute, not knowing what to do. I really want to kiss him, but I know I shouldn’t.

“So you wanna try hitting some balls?” he asks.

“I’m not very good at it, but I’ll try.”

“I always sucked at it,” he says, walking over to turn on the ball thrower. “Now I’m Hank Aaron.”

He hands me the bat, and I hit the ball over his house.

“You’re good,” he says.

“Yeah, considering I’ve never done this before.”

We continue taking turns hitting the ball until we finally get tired of it and decide to let the balls hit us in the face.

“Let it hit you in the eye,” he laughs. “It makes the coolest swishy sound.”

So we continue to let the balls hit us in the face for the next couple of hours. It’s a dumb thing, but, then again, so is a Jewish princess and an investment banker being able to hit a ball like Hank Aaron.



I have to make a comment before I start my next best day. So, you know how you do things in your life and you think you were having a really great time, but then years later you look back on it and it turns out to be one of the dumbest things you've ever done?

Well, that's exactly what happened to me.

See, when I look back on this particular best day (day number five if you're still counting), at the time it was more fun than I ever had. If I had to pinpoint, though, when all the trouble really began in my life, I suppose I'd have to start there. I kept going back and forth about whether I should even use this as a best day, but in the end I figured that the essay question is, What were the ten best days of your life? And it definitely was.

Let me go back a couple of years, though, before I get into it, so you can see the whole picture.

Remember how I was talking about the first kiss with the future minister and that after that I started dating a lot of boys and I didn't care that my parents went away and left me alone?

Well, I kind of went a little crazy. It was like the future minister released a wildcat of insatiable urges.



My perm grew out, I started eating sensibly, and I started going for weekly cortisone shots at the dermo. Suddenly, I was not so bad looking anymore and the guys took notice.

I admit it. By the age of eighteen I had dated almost every guy on the Main Line. I'm not saying I slept with all of them, but I will admit that I slept with way too many. It wasn't like I was just sleeping with guys randomly, but I really thought they wanted to date me. Yes, I was incredibly young and dumb. Looking back, I truly wish I'd had the knowledge and the confidence at the time to know that my body was a sacred object and should only have been shared with someone who truly understood and appreciated what I was handing over. I didn't get that until years later. And, thankfully, I think it was going through all that I did that taught me that lesson. I swung from extreme to extreme, and eventually I realized I had to settle down in the middle. That's something that needs to be worked on, on earth. When you have that mandatory health class in the seventh grade and you see that movie about puberty, sure, they should tell you what's happening to your body, but along with that they should tell you what a gift your body really is, and since it is a gift, you should treat it as such. It's not that I blame Mrs. Bickle, my seventh-grade health teacher, or my parents or any other elder, but I think it's something that's terribly overlooked. I always thought that if I ever had a daughter, that would be the first thing I'd instill in her.

Still, that time in my life was a blast. Pen and I and the other girls got fake IDs so we were able to get into all the hot Philly clubs. We had a bunch of older friends who took us under their wing, and finally going out didn't mean going to some subur-

ban keg party, it meant fancy dinners and champagne. Since we needed to look good when we went to these places, this is when I really started getting into fashion, and as my dad said, he “had the credit card bills to prove it.” Mom liked how I looked though. “I can’t believe what a pretty young woman you’ve turned into,” she’d say. “Grandmom would be so proud.”

Even the guys at school wanted to date me. The twins, Seth and Tom Rosso, started being nice to me when they heard I was the nightlife queen of Philly. Dana Stanbury and Kerry Collins and Olivia Wilson counted on me for advice on how to get guys when before it had always been the other way around. I was fast becoming the most popular girl in school for my decadent ways.

I do want to say one positive thing, if I may. I might have been partying too much, but I never did drugs. No, I swear, I didn’t. I tried pot once and it got me so paranoid that I had to hide in a stall in the bathroom at the Black Banana club for three hours until the high calmed down. That was enough to scare me off of drugs forever. I will admit that I did drink a bit though. Vodka was my thing, and that thing about having sex with a lot of different guys? Yeah, I did that a lot, too; so, yeah, I didn’t do drugs, but I did everything else that an underage girl should not be doing, and if I knew then what I know now, this entire best day would not be here. Thing was, I just didn’t know it at the time. I have to be honest and include it on the “best day” list, even if I know better now.

School suffered because of my partying. By the twelfth grade, I’d gone from getting pretty good grades to barely getting by. I got a 440 for my combined SAT scores because the night before I went out with friends until five in the morning. I

arrived at the test thirty minutes late, wearing my pajamas and a hangover. When all the kids got their SAT scores back, I got a note to come see the guidance counselor. When I got to her office, not only was she there, but so were my parents. As you know, for my father to miss a minute of work, this was huge and really, really bad.

"Alexandra," Mrs. Anderson said in her always-calm, wispy voice, "the reason we called you here is because we're a little concerned about your SAT scores."

"A little?!" Dad said, raising his voice.

"What'd I get, 900, 1,000?" I asked seriously. Nothing fazed me at this age. So dumb.

"You got a goddamned 440 combined!" my father shouted at me. "You get two hundred points for spelling your name correctly, and I hope you at least did that right!"

"Bill, please," my mom said, trying to calm him down. Mom took Mrs. Anderson's words to heart when she told them that a decline in grades like mine could have an underlying cause like depression.

"Alex," Mom said, "we just can't understand how this could have happened. What happened to all the studying time you had with that SAT tutor we got you?"

Poor Mom. I was actually skipping out on that SAT tutor and running downtown to party with my friends. He was a student at Villanova they'd hired, and when I went to meet him at the Ludington Library, all I did was hand him my parents' check and leave. The guy must have made a fortune from my parents. I hope he at least did something good with the money.

I was really shocked at the 440 though. I honestly thought I'd done better than that.

"Is there anything going on that we should know about? Have things been hard for you lately?" Mrs. Anderson asked, taking my hand.

"She's got it easier than anyone I know," my dad shouted. "She's got a brand-new BMW to drive around and she buys clothes and more clothes. Don't think I don't notice those credit card bills, Alexandra! What this girl needs is a good swift kick in the ass for all the good we've given her!"

Surprisingly, nothing changed after that. I think my parents might have grounded me, or at least they said they were grounding me, but since they weren't around to check that I was actually grounded, I went out anyway. I even thought it was funny whenever one of my friends mentioned my SAT score. It was the classic anecdote at school. My nickname became 440, and I got a kick out of that, too.

In the end, the SAT thing didn't amount to any real problem. Remember, my daddy was rich and even though I couldn't have cared less if I went to college or not, he did. He was going to make sure that I not only went to college, I was going to my parents' college, the University of Pennsylvania, and there was going to be the Bill and Maxine Dorenfield gymnasium to make sure it happened.

I gotta say, though, I loved college. I was out of high school and away from the Main Line and in town with my own single dorm room (Mom was afraid I wouldn't get enough sleep if I had roommates). Eventually, I had my own apartment in town

(yes, in a Dorenfield-owned building, but Dad was never there, and, frankly, I wasn't either).

After high school, Dana Stanbury went to the University of Colorado and Kerry Collins went to Pepperdine in California; Olivia Wilson went to Northwestern in Chicago. Pen, however, went to NYU, and if there was anything to beat the club scene in Philly, it was the club scene in New York. I'd even asked my parents if I could transfer to NYU, but they were dead against it.

"With all the money I shelled out to get you into Penn?" Dad yelled. "You are going to Penn and you are going to like it!"

So, by day (if I could get up) I was a student majoring in psychology at Penn. By night I was a club kid in New York City, arriving back in Philly just in time for a 9:00 a.m. class, still in the clothes I was wearing the night before (actually, it wasn't even the night before, it was two hours before). Needless to say, I was the best-dressed girl in Psych 101.

Thing was, it was the first time in my life that I was ever free. I was making all kinds of new friends in the New York club scene. Ray Milland had a lost weekend? I had a lost four years and, yes, it was decadent and bad, but it was the greatest.

Then one fall Saturday morning in Manhattan, Pen and I were twenty-two and we'd both graduated from college that prior spring. We were just going back to her studio apartment on Bleecker and Broadway after a night of clubbing. It was about 7:00 a.m. Neither of us felt like taking a cab. The morning was just perfect, no clouds, a nice breeze, not too many people on the street. It was one of those moments when you

suddenly take a deep breath and reflect on your life and realize that right now things are really good. I was in the greatest city in the world with my best friend, and we'd spent a night dancing and flirting nonstop. No parents were around to tell us what to do. We had all the money we needed thanks to our parents' credit cards. Neither of us had a job at that point, though Pen had been contemplating law school. (She eventually went, but not for another year.) That didn't matter though. That morning, walking through the streets of lower Manhattan with my best friend, life was really good.

And then the rain started.

No, I mean real rain, out of nowhere; quarter-size raindrops came falling out of the sky and we had no shelter. We started running and running along Houston Street as the rain pelted us. I was laughing so hard that I couldn't keep up with Pen, who was half a block in front of me by then. When she stopped and looked back, I must have been such a sight because she laughed so hard she fell to the sidewalk.

This is probably one of those moments that no one else would think was funny unless they were there. I'll put it this way though. Think about your own best friend. Think about a time in your life together when you made each other laugh so hard but no one else got the joke when you told it later. That's the kind of moment I'm talking about. This is the moment when all the great moments you've shared together rush back into your head. I saw Pen on her first day at the Friends School, all fat and tall and gawky looking, and remembered the rescued feeling I had when she opened that trash bag and got me out of it. I could see us at ten, playing in my bedroom

with my dolls from around the world, and then at twelve when we'd sit on my bed and look through my mother's *Vogue* magazines and pretend that we were the women in those pictures. We were fourteen when we stole cigarettes from her mother's purse and went behind her house to smoke them (well, cough them is more like it). I hear her voice, all groggy and sick, when she told me she got food poisoning from the steak sandwich at school, which would eventually lead to my first kiss. I see us holding hands with our fantastic twenty-year-old figures, making our way through a New York City club as men tried to hit on us. I hear us gabbing and laughing and hours and hours of conversations that lead up to this moment. My best friend in the world is lying on a downtown New York sidewalk at seven in the morning while rain pelts us, and we can't stop laughing as I try to pick her back up.

Do you get where I'm coming from? I thought you would.

So we finally got back to her apartment, soaking wet. Pen had this crummy studio just off Broadway that cost \$1,000 a month. If it wasn't the roaches that were bothering her, it was her furnace. So much heat would radiate from that thing, sometimes she'd lose five pounds just by sweating through a half hour of television. She tried legal action to get the furnace fixed (and eventually won a nice settlement), but on that particular morning it was worse than it ever was. Because of the intense rain, by the time we got back to her apartment it wasn't even a dry heat. The apartment had gone from being merely a sauna to a full-blown steam room. There was so much moisture in the air that it was even fogging up the windows, and we were feeling even more soaked from just sitting in her apartment.

I'm not exaggerating when I say that the dampness of the place was making it difficult to see each other. It was the Amazon rain forest relocated to Bleecker and Broadway. So I made a wise request.

"We can't stay here," I said. "We're checking into a hotel."

I don't remember which of us suggested the Plaza. It was probably me. I was always a huge *Eloise* fan, but that part is cloudy.

Anyway, so we checked into the Plaza, still in our soaked clothes from the night before. I used my father's credit card. "The magical card," Pen called it since all I ever did was charge things and I never saw or knew the balance on the bill. Why my parents let me get away with it, I don't know. I guess in some ways I was still the miracle child to them. There were no smaller rooms available, all they had was a suite, and Pen and I both remarked that we really needed the space anyway. I don't remember how much the room was at the time, could have been \$1,000 or more, but remember, I had that magical credit card so price was not an issue.

The suite had two rooms and a view of Central Park. We both were starving, so we ordered half the menu from room service and sat in our Plaza terrycloth robes as we watched television. We eventually fell asleep around noon.

It was dark by the time we got up. Since we had graduated from college, both of us led nocturnal lives.

"Hey, we have no clothes," Pen struggled to say as we awoke.

We were meeting some guys we'd met the night before, at Tre Merli for dinner at ten, and it only seemed logical that we find some new clothes.

So we took the magical credit card and went to Bergdorf's. I can't even remember what the heck we bought that pushed the bill so high. I know I got a velvet three-quarter coat and Pen got a Shetland coat (it was getting cold out). I know we had to buy some underwear and bras, and Pen saw a pair of jeans that looked amazing on her and I loved this tight black lycra dress with fringes of velvet coming off the bottom. We might have had a drink or two at the Oak Room bar beforehand (or three or four), and we both might have been a little drunk. Since we didn't have any hair products or even a brush, the concierge at the Plaza made us an appointment at John Dellaria and we got our hair and makeup done. I would find out later that our purchases ran over \$20,000, but that wasn't until much later.

Like I said, nothing mattered at this point. We were free and New York City was our playground, and the magical credit card was giving us the opportunity to do whatever we wanted to. We were having a blast.

We met the guys at ten at I Tre Merli, and all I remember is ordering champagne and more champagne. Who the guys were, it didn't matter, they were just some guys we met. Whatever the bill was at I Tre Merli, who cared? I put it on the magical credit card. (I would find out later that it was \$3,000.)

Next, it was on to the club of the night. In those days, Nells on Fourteenth Street was our scene. The doormen knew us so we never had a problem getting in. Upstairs the restaurant was a table-hopping paradise. There were kisses and hugs to be given to people like they were long-lost friends even though we only met them the night before. Downstairs I danced in my lycra dress with two men at a time. Whenever I hear Ce Ce Peniston's

“Finally” come on the radio, I think of that night grooving with two men I didn’t even know on either side of me, who could have been taking off my dress for all I knew. I was too drunk at this point to feel anything or have a care in the world: *Finally it has happened to me.*

Through it all, as I shook my hips and my head whirled to the music, I felt beautiful, sexy. I had never felt that way about myself before. I kept thinking, “If they could see me now,” they being all those kids who teased me when I was fat and pimply. And that thought just pushed me higher and higher. I was living a dream life and the alcohol and energy and people all around me were combining to take me even higher. I was truly high on life at that moment; I felt free from any constraints: insecurity about my body, financial, you name it. For the rest of my life, I’d think back on that moment in the club swaying my hips. I would never feel that way again.

Around 3:00 a.m. we decided to take the party to our suite at the Plaza. A half hour later, about twenty of our dearest, closest friends that we’d met the day before were raiding the mini bar and, when that was empty, ordering bottles and more bottles from room service.

Now, I do remember dancing on the couch in my six-inch stilettos, swigging a bottle of Absolut vodka, so I know it was me who put the holes in the couch. I remember handing the vodka bottle to the guy dancing on the couch with me. We started jumping up and down and that’s when I guess he spilled the vodka all over the couch. Who was smoking the cigarette, though, I can’t remember. All I remember is Pen screaming, “Alex, you idiot, you set the couch on fire!” Pen grabbed the

ice bucket, as we jumped off, and threw it on the couch, but it was a little late for that. The filling from the couch had already caught on fire and was flying up in the air, landing on the drapes and setting them on fire.

It was at that moment, as I watched bits of flaming stuffing fly toward the ceiling of my Plaza suite, that the euphoria ended. I imagined myself going down in history as the girl who burned down Eloise's home. Something changed in me at that moment.

All of a sudden, the laughing and partying went away. The freedom from all cares and worries about my life was gone. It was like I suddenly saw the light and I was scared out of my mind. I remember trying to get through all the people. Everyone was laughing and treating the flames like a bonfire to be partied around. I grabbed the bedspread off the bed and ran over to the couch to try and smother the blaze. Penelope and I were the only ones trying to keep the fire in check, what did anyone else care? They didn't know me; they weren't responsible for the suite. Where should we go to party now? I remember screaming at these people, "GET THE HELL OUT OF THE WAY!" But they didn't. They were all laughing hysterically because I was so caught up in dragging that bedspread to the couch that I didn't see the television cord wrapping itself in the bedspread. That's when the television fell to the ground, taking the whole cabinet it was sitting in with it. People started to chant: "The roof, the roof, the roof is on fire!"

It was an utter nightmare. It looked like a scene from a movie, one thing falling on another thing, everything catching

The Ten Best Days of My Life

on fire. But it was real. I just remember begging these people to help me get the flames out. Every time I broke a vase or toppled over a plant, the crowd screamed louder. What had begun as one of the best days of my life had become one of the worst, and it was because of my own stupidity. It took demolishing a beautiful hotel room for me to finally grow a conscience.

And then morning came.

When all was said and done, the damage to the room and all the food we ordered and all the bottles of liquor we drank and all the clothes that Pen and I bought and the dinner at I Tre Merli added up to a credit card bill of \$55,000. Even my magical credit card couldn't handle that.

"Hello, Dad?" I sobbed into the phone from the Plaza Hotel manager's office.

My father never hit me or abused me in my life. I really think, though, that when he had to drive all the way to New York from Philadelphia that Sunday morning, if the manager of the hotel and Penelope and several security guards hadn't been around, he would have slammed me across the room. His fists were clenched the entire time he apologized to the manager and signed the check for the damages. The man did not calm down for the whole car ride back to Philadelphia. I begged Pen to come with me, but even she was too scared and went back to her hotbox of an apartment.

"Fifty-five thousand dollars!" he kept screaming. "Fifty-five thousand dollars! I'll tell you something. You are going to pay me back every single cent of that money if you have to dig ditches to China!" he shouted as I sat next to him in the car.

"Fifty-five thousand goddamned dollars!" He kept saying it

through Newark and Trenton and Metro Park, all the way back to Philadelphia.

When we got home, my dad got of the car, walked into the house, and went into his study and slammed the door shut.

Even my mother, who was always on my side, couldn't look at me.

"I don't even know who you are anymore, Alexandra," she said as she went into her bedroom.

Later that evening I was sitting in my old pink bedroom, under the old pink canopied bed, when my parents entered.

"Alexandra," my dad started. He had calmed down at this point, but you could see he was still on edge. "We need to have a real serious talk."

Don't you hate it when someone announces that a serious conversation is about to take place? It's the worst.

"Alex, your mother and I don't know what to do about you anymore. I can't stress this strongly enough. You are going to have to get on the horns here. This is where you're going to have to figure out what you're doing with your life. You're only twenty-two years old, so you're lucky that you can change things around for the better. I don't know, Maxine, did we spoil her too much? Did we give her too much freedom?"

My mother said nothing and shrugged her shoulders. The tears in her eyes were enough.

"From now on, though, it's clear to both me and your mother that you can't be trusted to be on your own anymore. I'm moving you out of your apartment and you're going to move back in here."

"I'm not moving back in here!" I screamed.

"It's for the best, Alex," my mother said. "We're at our wits' end."

"It's enough already," my dad said over her. He wasn't shouting anymore, but his voice had a quiet finality to it that was even worse. "For all the money we put into getting you into Penn, you learned nothing. For all the freedom we've ever given you, you've done nothing but abuse it. The only thing you've proven is that you can't do anything."

I sat on my bed and said nothing. I knew what I had done was wrong. I knew that I had been very stupid, but I didn't need to hear it from them. I would get around this, too; that's what I was thinking the whole time. This wouldn't stick either—whatever punishment they were going to give me. So what if I had to live at home? I wasn't in my apartment much anyway. I would still go out and have fun and live my life the way I wanted to. Twenty-two years old was the time to go out and have fun, but I just wouldn't let things get so crazy. I had learned that much at least, but I wasn't about to give up all the fun just yet. I wouldn't have to think about where my life was going until I was around thirty (which, yes, I know, is ironic given the fact that I'm twenty-nine now and have to write this essay).

"From now on you're going to work for me, and it won't be some cushy job either. You're going to start from the ground up, and you're going to learn how to make it in this world or I've done nothing with any purpose in my own life."

"Work in your office?" I asked, trying not to sound desperate. "I'm not working in that place!"

"You're going to work there and you're going to like it!" The cold, quiet tone stopped any further protest from me. "You

start tomorrow at 7:00 a.m.! Now, get some sleep!" He and my mother left the room.

I had a lot of feelings going through my head at that point. I was pissed off at my dad for yelling at me. I was pissed off at my mom for not being on my side. Mostly, though, I was pissed off at myself, but I was still too young and dumb to figure out that I was pissed off about the wrong things. Sure I felt bad about what had happened, but it was so much easier to focus on the fact that I was pissed off about getting up at seven the next morning. Facing my mistakes would have taken a maturity I now know I didn't have then.

When I look back on this time, if I could change anything, I would have apologized to my dad and at least tried to pay him back. Maybe we would have gotten along in later years.

I can still honestly say, though, that everything that happened before I trashed the room at the Plaza was one of the best days of my life.

When I think of it now, though, if I knew it was going to start this downward spiral in my relationship with my dad, I probably would have studied for the SATs all those years before. Though sometimes I do think that I had to go through all that in order to become the person I am (or was when I died). More about that person later though.

"Oh, and one more thing," Dad said, coming back into my room.

"What?" I grunted.

"Hand it over," he said, putting out his hand.

"Hand what over?" I mumbled.

"You know exactly what I'm talking about," he said.

The Ten Best Days of My Life

“Fine,” I said like I didn’t care, when I was actually dying inside, not just from the fact that I was giving up the magical card, but because I had never seen my father look like that, and somewhere, way deep down, it hurt to see him look that way. I went over to my purse and opened my wallet.

“Just the one, or all the others too?” I asked him.

“We’ll start with the big one and see how you do.”

“Fine, take it,” I said, handing the magical credit card to him.

And with that, he shut the door.

Far from Heaven

I can't talk right now.





Did I happen to mention that I was engaged once?
Oh.

Well, I was.

I met him when I went to work for my dad, which turned out to be not so awful, and not even because I met my future fiancé there.

The only thing that really sucked about working for my dad was his waking up at six thirty every morning. I actually think my dad got a kick out of waking me. The man did not think a soothing wake-up announcement was appropriate:

“Alexandra!” he’d shout with one of his construction bullhorns. “It’s six thirty! You either get up or get out!”

I always wondered what would happen if I chose not to wake up one morning.

“Dad, I can’t make it today,” I’d groan from my bed.

“Then have all your things packed and be out of here by the time I get home,” he’d say.

I envisioned myself under some highway off-ramp with my pink-canopied bed and my dolls from around the world hung up on the headboard, on sale for a dollar each.



That usually got me out of bed.

My dad told people at the office, “She might be my daughter, but she’s not to be treated like it.” Yet it never worked. My father was the head of a multi-multimillion-dollar company and everyone felt the need to kiss his ass.

Now, my job for those six months was working in the mailroom. The whole job consisted of getting the mail from the mailman in the morning, sorting it into slots, and then taking a cart and dropping off the mail at the different offices. I would arrive at the office with Dad promptly at seven every morning, but the thing was that the mail never arrived until about ten or eleven, so I napped in the mailroom until Damon the mailman arrived.

My dad’s office is located in downtown Philadelphia; you might know it, the Dorenfield Building on South Fifteenth Street (not to be confused with the Dorenfield Towers on Eleventh Street or the Dorenfield Plaza on Eighth Street or any of the Dorenfield apartments and condos in and around the city). The Dorenfield Building has fifteen floors, and my dad’s company takes up all of it. At the time, there were two other mailroom people besides me. I was in charge of filing the mail for the top five floors. Tim Brody was in charge of the middle five floors, and Gary Harberth took the bottom five. Every day when Damon the mailman dropped off the mail, there were over ten duffels of mail to sort through. This would take the whole rest of the morning, and then if Tim and Gary and I weren’t goofing off, we could get the mail into our carts by two and have it delivered by five.

I actually liked dropping off the mail for the people in the

different offices. Like I said, no one was about to treat Bill Dorenfield's daughter like a peon, so whenever I walked into their offices it was always a big hello and an aside and/or a high five:

"Is it true that you really trashed \$55,000 worth of a hotel room at the Plaza?" most of them asked.

I was a minor celebrity at the Dorenfield Building. As a joke, some of the secretaries put a jug in the coffee room, and threw a few pennies in, with a sign that said "Alex Dorenfield Trashed Hotel Fund." My dad found out about it, though, and he called the entire company into the conference room on the top floor.

"I don't know who among you thought it would be funny to put that jug in the coffee room, but I'm telling you all right now that I'm gonna find out who did it and when I do, you're going to be fired."

I knew it was a couple of secretaries on the third floor, and rather than get them fired, I did the only logical thing I could do.

"It was me!" I shouted in front of the whole company. "I did it, Dad! I'll have my things out by noon!"

The place erupted into laughter. My dad was so embarrassed that he let the whole thing drop and even though I got a big talking to at home, at the office I was a star. Everyone loved me. I was Bill Dorenfield's devious daughter and they loved it when I got under my dad's skin. I never told him the truth. The secretaries I saved were so grateful, but truthfully I was embarrassed by their gratitude. True, I did it to help them and I did get in trouble for it, but by then I was in so much trouble anyway, it was hardly a sacrifice.

When I look back on the whole experience, even though I

got millions of paper cuts, I might have stayed and worked my way up through the company, but fate intervened.

Yeah, I met the guy who I almost married.

Charles Kitteredge didn't work for my dad. He worked for his dad at Kitteredge, Kitteredge, and Kitteredge, his family's law firm. They specialized in real estate and also happened to be my dad's attorneys. Their offices were located in the building next to ours. Charles was only twenty-seven years old, but he had graduated from Harvard Law first in his class and had already won some major legal cases. He had just been made partner in the firm. He wanted no special treatment because he was "the son," and he didn't get it. He was just so good at what he did that he deserved to make partner. I guess you could say it was a case of opposite attraction.

I didn't know any of this, though, when I first laid eyes on Charles. To me, he was just the gorgeous guy at the salad bar.

See, I had seen Charles a bunch of times on my lunch break. Charles and I were both big fans of the salad place on Fifteenth Street. He was damn fine picking out lettuce and cucumbers for lunch. I even started to time my lunch break to the times I knew he'd be there. Remember, I didn't know he was one of my dad's lawyers, I just thought he was some cute guy. Sometimes I'd even be in the middle of sorting the mail and I'd leave everything where it was (something I was forbidden to do by Tim, who not only dropped off the mail to the middle floors but was also the lead mail boy, but I was Bill Dorenfield's daughter with the underhanded ways so all rules were off) and spend the next half hour primping to make it just in time to run into Charles.

Charles always had on the finest Armani and Hugo Boss

suits, and his hair was always neatly combed back. His shirts all came from Hong Kong and all of them were specially tailored for him. Something about the fact that his initials, CGK, were embroidered on the cuffs of his shirts turned me on like you wouldn't believe. I admit it. I've always been a sucker for a guy in a nice suit.

Anyway, after months of "accidentally" running into him at the salad place and little smiles here and little glances there, I was standing next to him, getting my fix of roughage for the day, when he finally spoke to me:

"Alexandra," he said in this deep, assertive voice, "don't you think it's time that we finally meet?"

Now, it wasn't the nice suit he was wearing, though that was a part of it. It wasn't the way his dark hair was always perfectly in place or the way his blue eyes glistened when he looked at me when he said those words. That was the stuff of a crush. It was the way he said my name in this deep, confident voice: "Alexandra, don't you think it's time that we finally meet?"

Do you get where I'm coming from? I fell for a guy because it was almost exactly the way my dad met my mom.

So I played the part of my grandmother.

"No, I don't think it's time that we finally meet," I said and took my salad to go while wondering how he knew my name. Who was this guy? He didn't work in my building. Had he been doing some detective work on me?

And then he did something my father didn't do right away. Instead of sending the roses and the perfume and the tickets to concerts, he called my dad and asked if he could take me on a date.

My father was practically doing cartwheels.

“Charlie Kitteredge!” he exclaimed. “What he wants you for, I don’t know, but you’re gonna goddamned go out with him, that’s for sure.”

And, as you can imagine, that was where my passion for Charles ended. It was just my luck that the cute guy from the salad place would be one of my father’s lawyers. Of all the men in Philadelphia, I had to get a crush on someone who worked for my dad. That’s when my crush was crushed.

Charles, however, was smitten. I guess it was because I couldn’t have cared less, you know how that is. Though I hemmed and hawed to my father, “He’s not my type, I don’t want to go,” he made me. Charles in turn took me to the most amazing places. We went to the best restaurants in town (and got right in without a reservation). We went to opening night of all the new Broadway shows in New York. When Charles wanted to take me away for two weeks to Venice and Rome, I told him I couldn’t because of work.

“Forget work,” my father said. “If you’re going with Charles Kitteredge, I don’t care what happens to the mail.”

Now, I have to admit, I was torn when Dad said to forget work. It wasn’t exactly my idea of a good time, sorting mail. And let’s face it, a trip to Italy with a gorgeous guy is every girl’s dream. But part of me was also starting to like how my dad looked at me now, like he had gotten back some of the respect he had for me because I was showing up to work every day. I liked the fact that everyone in the office said hello. I know it was just mail, but I did feel like I had a place of my own. Then I thought about how my dad would feel if I said I wanted to stay in the mailroom and skip

Venice. I knew he'd be disappointed. Wouldn't he? Wouldn't he want me to go with a Kitteredge? That was the choice that would gain his respect back. So, of course I went.

After Rome and Venice, the Kitteredge family rented an island just off the coast of Tahiti and when I told Charles that I really needed to get back to work, my dad said it again:

"I don't think your future is in the mailroom, Alex, it's with Charles Kitteredge. We all know you aren't cut out to be responsible. Charles will take care of you." My dad's words hurt a little, but by now I was convinced, and, really, who turns down an island for a mailroom?

Charles was a perfectly nice guy and so was his family, even though they were extremely Waspy. I'm not stereotyping when I say that when the clock struck five you never saw a pack of people run off a Tahitian beach so fast to get their evening cocktails. These people were huge drinkers, and I'm sure his family could have raced the Indy 500 perfectly without crashing into any other cars at speeds exceeding 140 mph.

Now, I don't really want to get into all the ins and outs of who Charles was, though the fact that he was referred to as Charles and not Charlie or Chuck should give you a clear picture. I cannot say that he was ever mean to me or, heaven forbid, struck me in any way. On the contrary, he was as nice as he could be. For as clean-cut as he was and as hardworking and Waspy as he was, I did wonder myself what he was doing with a spoiled Jewish princess who trashed a room at the Plaza Hotel. So I asked him.

"Well, you're cute," he said, kissing me on the cheek. "And we make a really great merger."

What he meant by that, I didn't ask. Did he mean that we as a couple actually merged well or did he mean that his family's company and my dad's merged well? To this second, if I were a betting girl, I would have to say that it was the latter, but the truth is, the whole thing was making my parents very, very happy and the trashed hotel room was now on its way to becoming history. Most importantly, as my dad put it, "At last you're doing something with your life."

That's why I really don't want to get into the ins and outs of Charles, and, besides, even though he was the catalyst for my sixth best day, he wasn't the reason for it. I'll get to the sixth best day, but you have to hear this part first.

Charles proposed to me at his parents' house, in front of both of our parents. We had only been dating for about five months, and, to tell you the truth, I had no idea that this was even happening. I just thought the families were getting together for dinner.

It was just after the drinks and the pecan/goat cheese/arugula salad and the beef bourguignonne and flaming baked Alaska, but just before the after-dinner port, when Charles clinked his spoon against his wineglass and said, "Now, if everyone would quiet down for a second, I'd like to make an announcement."

I still had no idea what was going on. Charles said "announcement," he didn't say he needed to ask a question or anything like that.

"As both our parents know," he started, "Alexandra and I have embarked on a wonderful relationship. I know it's only been a short time, but, as most of you might know, I never make rash decisions. It's just that when you know something is

right, you can't help but want to get on with the next step and that is why I've asked you all to meet here tonight."

And that's when I knew.

"Alexandra," he said, bending down beside my chair and pulling out a small velvet box from his Zegna suit jacket, "you would make me the happiest man in the world if you would do me the honor of becoming my bride."

All I could see were his initials, CGK, on his shirt sleeve peeking out from his jacket and this rock of an emerald-cut diamond ring extended toward me.

I wanted to say, "No, this is all too soon. I'm only twenty-three years old! I've got a million things I want to do with my life even if I don't know what they are yet!"

But then I looked at my parents. You never saw a bigger smile on my father's face. My mother was dabbing her eyes with her linen napkin. In that one moment, I'd never seen them more proud that I was their daughter. So I did what I thought was right.

"Yes, Charles, I will marry you," I eked out.

You would have thought that Philadelphia was getting ready for its own royal wedding. Channel 6 even had it on the local news that we were getting married: "The heir to the Dorenfield dynasty" (what dynasty? I wanted to know) "and one of Philadelphia's oldest and most influential families has found romance."

Charles's firm got seventeen new clients the day after the Channel 6 announcement.

Philadelphia magazine had us on its cover: "Alexandra and Charles—Philadelphia's New Social Elite," it claimed beside our picture on the cover.

I couldn't go anywhere without being recognized. "Alexandra!" some old woman shouted as I was leaving Saks one day. She hobbled up to me. "Hearing about you and your intended is keeping me alive."

At every restaurant we went to, people sent over champagne. "For the happy couple," the waiter would say as he popped the cork and then pointed at some table of people who'd raise their glasses to us.

Gifts were sent from people we didn't even know and some we didn't even like.

"You are the luckiest guy to get Alex," one card read. "We've known her since our days at the Friends School. Let's have a little reunion to celebrate this wonderful merger. Tom and Seth Rosso."

Pen was to be my matron of honor and Kerry Collins, Dana Stanbury, and Olivia Wilson were my bridesmaids. Even though we were scattered across the country, they all flew in for dress fittings. I tried to confide in them:

"What am I doing?" I asked in the dressing room at Vera Wang as Vera herself waited in the store for our fitting.

"Everyone gets scared when they're about to get married," Kerry replied. "You'll get over it."

"It's a scary thing," Olivia added, trying to soothe me, "but it's not something nobody else has done before."

"What is the worst that can happen?" Dana demanded. "So you'll get a divorce if it doesn't work out."

"You're sure you love him, right?" Pen asked. Good old reliable Pen.

Here is the sad truth. I wasn't in love with Charles. I didn't

want to spend the rest of my life with him. I didn't want to just be a wife, and clearly that's all he wanted me to be. I could have had every material thing I ever wanted and have lived in a big house with servants at my beck and call, but what would have been the cost? That's all my father thought I could be, but I knew deep down that that's not how I wanted my life to be. Still, there were dress fittings to be scheduled and gala benefits to attend. There were invitations to head up charities and even more invitations to raise money for said charities. There were appointments with decorators who wanted to make our Villanova home a calling card and phone calls from *Town & Country* and *Architectural Digest* to photograph us in it. I sometimes felt like all I had to do was sit in a chair and the world would present me with the plans it had for me. I even clocked it once. I sat in a chair for four straight hours as three decorators, one hairstylist, and four members of the Junior League came over to tell me what they were going to do for me. It was heady—all this attention and the illusion of power. But it was all getting to be too much. I knew if I didn't nip this whole thing in the bud soon, I would be sitting in that chair for the rest of my life.

"You're going to have to tell him," Pen said when she saw my face and figured it out. "You've got to be strong with this or you'll ruin your life."

So one night when Charles came home to change for our evening's activities, I finally told him:

"I'm sorry," I confessed, "but this just isn't me. This just isn't how I saw my life going."

"Don't be foolish, Alexandra," he replied as though it was nothing. "I'm the luckiest thing that's ever happened to you."

"I just can't do it," I told him as I took off the ring and set it in front of him."

He stared at the ring as though seeing something completely foreign—a pigeon at the table or something. "Think about what a mistake you're making," he said finally. "Think about how many people you're going to hurt."

That's when I knew it was never meant to be.

"But do you love me?" I asked him.

"Yes I love you," he shot back.

"No, do you really love me or do you love all the outside stuff that comes with this relationship?"

He paused.

"That's why I need to end this now before someone really does get hurt," I said to him.

"You're making a huge mistake," he said. "You think everyone marries just for love?"

"Well, maybe everyone doesn't, but I will."

I remember driving in my car, not knowing where to go or who to talk to. Penelope had left for Martinique with her husband, Melvin, that morning, and there was no way of getting in touch with her. I thought about calling information for a shrink, but that seemed crazy. I couldn't check into any hotels because everyone knew me and I didn't want the gossipmongers to start before I told my parents. That left just one place.

By the time I arrived at my parents' house, my father was waiting for me.

"Alex," he said, "don't you even try to get into this house. You are not welcome here. I'm done with you."

"Dad, let me explain!" I cried from the driveway.

"No, you've had enough explaining in your life. I'm through letting you explain."

"Dad, how can you be like this? I don't love Charles. How can you be angry with me for that?"

"Jesus, Alex, I'm not angry with you because you don't love him. I'm angry with you for letting it get as far as it did. The night he asked you to marry him, why did you say yes?"

"Because . . . because everyone was staring at me." I stumbled trying to come up with the right words. "I felt trapped with everyone sitting there staring at me. I couldn't say no."

"Alex," he said, calming down a bit, "don't you understand? I don't know what I can do for you anymore. I can put up with a lot of stuff from you because along with your mother you are the most important person in my life, but I can't have another sleepless night worrying about you. What are you going to do with your life now? I thought at least if you were married to Charles, then at least there would be someone to take care of you and I wouldn't have to worry so much."

"So stop worrying!" I screamed at him.

"Then tell me your plans, Alex!" he shouted back. "If you're not going to marry Charles and you're not going to work in my office, what are you going to do? I'm at my wits' end already!"

"I'll make something of my life. I know I will."

"With what skills? What can you do? Alex, do you understand how painful it is for me to see how lost you are?"

And then the strangest thing happened.

"Bill, I've heard enough," my mother said, standing at the door. "Let me speak to Alex alone. Go into your study and don't come out until I tell you to."

This shocked both my father and myself. In all my twenty-three years, I had never once heard my mother give my father a demand.

"Maxine, let me handle this," he shouted to her.

"Bill!" she shouted. "Go into your study! Alex, get in the house!"

"Maxine, I know what I'm doing here," he yelled at her.

"Bill! Go into your goddamned study and don't come out until I tell you to!"

Now, I suppose you're wondering at this point, *I don't get it. This is, like, the suckiest day. Wasn't this essay supposed to be about your sixth best day?*

Yes, it was and here is why this was a best day . . .

My mother walked me into the living room and shut the doors. I thought she was going to tell me to go back to Charles. I really thought she was going to make me understand that marrying Charles was the best thing for me. Instead she said:

"Alex," she took my hands in hers, "your father is very upset with you right now. He loves you so much and he's very frightened. You understand that, right?"

"Yes, but he won't give me a second to think for myself."

"He can't help it, and maybe when you have children of your own you'll understand his feelings, but I want you to know something. I want you to know that I do not think there has ever been a day that I have been more proud of you."

After she said that, I went full-on into a major Niagara Falls crying jag.

"Now, listen to me because what I want to tell you is very important," she said, handing me a tissue to dry my tears.

It took me a second, but I finally calmed down.

“You don’t think sometimes I regret the path I took in my life?” Mom started. “Sometimes I look at my life and I wonder if I did anything to benefit the world. I never had a job, I never lived on my own. When I was your age, you were a teacher or you got married. My generation had no choice, but you do. All my parents had to do in my day was to make sure I married a good man. Daddy doesn’t understand that things are different now. Alex, you are so lucky to be living in a time when you can be whatever you want to be. If you don’t want to get married, you have that choice. I didn’t have that choice. Alex, sweetheart, do something for me, go out there and conquer the world.”

I did not know what to say. And you know, now that I’ve met Alice Oppenheim, I’m even more struck by how lucky my generation is. My mom and Alice had a much different life.

I love my mother more than anything, but I didn’t want to be a carbon copy of her. I knew that I didn’t want to go through life being Charles Kitteredge’s wife. I wanted more out of my life, and when my mother sat me down and told me she completely understood, I knew that I was doing the right thing. It had nothing to do with whether I loved Charles. It had nothing to do with the fact that my mother had given up her dreams, whatever they might have been, for the man she truly loved. What mattered was that I wanted to see life on my terms. And suddenly her support gave me the confidence to do that.

“Show Daddy that he’s wrong. Show him that you can think for yourself. I have every confidence that you’ll be able to. If you had the strength to let this engagement go as far as it did

before you ended it, then there must be more that you want to do for yourself. You will make something of yourself in this world and you'll do it on your own terms. I'm not worried for you anymore."

It was the first time I'd ever made someone truly proud of me, especially someone I loved. That's why it was one of the best days of my life. I know that even if my dad wasn't proud of me, even if he still thought I was lost, I would, I could, prove him wrong.

Three days later, all of Philadelphia knew the marriage would never happen. The Philadelphia gossip pages were hungry to find out why. Some said it was because I was cheating on Charles. Someone said they saw me scoring drugs in Chinatown. I never even went back to the home I shared with Charles. Mom and I just went out and bought new clothes and cosmetics.

It was becoming clear, though, that I couldn't live in Philadelphia anymore. According to Tim from the mailroom, when I called to say hi, the people in Dad's office went from thinking I was endearingly crazy to thinking I was just plain crazy.

I thought about moving to New York, but it seemed too close to Philadelphia. Penelope even told me that some of her friends heard I had been committed.

I stayed in my parents' house for the next two weeks, watching movies and trying to decide what to do. I avoided seeing my dad as much as possible. My mom and I spent a lot of time talking, and I watched those three minutes of home movies more than once—the joy and certainty that life was okay.

Then one night I was watching *The Grapes of Wrath* with Henry Fonda, when it came to me. It was the last line of the

movie, I'll never forget it. It was like it was saying something to me I'd always known but never had the strength to do. Ma Joad says:

"Rich fellas come up an' they die, an' their kids ain't no good an' they die out. But we keep a'comin'. We're the people that live. They can't wipe us out; they can't lick us. We'll go on forever, Pa, 'cause we're the people."

To do anything in this world I was going to have to stop living off my parents.

I called Dana Stanbury, who by this time was living in Los Angeles, and she said I could stay with her until I got my feet firmly planted.

The next morning I told my parents I was moving to California.

"You'll get nothing from me," my father said.

"Good," I told him. "That's just the way I want it."

(By the way, I can't go on record saying that I didn't take any money from them ever again. Mom slipped me some cash to help me get settled. After that, though, life was on my terms.)

A couple of years later, Charles was in Los Angeles on business and he called me up. We decided to have lunch. By that time Charles had fallen in love, gotten married, and had a baby on the way.

"I really want to thank you," he told me. "I didn't understand why you did what you did, but I do now."

Like I said, he wasn't a bad guy. He just wasn't the guy for me. I don't know, love complicates everything. It can make you sacrifice your own dreams, but when it's right, even when

doubts rear their ugly heads, you know that the choices you made were right. Like my mom's love for my dad. When the love isn't there, though, even the grandest house with all the clothes and all the attention that comes with it can only add up to one thing: a huge waste of a life.



Something Close to Heaven

“You were always the devilish one,” Grandmom laughed to Alice as she poured some salt on her potatoes. “I always said to Maxine when you two were little, ‘That Alice is going to get you into trouble one of these days.’ ”

“Don’t think Maxine was so pure, Mrs. Firestein. She knew how to get away with anything.”

“My Maxine was never bad,” Grandmom countered. “She was always the best little girl.”

“She had her ways,” Alice laughed. “She could change the plans to what she wanted by just putting on a smile.”

“She could,” I joined in. “She could get everything her way without saying anything.”

“How did she do that?” Alice asked me, laughing.

“I have no idea, never learned it myself,” I chuckled back.

“Well, she was a good girl,” Grandmom said. “No one could fault her because she was so pretty and charming.”

“True, true,” Alice agreed. “But she was no angel.”

“Yes, she was,” I laughed.

“Okay, she was,” Alice said as we all cracked up.

“The only time I really remember Maxine ever doing some-

thing wrong was a couple of weeks before my sweet sixteen . . . ,” Alice began.

“Oh no, not the crinoline story,” I shouted.

“Yes, the crinoline story!” Alice laughed. “She told you about that?”

“You told her that she could borrow your crinolines,” Grandmom defended my mom.

“Yes, but I didn’t say *all* of them. Alex, you have to hear the story from my side.”

“All right, fine. I’ll hear it from your side and then this story must die . . . along with us,” I deadpanned.

“Well,” Alice started, taking a deep breath, “your mother had a date with Sy Silverman and she came over to my house to borrow some crinolines. I don’t know why she didn’t have enough of her own.”

“I was using them,” Grandmom explained.

“Okay, you were using them,” Alice concurred. “So, I’m outside with my brother, Butch, handing him tools while he’s fixing my dad’s car and Maxine comes over and asks me if she can borrow some crinolines. Sure, I tell her, go ahead. I don’t know what happened after that, the phone rang or I got busy with something else, but I didn’t see Maxine leave with the crinolines. A couple of hours later, I go up myself to get ready for my own date and I pick out my dress. I go into the crinoline drawer and there’re none there. Your mother took all my crinolines!”

“My mother always said she left one for you,” I tell her. She did, she always swore she left some.

“She left me nothing!” Alice exclaimed, still a little angered

by the story. "I went over to her house and knocked on the door and you answered the door, Mrs. Firestein."

"You never saw Alice look more pathetic," Grandmom laughed as Grandpop cracked a smile from behind his newspaper.

"I wanted to cancel my date, but it was too late. We go to the party and there's gorgeous Maxine Firestein looking like a blooming flower, and I look like a wilted rose."

"They woke up the whole block with their fighting when they got home," Grandmom laughed.

"I can still hear the echo," Grandpop smirked.

"Maxine always had a thing about poofing out her dress. She always had to be the one with the puffiest skirt," Alice explained.

"It had something to do with her waistline," Grandmom said. "She thought it made her waist look smaller."

"You couldn't find her waist that night if she turned sideways," Alice declared.

"I told her, 'everything in moderation.' It took a few years, but she figured it out," Grandmom agreed, laughing.

"I wouldn't even think my mother ever worried about things like that," I said. "I always thought she never had to work at it."

"We all have to work at it," Alice laughed aside to me. "Anyway, we didn't talk for about a week after that."

"Maxine would swear to this day that she left crinolines for you."

"Well, she didn't."

"So, when did you make up?" I asked.

"I think it was just before my sweet sixteen, just before that night. She went shopping with me for my dress, didn't she?"

"She did," I told her.

The laughing quieted down. What happened next in Alice's life, it just didn't fit into the conversation.

"She felt very bad after all was said and done," Grandmom whispered, taking Alice's hand.

"I know," she said sadly. "I tried to tell her. I told her. I told her it was okay."

"When?" I asked, not getting it.

"When all was said and done," Alice sighed.

Silence filled the room.

I've decided to stay at my grandparents' tonight. It just feels good to be here. If I have to go to fourth heaven, maybe no one will mind if I spend some nights at my grandparents'. I can't imagine there's a law against that. We all give Alice a hug as she leaves, and I walk her outside to her car. I have to say, I'm so glad I met her, and after years of hearing that story, I also have to say, Mom was wrong. It's strange to think of my mom that way.

"Thanks for coming by tonight," I tell Alice, giving her a hug.

"That was the best!" she tells me. "You know, I've missed your mom over the years. Will you send her my love the next time you go visit her?"

"You know, I'm still not able to do that yet. I keep trying to concentrate like you told me, but the closest I got was the foot of my parents' bed."

"You still can't get into your parents' dreams?" she asks, dumbfounded. "You can't get back to earth?"

“No, and it’s really bugging me.”

She stops and thinks about it for a second.

“You know what I think it is? You’re not strong enough yet,” she says, nodding. “Yeah, that’s it. I see what’s going on here, you’re just not ready to handle it.”

“So what do I need to do?”

“It’s just . . . like I said before, it’s something that’s got to come from within you. It’s like, if you have peace within yourself, then you’ll be strong enough to get back down to earth. There’s something that’s blocking you from being able to do that. Your spirit is off balance right now.”

“So, what do I do to get to that place?”

“Try it tonight. Let your mind rest. Try to forget about the problems you’re having up here—the essay, Adam, trying to stay in seventh heaven. Forget about all of it if you can. That might work.”

“Okay, I’ll do that,” I tell her as she gets in her car and starts the ignition.

“If that doesn’t work, though,” she says, rolling down her window, “the only thing that I can think is that you’re just not ready to face your parents yet. Maybe there are some things you need to figure out for yourself before you can help them.”

“Maybe,” I say, thinking about it.

“Try it tonight and let me know what happens. If you can’t speak to them now, we know that you’re just not ready yet.”

“Okay,” I tell her, “and thanks again.”

“And if you are able to talk to your mom tonight, tell her that when I got to heaven, my closet was filled with crinolines. She would have been so jealous.”

“Okay.” We both laugh. “I will, I promise.”

I’ve settled myself in my grandparents’ guest bedroom and I’m trying to get some sleep. The crinoline story is still on my mind though. I think it’s the first time I’ve ever heard of my mom being wrong. When my mother gets here, I’m sure that crinoline story will come up again for old times’ sake. Who would have taken the ones my mom said she left in the drawer?

“Something’s fishy with Mom’s side of the story,” I think as I close my eyes. “It’s going to have to be the first question I ask when we all get together again.” Somehow I’m comforted thinking that we will all be together again.

It’s really peaceful in my grandparents’ house. The ocean, or whatever large body of water it is that’s making waves outside the window, is very calming. Why didn’t I think of getting an ocean outside my window?

Mom would have had so much fun tonight. It felt like all that was missing was her.

All of a sudden, through my mind, I see my parents’ house. Oh my god, I’m doing it.

It’s dark in the house. They must be asleep. I’m outside their bedroom. Concentrate, let go of your mind. I can feel the coolness of the hardwood floor as I walk through the door of their room. Oh my god, I can’t believe I’m able to do this, but I can’t think about it. I must concentrate.

They’re sleeping. I see them! Dad is over on his side under the covers. Mom is above the covers. She’s still in her robe, the white satin one with the red roses on it. She must have fallen asleep before getting under the covers. She does that a lot. She’s

got some bottles of medicine by the bed and a glass of water. Does she have a cold? There's my high school graduation picture on her bedside table. Why does she have that there? I hate that picture.

She's wearing my cliché pink bunny slippers. Where'd she find those?

She looks sad even though she's sleeping. Can I hug her? Can I touch her?

I slowly walk over to her side of the bed. I put my hand out to her and touch her shoulder. She takes her hand and puts it on top of mine.

"Mom?" I say very quietly.

"Alex!" she screams out, waking up.

This startles me, and suddenly I wake up in my grandparents' guest room.

Now I've done it. I've made her even sadder than I did before with the whole dying thing.

I've got to get back to her to calm her down. She needs to know I'm okay.

"Concentrate," I whisper to myself.

It's no use. I'm not going anywhere.

The thing is, though, I did make it in. I'm getting better at this.

"Be strong," I whisper, praying, hoping my mom will hear me. "I'll talk to you soon," I say, hoping she might hear me somehow.

"I swear she was here," I suddenly hear my mom sobbing in my head. It's so weird though. I can't see her. Why can't I see her anymore?

"It's okay," I hear my dad reply. "You were just dreaming."

"No, I'm here!" I scream in my head while seeing nothing. "I'm right here, I'm fine."

"Go back to sleep, darling," I hear my dad say. "Do you want to take another pill? It will calm you down."

"No, Bill, I don't want to take another pill. I swear I heard my daughter say 'Mom,' Bill, I could swear she touched my shoulder. She was here!" she sobs.

"It was just a dream," my dad whispers, trying to soothe her. "A very good dream, but, still, just a dream."

I can't stand hearing what's going on in my head. I jump out of bed and run down to my grandparents' room.

"Gram?" I say, waking her.

"What's the matter, sweetheart?"

"Can I sleep with you and Grandpop tonight?"

"Sure, sweetie," she says, moving over. "Did something happen?"

There's no sense in getting her upset so I lie. "The mattress in your guest bedroom is too lumpy."

"Come in with me," she says, spooning me as I lie next to her. "I'll invoke a new mattress in the morning," she murmurs, falling back asleep.

For the first time in my life and death I'm glad my grandmother has a snoring problem. It used to bug me when I'd stay at her house as a kid, but at this very moment, it's the most soothing sound I could ever hear.

My parents' voices are gone from my head. I hope my mom fell back to sleep.

Here's the thing. Have you ever gotten through a day without

saying, “How are you?” to someone? We always ask it whether we care or not. Nine times out of ten, the answer is, “Fine, thanks.” It’s such a common thing to say that most of the time we take it for granted, like when you’re at the magazine stand and the guy behind the counter says, “How are you today?” You tell him, “Fine, thanks, how much for the *Us Weekly*?” With friends and family, we most likely know that they’re okay—we spoke to them a few weeks ago or even yesterday. We have a pretty good idea that nothing devastating has happened and our sixth sense tells us that they haven’t won the lottery since the last time we saw them. Still, you ask them anyway, “How are you?”

Now, take the ability to ask that question away. There’s no phone, no e-mail, text message, or snail mail. There’s no address, phone number, and no Google to find out what’s happened to that person. Think about it. Someone you love, who you really, really love. Suddenly, one day they disappear or, in my case, die.

Can you imagine how important it would be to my parents to ask me that one question? “How are you?”

Can you imagine how important it is for me to answer them and say the two simple words that will put their minds at ease? “I’m fine.”

It reminds me of this time when I was a kid. The bus to school used to stop in front of my house, and one day while I was waiting outside my mother called to me from the house and said, “Let me know when the bus comes.”

So the bus comes and I scream out toward the house, “Mom, the bus is here,” but she doesn’t come to the door. I think I yelled

to her about three times before the bus driver said, "Come on, Alex, we're going to be late."

"But my mom told me to call her when the bus comes," I told the bus driver.

"Look," he said kind of sternly. "I can't help it if your mom doesn't hear you, we gotta get to school."

So I had no choice but to get on the bus. Oh, I was a mess. All I could think about the whole way to school was my mother coming to the door and finding me gone. She'd think I was kidnapped or something, her little miracle child gone from her. I envisioned her screaming through the streets of my neighborhood, looking for me, "Alex is missing!" I envisioned dozens of police cars pulling up in front of my house. By the time we got to school I was in full-on panic attack mode.

I ran straight to my teacher and hyperventilated as I relayed the story, "... so I have to go call my mother, she's going to think I'm kidnapped!"

"Alex," Mrs. Weinstein countered, "your mother came out and saw that you had gone. She knows you weren't kidnapped. Now come on, Alex, sit down and let's get started for the day."

"No!" I screamed, "MY MOTHER DOESN'T KNOW WHERE I AM!"

And with that, I ran out of the room and to the pay phone in the lobby of the school and called my mom.

"It's okay, honey, I figured you left," Mom cooed from the phone, trying to calm me down, "but thank you for calling me. That was so sweet of you."

When I came back to class, Mrs. Weinstein had already started the lessons for the day and was already at the black-

board. I went in and took a seat. I was never punished by Mrs. Weinstein or got a talking-to about running out of the room, but even if I had been, it would have been worth it. My mind was at ease knowing that my mother's mind was at ease.

"Mom," I say to myself as I drift off to sleep, "please don't worry. I'm fine, Mommy. Please don't worry, I'm fine."



Sometimes I wonder what my life would have been like had I not purchased my dog, Peaches, with the last \$800 I had in the world. Yes, one could argue that if I didn't have her I wouldn't be where I am right now, but that's totally beside the point.

The point is, when I first moved to Los Angeles, before I got Peaches, things thoroughly sucked for me. Starting from the very moment I got there, everything seemed to be awry. A part of me truly thought there would be some kind of parade at the airport, a marching band perhaps with seventy-six trombones and someone like Harold Hill holding a big sign welcoming the city's newest transplant.

The other part of me, the sane side, knew that no one would be waiting for me, mainly because I didn't know anyone there except for Dana Stanbury. This was a big concern for both my mother and Pen when I was leaving.

"Here's the number for the Los Angeles Police Department in case anything goes wrong," Mom said, stuffing the number in my pocket.

"I know this guy who knows this guy whose brother just



moved out to California to be a comedy writer. Here's his number," Pen said, stuffing the number in my other pocket.

In other words, I should have thought things through a little better, but, as you know, I was in a hurry to get out of Dodge (or Philadelphia, as the case was).

At least Dana was there to meet me at the gate with all my things. I didn't appreciate her wearing her bridesmaid's dress when she came to pick me up though.

"I figured I could get some use out of it someday," she teased.

Okay, it was pretty funny.

Now, there's something you should know about living in Los Angeles. If you only have one friend—in this case it was Dana—it is without a doubt the loneliest place on earth. I know I said earlier that you only need one good friend in your life, but that doesn't mean you don't sometimes wish you had more.

First of all, remember that eighties song that goes "nobody walks in LA"? It couldn't be more true. No one walks, and if you do, as I found out, people stare at you from their cars like you're some kind of derelict. No one bothers to even slow down when you've stumbled with grocery bags that have torn open and fallen onto the street, and you become like that Frogger video game, weaving from moving car to moving car trying to pick up your scattered six-pack of Diet Coke cans. The closest I ever got to a helpful human being was the soccer mom in the minivan who screamed, "Get the hell out of the street before you get yourself killed!" Ha! Should have listened to her.

I did try to meet people in those first few weeks. Thing is, there's no watering hole where if you start going on a regular

basis everyone knows your name. It's not like they don't have bars and clubs and things, but as Dana said, "You can't go by yourself, you have to go with a group of people."

"So, how do I meet a group of people if I don't go to these places?" I asked her.

"It's kind of a catch-22, I guess," she sighed as she left for work one morning.

The glamorous life I'd envisioned turned out to be as normal and lonely as it could be, and I never even saw a single movie star.

Finding a job turned out to be even more of a fiasco. Dana was an assistant to a producer at Paramount Studios. My first thought was that I'd find a job like she had. It seemed like an obvious fit; after all, these film people would love that I moved out to California because of *The Grapes of Wrath*. Dana hooked me up with a great interview for a job as an assistant to a director. When I went into the interview, and started spewing some of my favorite movies, he had no interest.

"Yeah, yeah, but can you handle Excel?"

"I can excel at anything," I told him. "Just put me to work."

Truth was, my father's fear that "you aren't capable of doing anything" was turning out to be true. I couldn't get a temp job because I couldn't type and couldn't master a phone system to be a receptionist. I worked for one day at a law firm and was asked not to come back because I wasted five reams of paper trying to figure out how to use the copy machine. I went home that night and spent the money I'd made that day on Band-Aids for all the paper cuts.

The Ten Best Days of My Life

Every night, during my first month in Los Angeles, I just cried.

After signing the lease for my apartment and buying a used Saab that was missing a backseat and leaked transmission oil and brake fluid, the money that my mother had slipped me was down to \$800. For the first time in my life, I understood the value of a dollar. I was surviving on a diet of ramen noodles and cheese popcorn. My body was turning into one ball of carb mush.

"I think you should just move home," Pen told me. "Tell your father that he was right, you can't take care of yourself, and start working in his office again."

"How can I tell him I was wrong?" I cried to her. "He'll never respect me."

The one fortunate light in all my sorrow was that the apartment I found was just a few blocks away from the Beverly Center mall. The apartment faced another building, so it had no light, and the guy who lived next door smoked so much pot that it seeped into my apartment, which made me even more paranoid since I was sure it was making me stoned. Needless to say, the Beverly Center mall would become my refuge. Something about Gaps and Banana Republics made me feel more at ease, a home away from home; like an embassy that helps you if you lose your passport, the Gap is right there to comfort you with comfy cotton T-shirts and jeans.

There was one shop, however, that I was continuously drawn back to. This shop was the catalyst for one of the best days of my life (the seventh best day in this essay).

Every time I'd come home from a bad interview, or if I was

sad because I couldn't get an interview at all, I found myself heading into the Beverly Center pet shop, Pet Love. Pet Love is a pet store that sells dogs and cats and birds and rabbits and an occasional guinea pig or mouse. All of the animals, with the exception of the rabbits and occasional guinea pigs, who had their own freestanding wire pens in the middle of the store, were housed in these glass cages. More than any other store in the mall, the place was always packed with people tapping on the cages at the little Chihuahuas or chocolate Labs. (Even though signs on the glass instructed people not to, I think it's a human instinct. Who could possibly walk by a cute puppy in a cage without tapping on its window?)

Anyway, there was one particular pup that struck me. She was this tiny miniature beagle. I don't know what it was, the way she looked at me, like she always knew me every time I went in to tap on the glass cages. Her little brown eyes would suddenly perk up when I walked in. I loved the way she wiggled her brown coat with the one white circle on her back. It wasn't that other people weren't looking at her, she was the cutest little thing in the place, but it was like she knew me in some way. (Did she?)

One Thursday night, sitting in my sparse apartment after being turned down for yet another job at one of the movie studios, I started to think about that little dog in the cage.

I needed a new life. She needed a new life. I knew I needed a couch and a table and chairs to eat breakfast. I needed some new clothes to interview for jobs. There were a lot of things I needed but only one thing I really wanted, and when you think about it, which would you rather get with your last \$800—something you need or something you want?

So with the last \$800 I had, I went to purchase the little miniature beagle.

As I walked in, there was this girl, my age, trying to stuff my little dog into a Fendi dog bag.

"If she fits," the woman wearing too much frosted lipstick told the salesperson, "I'll take her. If not, I'll take a look at the teacup poodles."

"That dog's not going to fit in there," I told the girl, reacting quickly. "That bag is too small. Get a teacup poodle."

"No, she'll fit," she grunted, stuffing Peaches's butt into the little bag.

That's when this little beagle looked up at me with those big brown eyes that made me fall in love with her in the first place. She *so* did not want to be in that bag, and I knew it. She just looked at me with those eyes that said, "Get me the hell out of here." Suddenly, nothing was more important to me than getting that dog.

"She doesn't fit," I told the woman, like a friend. "You'd be better off with a smaller dog, maybe one of those teacup poodles. I hear beagles have psycho personalities anyway."

"I heard that too," she said, "but this dog is so cute."

"Trust me," I told her, taking the little dog from her, "get a teacup poodle. They're cuter. I only wish I could get a teacup poodle."

"No," she said, taking Peaches back from me, "everyone has teacup poodles. This one is different."

"Beagles will ruin your life," I told her, taking Peaches out of her hand and back into mine. "My cousin had a beagle and the thing ripped her place to shreds."

"You know," she said, trying to take Peaches from me again, but this time I held firm, "I know what you're up to and I saw her first."

"I don't think so," I said as I searched for a salesperson. "Can someone ring up this dog for me?"

"I saw the dog first," the woman shouted at the approaching salesperson.

"No, I did. I've been coming in here for a month for this dog."

"Give it to me before I rip it out of your hands!" the woman screamed.

"Try it and I swear I'll deck you so hard you won't even know what hit you!"

"Ring her up!" I shouted, throwing my wallet at the salesperson.

"I hope the dog pisses all over your apartment!" the girl said, storming out of the store.

So I bought the dog and I named her Peaches, which I've always regretted. Later on, I wished I had named her something better, like Euripides or Shakespeare. You know, something a little more intellectual sounding, something with a little more substance so I wouldn't be yet another dumb twentysomething girl with a dog named for a fruit stuffed into a Fendi dog purse, even though I couldn't afford a Fendi dog purse or any purse for that matter. Well, at least I didn't go with Princess or Queenie or something even dumber.

"You bought a dog?" Dana soured when I presented the latest addition to my family. "That was a dumb move. You hate to get up before noon, how are you going to get up and walk a dog?"

"I'll get up," I told her. "If I have to get up, I'll get up."

"I don't think that was the best course of action you could have taken right now," my mom admonished. "Maybe you could give it back."

"Mom, if anything, the dog is helping me get acclimated," I told her.

"Alex, you've never taken care of anything in your life."

"The dog is no problem," I lied. "She's the sweetest thing around. I can't wait for you to meet her."

"Yelp, yelp, yelp, yelp, yelp," was all I needed to hear, a thousand times a day, to figure out that they were right. My apartment was starting to have the distinct odor of urine, and how could such a little thing shed so much hair? She ruined not only my Christian Louboutin velvet sling-backs but my favorite Juicy sweats, the Pucci bathing suit top I'd stolen from my mother, one pair of earrings I was sure she'd swallowed (which, before I found them mangled, cost \$300 in X-rays at the vet to prove otherwise), and, it kills me to even think about it, the velvet fringe dress I bought with Pen on the night of the Plaza Hotel fifth-best-day/nightmare fiasco.

I had bought a book, *Dog Training for Dummies*, and after instructing her over and over to "sit—Sit, JUST SIT ALREADY!" she never sat once.

Finally, one night at about three in the morning after my landlord called and said Peaches was disrupting the building yet again, I gave up. It took me a half hour to figure out that she was barking at a moth that had gotten stuck between the window and the screen after I'd closed it for the night. I knew that I couldn't handle Peaches anymore.

"It's not the end of the world, you just can't handle having a dog," Pen told me on my cell phone as I came back from yet another interview for a job I did not get. "That's not a put-down, it's just what is," she said. "You made a mistake. I'm not saying you won't be able to take care of a dog at some point, but not right now."

"I know, you're right," I told her. "I'll give back the dog."

I had one piece of mail, my credit card statement, which came to \$2,000 and none of that was for clothes or shoes or any other miscellaneous items, it was all food for Peaches and things I really needed like food, soap, shampoo, and gas for my car. As I entered the apartment, I saw that an upper closet shelf I'd stuffed with the last of my clothing that wasn't ruined had fallen in an avalanche and there was Peaches gnawing her way through the last of it.

"Damn you!" I screamed at Peaches as I ran over to the pile.

So now I had no clothes, no money, and this dog that was making everything worse. That was enough for me.

I picked up the one thing Peaches hadn't ruined, the dog crate she came in, got her into my car, and took her back to Pet Love.

"Hi," I said, holding the crate. "I need to return a dog to you. I'm sorry, this was a mistake."

"Which dog is it?" the saleswoman asked, looking in the crate.

"She's a little miniature beagle. I bought her about a month ago," I said, showing her the crate.

"We don't take dogs back after thirty days. Do you know the exact date of purchase?"

I didn't know the exact date. Peaches had eaten the receipt.

"Can I ask why you want to return the dog, ma'am?"

"Well," I paused as I started to cry, "I just can't take care of her."

"There are shelters where you can take the dog."

"Will they find another owner for her?"

"I can't guarantee that, but at least she'll be in more capable hands."

I suddenly envisioned this little dog in one of those shelters. What if no one took her? I couldn't begin to think of the consequences.

"Listen, there was a girl I fought to get this dog. I think she ended up getting a teacup poodle. Maybe you can find her number and ask if she still wants her?"

"Oh wait, you're the girl who fought with that other girl?" she said, laughing. "Hey, Pedro," she said, calling over her fellow worker, "this is that girl who fought with the other girl for the dog! She wants to return her."

"Damn! All that fighting and you couldn't take care of the dog," Pedro laughed.

"Well, it's not that I can't take care of her," I said, humiliated, "I'm just going through a really hard time."

"And you can't take care of the dog? You wanted her so badly. You used to come in here all the time."

"I know, and I made a mistake."

"You girls who come in thinking these dogs are just going to be cute and sweet. You girls just don't realize it's a responsibility."

"No, I knew she'd be a responsibility, like I said, it's just too much for me to handle right now."

I'd never felt like a worse person in my life.

"Forget it," I said, taking the crate, "forget I said anything."
I walked out.

I took Peaches with me back to my car. I turned the ignition; it wouldn't start. That was all I needed. I started banging on the steering wheel. "Why can't anything go right? Why can't one thing go right in my life?" That's when I lost it in the middle of the parking garage. I just sat there crying into the steering wheel, moaning and with slobber all over me. It felt good to cry like that, like I needed to get everything out. All those words people said, "You just can't take care of anything," kept going through my mind.

I took Peaches out of the crate, put her on the leash I had with me, and we left the car in the garage.

I could not go back to that apartment. I needed some air, so Peaches and I walked up La Cienega Boulevard. Again, we were the only ones on the street in the middle of the day, but I didn't care. I just needed to walk and clear my head.

I think we must have been walking for about an hour, past stores and cars, on the street. I was numb to all of it. All I wanted to do was walk until I couldn't walk anymore and try to make some sense of everything. The sun was pretty hot that day, and both Peaches and I were starting to get tired after the long trek so I took a seat at a table outside a coffee place.

I wasn't even thinking of my failure anymore. All I could think of was how tired I was. I was too tired to worry about anything anymore. When I look back at it now, I think I just surrendered.

We must have sat at that coffee place for over two hours. The

people who worked there were kind enough to give Peaches a bowl of water, and after she finished that, she curled herself into a ball on the sidewalk and fell asleep. I could see the people inside looking at me from time to time, wondering whether or not I was going to leave there already, but I just couldn't. I would have bought a cup of coffee, but I didn't have the money even for that so I just sat frozen with my thoughts, hoping maybe I'd become invisible.

There was no one who was going to make my life better but me. I thought I was at the worst moment of my life on the day I left Charles, but now I realized that was just the beginning. I couldn't, and I didn't want to, ask anyone for help then, and I knew I couldn't ask now either. I would have to make this work. I would make this work.

As the sun was beginning to set, I picked up Peaches and walked the three miles back to my apartment with her in my arms.

The two of us slept right through the night. Normally, Peaches would have woken up and started yelping, but this time she didn't. I realized she was as I tired as I was.

We both woke up at about seven the next morning. I was actually surprised to see that she hadn't peed on the remaining clothes I had left out. She was just staring at me on the edge of the covers with those eyes, so I took her out again for another big walk.

During the day I bought her some chew toys on my already overdue credit card and sat with her in the apartment, teaching her to chew on the toys instead of my Gucci pumps. I learned that scratching on the front door was her cue to go out. As the

days passed, I barely took phone calls from anyone and concentrated on training Peaches.

Dana had told me about Runyon Canyon. A lot of people with dogs went there to exercise, so I got a bus pass and started taking Peaches up there for morning walks. After a couple of days of going there, you start to know the other people with their dogs. At first you give a smile then say a little something about their dog. "Your dog is so cute." Something like that.

After a month of going there, I had made some friends. It was just like Dana said, you need to go with a group. The group in this case was Peaches and me.

I was even starting to look better from all the walks. The carb mush had started to turn strong and lean.

Then, one day, on one of our hikes, I saw a woman who looked familiar, but it was one of those things where for the life of me I couldn't place her. Her chocolate Lab didn't look familiar, but once I got a little closer to her and saw her frosted lipstick, it dawned on me.

"Hey, don't I know you?" she said to me.

"No, I don't think so," I lied.

She looked at me again and then at Peaches.

"Wait a minute, you're the girl from the pet store. That's the dog we fought over!"

"Oh yeah," I acknowledged sheepishly. "I remember you now."

"You know, I've thought of you since then," she said.

"She has," the guy with her concurred. "She's totally mentioned you and that dog. She thinks you two were meant to be together."

The Ten Best Days of My Life

"I do," she added. "You were so determined to have that dog. I saw the way that dog looked at you."

"You think?" I said, looking down at Peaches, who jumped up as I petted her head.

"Yeah, she loves you. You can totally see it."

"That's why I didn't even take the teacup poodle. I ended up getting this big thing," she said, petting her Lab.

"I don't think she fits in that Fendi bag."

"No, I gave the bag to Peter and Lucky," she said, pointing to her friend and his shih tzu. "This is my dog. This is the dog I'm supposed to have."

"Whew," I said, taking a deep breath. "I feel much better now."

"Oh, this is Bambi by the way," she said, petting her dog.

"This is Peaches," I said, picking her up.

"I'm Morgan," she said as I shook her hand. "Peter and I take our dogs here every morning. Why don't you start joining us?"

"Yeah," Peter said, "join us!"

And that's how we made our first friends in Los Angeles. From then on, Morgan and Bambi and Peter and his dog Lucky and Peaches and I met at Runyon Canyon and walked. After that, we took our friendship beyond the canyon and started spending evenings together. Peter and Morgan, as it turned out, worked in the shoe department at Barneys and Morgan had plans to go back east.

"You've got to take my job when I leave," she said. "Barneys is the best place to work."

And that's how it happened. The day after Morgan's going-

away party, I started working with Peter in the CO-OP Shoes section at Barneys. I wasn't making loads of money, but at least it was a start and I was able to pay my rent and put a dent in the credit card bill.

"Mom," I said when I called her one night, "Peaches is fine. I'm fine. I'm really happy here."

"I'm so proud of you, sweetheart," she said.

"Did you tell Dad I got a job?"

"I'll tell him later. He's busy right now."

"Can I say hello to him?"

"Well," she said, "he's sleeping. Maybe tomorrow."

While it did bother me that my dad and I still weren't talking, it went away quickly. I was three thousand miles away from being Bill Dorenfield's daughter. I was just another Los Angeles transplant.

I hung up the phone as my little dog jumped up on my lap. Buying Peaches was the smartest thing I'd ever done. Meeting Peaches was one of the best days of my life. Because of her, I had a job, friends, a life.

Just like Tom Joad, I knew California was going to be tough, but I was finally a grown-up realizing my own responsibilities . . . and I wasn't about to screw it up.

One Foot in Heaven

“You are the best dog in the whole wide world,” I tell Peaches as I scoop her in my arms and give her a hug.

That’s when it suddenly dawns on me again.

This could be one of the last times that I ever get to scoop up Peaches in my arms and give her a hug.

I don’t understand it, heaven should be like having a summer house and a winter house except one house would be for the good, fulfilling things you were going to do on earth and the other house, the one you live in permanently, for all the screwups you made. Maybe the winter house isn’t insulated well or something and that’s your punishment. Not being able to be with Peaches every day will be like hell rather than fourth heaven.

I embrace my little dog tighter as I take her with me to my closet.

“What’s the point of even getting dressed?” I say aloud to Peaches since she’s the only one there.

I decide to leave my Diane von Furstenberg wrap dress for another time (most likely no other time, though, since I’m probably out of here soon enough) and keep on the black



Juicy velour sweats I've had on for the last two days. I take Peaches with me as we go downstairs to watch my favorite show in heaven, *What Ever Happened When Your Favorite Movies Ended?* It's nice to know that Katie Morosky (Barbra Streisand) dumped her husband, David X. Cohen, and went back to Hubbell Gardner (Robert Redford) in *The Way We Were*. It feels good to know that E.T. was able to call little Elliott when he got back to his planet and they spent years having a nice long-distance friendship. I even start to forget my troubles in the middle of *A Place in the Sun* when the Montgomery Clift character, George Eastman, suddenly gets a reprieve from the gas chamber and gets out of prison and marries Elizabeth Taylor and goes on to run his uncle's company. The anxiety begins again, though, when Dorothy realizes that maybe there is another place like home and she starts stalking tornadoes around Kansas so she can go back and visit her buddies in Oz. The whole *Wizard of Oz* thing is too much like heaven and, at this point, since I know I can't click my heels three times to get back to earth, I have no idea where home is. This is causing me to freak out again.

Jeez, I can't even concentrate on what happened after *The Breakfast Club* ended. Judd Nelson and Molly Ringwald are now the hot couple at school, which is a bad move if you ask me. What does she see in him anyway? I have to say that when it comes down to it, I never liked *The Breakfast Club*. I don't even know why it's on here. I remember the first time I saw the movie and waited the two hours for them to finally leave school for the day, and then the movie was over. Waste of my time. Nothing happened there. Who do I speak to about get-

ting *The Breakfast Club* off my “favorites” list. Who put it on there anyway? Who in heaven thinks they know me so well that they would put this movie among my favorites? Did they just assume that because I’m a woman I would automatically love this freaking movie? Huh? Huh?

Oh no, I’m not going to pass this test! My cellulite is going to come back! My shoes are going to pinch! I’m going down to fourth heaven! Oh no, I’m totally going down to fourth heaven!

Is it possible to have an anxiety attack in heaven?

I’ve got to get out of here. I’ve got to just take a walk or something, calm down, clear my head.

“Come, Peaches,” I say to her. “Wanna take a walk? Come outside with me.”

Peaches doesn’t answer me and keeps watching the television. Peaches always loved *The Breakfast Club*.

“Come on, it’s our thing. We always took walks together on earth, we haven’t done that here.”

She still doesn’t move, the lazy dog.

“Fine,” I tell her, leaving the house, “I’ll catch you later.”

I’m walking through the streets of my neighborhood, mansion after mansion surrounded by rosebushes and fruit trees with the most succulent apples, lemons, grapefruits, and oranges ripe to perfection.

“Hi,” an old man calls from his Tudor mansion, “feel free to grab a couple of bananas if you like.”

I don’t even answer him. I don’t even wave back. What did he do that was so special to get those coconut palms?

I see some other lady potting plants in front of her two-story greenhouse.

"Hi," she says. "Isn't heaven grand?"

"Isn't is just?" I say condescendingly, although she has no way of getting it.

Why is everyone so darn happy? Am I the only person in all of heaven who ever had to take the entrance exam?

This is when I start my jog. I've never been much of a jogger. Actually, I've never been a jogger at all, but it's the only way I can stop these people in their perfect seventh-heaven homes from sharing how fantastic their deaths are. If I can just run a couple of miles and get myself tired and weak, hopefully I'll be too tired to think about anything.

Maybe I'll just turn myself in.

"Forget it all," I'll tell Deborah, my bad-dye-job guardian angel. "I get it. I didn't lead a fulfilling life and I wasn't going to. Just send me down to fourth already."

There's just no sense in going on with this. I'm done. They've got me.

Maybe fourth heaven won't be so bad though. It's not like I'll be there by myself. Alice says she thinks all the people on fourth are really cool. Maybe I'll learn how to play the guitar and join some band.

"Oh, screw the jog," I say aloud. I'm not even close to being out of breath. I suppose it's because I'm not a being who gets tired anymore, darn it.

"You sure you don't want any fruit?" the old guy with the fruit asks again as I pass him.

"I don't want your stinking fruit, okay?" I shout at him. "Now quit asking!"

"Okay, okay, you don't have to fret about it. Are you okay,

lady?" he asks. "Would you like to come in for a cup of tea and maybe a bowl of fruit?"

I flip him the bird. Somehow this makes me feel a little better, but not enough. I look back at him a few times, and every time I do, he's standing there staring back at me like he can't understand what just happened.

"I hope your fruit rots!" I scream and then start to run. Why? I don't know, it's not like he's running after me or anything, but I just need to get away from everything and this seems to be the best way.

I get back to my house some ten minutes after I left, just in time for *Weird Science*. Peaches has always hated the movie *Weird Science* so I guess that's why she's not here.

"Alex?" I hear from outside. "Are you there?"

"Hi, Adam," I say, going over to the window. As always, he looks adorable in a pair of Lucky jeans and a black cashmere crewneck sweater. His hair is delectably disheveled, as usual.

"Your dog came over and she wouldn't stop barking until I came over here. Is everything okay?"

I look at Peaches as she stands next to Adam. I know she's up to something.

"Yes," I fake chuckle. "Everything is fine. I don't know why she was barking at you," I tell him in the most offhand way I can. "Maybe she just wants you to play fetch with her."

"Oh, is that what you want, girl?" he asks, walking over to a stray ball in the yard and throwing it across the lawn.

Peaches doesn't move. She stands there and looks at him, and then she looks at me and barks again.

"Peaches, chill," I instruct her from the window. "I don't

know what's going on with her, she's been acting crazy all day," I lie. "Listen," I tell him, "I just came in from a jog, can I call you later?"

"Sure," he says. "You're sure you're all right though?"

Peaches starts barking again.

"Would you shut up already?" I tell Peaches. "You don't have to do this."

"What's the matter with her?" he asks me.

"She's just trying to stick her nose where it doesn't need sticking," I say, looking right at Peaches, who continues barking.

"Look, something's going on here," Adam shouts up to me. "I mean, come on, Alex, obviously even your dog wants me to know what's going on. Let me come in and we'll talk."

Oh, for crying out loud. I give up. I'll just tell him already. Who cares anymore? So what if he wants nothing to do with me anymore. I'll be in fourth heaven where he won't come see me anyway.

"Fine, come on in," I wave to him.

He comes in through the kitchen and I sit him down at the table as Peaches runs past us.

"A lot of help you are," I yell to her as she runs upstairs.

"Okay, spill," he says to me, taking a seat.

I take a deep breath. The whole thing is stirring in my head and I don't know where to begin. I still don't want to tell him. I don't know how to tell him. What I am about to say to him could ruin everything, forever. I'm still sitting there trying to get the words out in the right way, and he's just sitting there waiting for me with this reserved look like no matter what it is, it will be fine. Will it?

"The truth is," I start as I take a deep breath, "Adam, I'm not like you. When I died and got up to heaven and saw you and this house and all those fantastic clothes, I thought this was what I deserved. I just assumed that I was entitled to all of it. The thing is, after I left your house that morning, I was told something I should have already known. I'm not entitled to any of this," I say, looking around my kitchen with the island stove in the middle of the room.

For the first time, I've explained what's going on. I'm not crying and he's not breaking in. He's still sitting here in that calm fashion.

"The thing is, being that this is heaven, I'm being given the chance to plead my case. I'm being allowed to tell my side of the story so that maybe God or whoever is judging will let me stay up here with you. If I don't explain myself well, I have to go down a few planes in heaven."

Adam still isn't saying anything. He's just sitting here staring at me with this blank look on his face like he's really intent on listening to what I'm saying, and I can't read his feelings.

"The thing is, I'm writing this essay to give my side of it," I say, exhaling, "and I'm starting to realize that maybe I wasn't going on to lead an existence on earth that would let me deserve to be up here in seventh heaven."

"But you were really young when you died," he reminds me.

"I know and that's why they let me take the test. As I'm writing it, though, it's become really clear to me that they're probably right and I have to accept it. I did not lead a life on earth that would have led to any kind of fulfillment for myself."

Adam takes a deep breath as he takes my hand.

“Well,” he smiles, “if you don’t think we’re going to be able to see each other in the future, why don’t we make the best of the time we have now?”

“Because I can’t think of anything more painful,” I tell him, and now I start to cry. “If I spend any more time with you, I’ll fall in love with you even more, and I know myself, my heart will be in pain for the rest of eternity. Even looking at you is breaking my heart—to think I won’t be able to see your face every day and we won’t be able to throw softballs at each other’s heads or have the best sex every night for the rest of our deaths,” I say, really starting to freak out. “Adam, I can’t even look at you anymore, it makes me so sad. I have to get out of here. I’ve got to turn myself in and leave here for good!” I cry, starting to walk out.

“Alex,” he whispers, taking my arm as I begin to leave, “then do something for me. If you have to go, and it’s because you think you were never going to lead a fulfilling life on earth, why don’t you make a fulfilling life for the time you are in seventh heaven? Stay with me for as long as we’re able to be together.”

“But I can’t,” I tell him as he puts his arms around me.

“Promise yourself that if you leave here, you’ll leave with only the best memories,” he says as I bury myself in his shoulder. “Make this time worthwhile and then maybe you’ll realize what leading a fulfilling life is all about. It’s not the pain of missing out on what you don’t have anymore, it’s making the most of what you have for the time you have it.”

The Ten Best Days of My Life

He's got me as I collapse in his arms and we kiss the sweetest kisses I'll ever know.

I've just had the second best sex of my life and death and we're lying here as I try not to think that this might be the last time I'll ever see him.

"Thanks, Adam," I tell him. "Thanks for understanding."

"I'm just glad to be here with you," he says, pulling me in tighter.

"Adam?"

"Yeah?"

"Can I ask you something?"

"Sure."

"Well, I'm just wondering," I start. "I mean, you're such a great guy and you must have done a lot of good to be up here in seventh heaven. I just admitted to you that I'm not all I've been cracked up to be. I just have to know, what the heck is it that you see in me anyway?"

This makes him laugh.

"No, I'm serious. I know I'm cute and everything, but what is it? What would a guy like you want with a girl like me?"

"You really want to know?"

"Yes, it's kind of driving me crazy."

"Well," he says, taking a deep breath, "now, taking in the fact that you're dead and all . . ."

He leans on his elbow as he looks down at me lying under him.

“Alex, if there is one thing that I find really attractive in a woman, it’s her ability to work a room.”

“When was I working a room?”

“Well, it wasn’t a room exactly, in this case it was the gates of heaven. When I first saw you, you were the most popular girl in line, talking to everyone around you like you were at the hippest party. You were this fearless woman who was making the best of a situation, and at the time I thought to myself, ‘Now, that’s a woman who really lived.’”

To tell you the truth, I’m shocked at what he’s saying.

“Well, it was really fun in that line,” I say.

“The reason it was so much fun was because you were talking to everyone, being our little cheerleader, our comic relief,” he says. “So all that you’re telling me about not living a fulfilling life on earth or that you weren’t going to lead a fulfilling life on earth, well, all I had to do was see you for five minutes to know that whatever you did with your life, it must have been done with every bit of energy you had. From what you told me earlier, I don’t think it’s that you didn’t live life to its fullest, I think you were so busy living that you didn’t take any time to realize it.”

His words are sinking in to me. It’s one of those lightbulb moments when everything starts to make sense: the people I’ve loved, the things I did, my own damned insecurity and not believing in myself.

Have I been looking at my life with the wrong attitude? Is that why I can’t get into my parents’ dreams? Is that why I’m not able to visit them on earth for more than a moment?

“That’s the kindest thing anyone has ever said to me,” I tell him with tears in my eyes.

The Ten Best Days of My Life

“Alex, no matter what happens to you, I hope you’ll remember it.”

“I will, I promise I will.”

I fall asleep that night thinking of only two things: one, I can’t believe I didn’t tell Adam sooner and, two, I must go over and apologize to that guy with the fruit trees for flipping him the bird.





You might be surprised to hear the following statement come from me:

It feels good to do good work.

I had been working in the men's CO-OP Shoes department at Barneys for six months and I had really started to get into it. The CO-OP section of Barneys, if you don't know, contains the more-casual shoes and therefore it meant selling shoes to more-casual guys who weren't anal about their shoes—they just wanted to look cool. It only took me a good six months before I began to realize that the men's equivalent to “Do I look fat in this?” is actually “Do these look cool?” That's all they ever wanted to know.

In the Beverly Hills Barneys, this being Hollywood and all, if you worked in CO-OP, you always helped a lot of screenwriters and directors. If you worked in main-floor men's shoes, though, that was for the agents, managers, and entertainment attorneys (aka the anal ones who stayed there for hours comparing one shoe to another, though luckily I didn't have to deal with them). I would even have to go so far as to say that in my casual, laid-back shoe section, it was pretty easy. I don't know



what was with the fashion, but every writer had to have red Adidas sneakers. It must have been a real fashion “do” in the screenwriting world. We were always ordering more red Adidas and that was usually the shoe of choice to sell. In the summertime, though, flip-flops were all the rage and that was great for me for one reason alone.

Now, if you’ve never worked in a shoe store before and you don’t know what I’m talking about, I should spell it out for you. The bad news about working with shoes is that it’s a bitch getting those shoes down off the shelves in the storeroom, and just about every guy who came in wasn’t sure if he was one size or another. You always had to get two of everything, and if the guy wanted to try on a couple of pairs of shoes, it could take your back out. The best news is that you start to strengthen your biceps and triceps so much that working with weights at the gym for me became a bygone task. I’ve always hated my arms. The upper arms, no matter how many weights I lifted, always had flags of fat blowing in the wind every time I raised them. If I had stayed on earth, one day I would have gotten the fat sucked out of my upper arms, but had I kept on working in the men’s CO-OP Shoes department at Barneys, I bet I could have forgone the hassle. That is, unless flip-flops became really popular all year round, which, thankfully, they never did during my tenure—so my arms were always on the brink of looking like Linda Hamilton’s in *Terminator 2*.

Working along with my buddy Peter, who was single and gay, we had the men’s CO-OP Shoes department cornered as far as any cute guy who happened to come in. If he was straight and cute, he was immediately my customer and get-

ting those Paul Smith suede chukka boots off the shelves in the back room didn't seem so awful. Peter and I were always getting hit on, though, on the average of one of us a day. There were invitations to movie screenings and fun parties. A very popular straight married actor once hit on Peter (and no, I'm sorry, I can't blab as to who it was; once a Barneys employee, always a Barneys employee—we never rat out our customers), but Peter turned the guy down. When I asked him why, he said, "Honey, that's not the way I see myself getting into *People* magazine," which I thought was a very good point.

Pretty soon, you got to know all your customers and that was very important to me. See, in those early months when I started working there, I knew there was one thing that had been missing for years in department stores that I needed to bring back. I wanted to know my customers. Like the stories my mother told me about the grand days of department stores when she was younger. Salespeople knew you by name and knew exactly what you were looking for. I wanted to be that salesperson. I took meticulous notes on all my customers, their styles, their likes and dislikes, not to mention the size and widths of their shoes.

There was Kal Rogers, a television director who I ended up dating until he dumped me for the lead actress in his show, but he still bought a lot of shoes and that was more important to me. There was Lou Sernoff, a film producer who made me keep his orthotic in the back for whenever he came in to try on shoes. (I accidentally lost it once and Lou took a fit, but it turned out that Peter had been using it as a doorstop in the back room.) Stan Mitchell, a screenwriter, only bought brown shoes, and it was a year before I figured out for him that he was color blind.

The guy was a successful comedy writer and went his whole life without realizing he couldn't see colors until I asked him one day about the brown-shoe phenomenon.

"Aren't these black?" he asked, pointing to his caramel-colored loafers.

Stan bought a lot of shoes after that, in a wide variety of colors, as a thank-you.

My favorite customer, though, was Lloyd Kerner, a writer who thought he could only sell screenplay pitches if he had on a brand-new pair of shoes. Lloyd wasn't one of the guys who hit on me, and thank goodness for that or what happened wouldn't have resulted in one of the best days of my life (which I'll get to in a minute).

See, Lloyd was a sorry-looking guy in nice clothing, though the clothes never looked as good on him. He was a really thin guy, and the expensive clothes he bought just hung on him and never looked dapper, even when I had the tailor completely alter them. It was like . . . remember Pigpen from the *Peanuts* comics and the way that even if he took a shower he was still dirty afterward? That was kind of like Lloyd, except Lloyd didn't look dirty, he just looked bad. Also, he was the kind of guy who always seemed like he had a cold. He even talked like it too:

"Do you habe dese Conberse All Stars ind my sidze? Amb I cool enough to wear dem?" he'd ask as he blew his nose.

Another fantastic thing about Lloyd: he was always fretting about something, whether it was his latest script or an idea for a new one. He was quite the anxiety-prone guy. It had begun to become quite obvious, when Lloyd started coming in twice a week for new shoes, that all his worrying shouldn't

have amounted to anything. When an invitation came to the premiere of his new movie, along with a note, "Thanks for the lucky Converse slip-ons," I knew that I was dealing with someone crazy, yet very successful, and I began urging him to buy shoes even when he didn't have a screenplay to pitch.

"Maybe this one will make you write that really great scene?" I said to him one day.

That's how I sold him the \$375 Sciapo pull-on boots in both brown and black.

In other words, Lloyd was every saleswoman's dream. He had all the money in the world to buy anything I told him to buy, and he always came back for more. I also genuinely liked Lloyd. I enjoyed soothing his wounds when the girl wouldn't go out with him or when the one who would go with him first class to Hawaii dumped him after the trip.

One day Lloyd came in, in a panic. He had been dating Kate (the actress who had never landed a part) for six months and it was getting serious.

"I'm going do meed Kade's family in Kentuggy. I can't shop wid anyone else bud you," he said. "I thing dis could be the girl. Can you helb me?"

And so I started helping Lloyd buy other things besides shoes. I gotta be honest with you, I'd never shopped for a guy in my life. I didn't know what men wanted. I had also never been to Kentucky so I didn't know what people wore there. After a year of hearing about the girls who wanted nothing to do with him, I wanted to help Lloyd in any way I could.

"Not to worry," I said, putting my arm around him. "I'll take care of you."

The Ten Best Days of My Life

Eight sweaters, seven pairs of pants, two pairs of jeans, three button-down shirts, two sports jackets, and a suit later, I had sold \$25,000 in merchandise. The buzz of my sale went all the way from first-floor women's shoes and jewelry to fifth-floor men's suits. It wasn't like salespeople hadn't made bigger sales. After all, this was the Beverly Hills Barneys. It was that I'd come from shoes and was able to sell throughout the store. When I got my commission, I treated both Peaches and myself to a day at the salon followed by shiatsu massages (yes, they do that for dogs in Los Angeles—go figure).

Lloyd was thrilled with his purchases, and he really looked good. Or as good as Lloyd could, anyway. The powers that be at Barneys loved me. For the first time in my life, I was good at what I did.

Like I said in the beginning, it feels good to do good work.

This set the stage for one of the best days of my life (and the eighth one in this essay).

A few weeks later, Lloyd came back from Kentucky engaged, his fiancée, Kate, in tow with him.

"Id was the black cashdmere sweder that did it," he said, wiping his nose.

"It wasn't just that," Kate smiled, kissing his cheek. "But it certainly helped."

At first it was just little things that Lloyd would call over for.

"Do you dnow of a nice sports jacket I could wear? I'm oud of socks."

Pretty soon I was making trips to Lloyd's house to drop off or have him try on clothes. That's when Kate got into it.

"Hi, Alex," she called. "Lloyd just got nominated for another Golden Globe. Do you know of anything in the store that I could wear?"

So I started shopping for Kate.

I chose not only Kate's wedding dress but four engagement-party dresses with the right jewelry and everything for their honeymoon in the Maldives, from bikinis to underwear (La Perla of course). After two years of this, Kate was pregnant with their first child and I was clothing a second generation.

That was when I knew that I was on to something.

"You know," I said to color-blind Stan Mitchell one day as he was trying on a pair of pink crocodile half boots. "I'm sure this is your style, and it's a good one, but now that we know about the color-blind thing, do you realize that you're matching a pair of pink crocodile half boots with a cashmere sweater in orange sherbet?"

"Pink?" he yelled out. "What's pink? What's orange?"

"Okay," I said calmly. "I just didn't know if this was some kind of signature look for you or something, and that's okay if it is, style is all about bringing out your personality. It's just that knowing you as well as I have for the last year, I don't think pink and orange sherbet are your colors. Maybe we could work something out like hiring me to be a personal shopper for you."

"Why doesn't anyone else tell me these things?" he asked, getting all in a tizzy.

"You are a very successful man," I told him. "People get intimidated by that so they don't want to say anything. Look, let's go over to the men's clothing section and put a few things together and we'll see how things go. If you like what I pick out, maybe we continue working on your wardrobe."

That's how I got Stan Mitchell as a client.

"You know," I told Lou Sernoff one day as I grabbed his orthotic from the back, "as long as I'm keeping your orthotic for you, maybe I should get your clothing sizes to see if anything goes with the shoes you pick out."

"If you could do for me what you did with Stan Mitchell, I'll pay you 20 percent above what I buy."

With three clients to shop for in between manning the CO-OP Shoes section, I was constantly racing back and forth between the departments when new shipments came in. With the word out that Lloyd and Stan and Lou had someone at Barneys as their personal shopper, other customers came in. Within the year I had picked up four more clients with 20 percent commission above what I sold and the powers that be at Barneys were on to my second occupation.

"But I only get clothes from Barneys," I told the powers.

"And that's great, but that's not what we hired you to do. Just as long as you're not taking off the top."

That's when I got scared.

The next day I approached Lloyd about the situation.

"I'm thinking about going out on my own, but there's one problem that I need to take care of," I told him. "If I continue to be your personal shopper, I'm going to have to up my fee to 30 percent of the cost so that I can afford health insurance."

"Thirty percent," he pondered as I smoothed his new Harris Tweed sports jacket. "Led me think about it."

I followed that with the other guys.

"You're worth it," Stan Mitchell exclaimed as I had him fitted for a new black suit. "I'm in for 30 percent."

"I'm in for 30 percent," Lloyd told me.

"If Stan and Lloyd are okay with it, so am I," Lou Sernoff told me.

After four years at Barneys, I gave my notice. Walking out of the beautiful department store that had given me the means for my future, I promised that most of my shopping would be done there. And it was.

To begin to describe to you the feeling I had on the eighth best day, let me put it this way: I didn't call my parents and Penelope and other friends to share the good news so I could rake in some congratulatory adulation. I didn't need that. All I needed was the feeling within myself that I had done a good job. I had done it all by myself without the help of anyone.

Don't get me wrong here. I know that being a personal shopper is not exactly curing cancer. It might sound like a vain business to get into, but, to me, I was helping people feel good about themselves. It was something you just saw in the person when they'd look at themselves in the mirror. Somehow, putting on the right suit or the right pair of shoes made these men stand a little straighter, more confidently. It was an indisputable look on their faces, this look of poise and distinction they exuded every time I leaned down to straighten a cuff or smooth a jacket line.

I can't say that I hold myself completely responsible for Lloyd finding a woman who loves him for who he is. I can't say it was me alone who caused Stan Mitchell to write an Oscar-winning screenplay. I will honestly say, though, that when you have the ability to make the presentation look a little more presentable,

it can break down some of the walls in your life, bringing the things you want that much closer.

I had been back to Philadelphia a total of three times in the four years I had been living in Los Angeles. Twice my father had been away on business, and once, when he was home, we kept our distance from each other. It had become easy to slip by each other when I was home. Since my father worked sixteen-hour days, by the time he came home I was already situated in the family room watching television or in my room under my old pink canopy bed. He just stayed away.

This time was different though. Coming home to visit in the past, I was still the girl who hadn't quite made it on her own yet. Now I was a grown-up: I was running a business, my life was my own, and it had nothing to do with my father, financially or otherwise.

The first few days after I got home, we snuck around each other as we had the times before. Old habits don't die.

Then one night, three nights into my stay, I went into the kitchen at around midnight to pour myself some cereal. I actually thought my dad had come home already and was in his study or bedroom. Hearing the key being inserted into the back door in the garage, I suddenly felt like I was trespassing in some way.

"Oh hi," he said, entering, looking as displaced as I felt.

"Hi," I said, putting my cereal spoon down.

My dad started to walk out of the kitchen, but then he turned around and walked toward the refrigerator so I got up and put my bowl in the sink.

"That's all right," he said, grabbing a soda out of the fridge, "you go ahead and eat."

So I took the bowl out of the sink and went back to the table. I really didn't want any more cereal, but I knew if there was anytime we'd talk, this was it.

"Late night?" I asked, not knowing what else to say.

"Yeah. We've got some developers from Hong Kong in for the week."

"Oh," I said, not knowing what else to say.

My dad took a seat at the table and we sat in silence for another few minutes. My cereal had become mushy.

"So, you getting along well out there?" he asked.

"Yeah, everything is great."

"Mom said you started a business for yourself. You're shopping for people?"

"Yeah, I'm a personal shopper. A lot of people can't shop for themselves out there."

This made him chuckle.

"Yeah, those crazy people in la-la land," he said.

"I guess," I chuckled back.

"So, living out there is treating you right?" he asked.

"Yeah, I like it. It's, it's home now."

"Good. Good for you."

"Thanks, Dad."

We sat in silence for another few minutes.

"Well," he said, putting down his soda and leaving it on the table, "that's good. I'm glad everything is working out for you."

"Thanks, Dad."

The Ten Best Days of My Life

“Okay, good night then.”

“Night, Dad,” I said as I watched him leave the room.

Had I known that this was the last conversation we’d ever have together, I would have told him that I loved him.

I just didn’t know.

What do you think? Do you think he knows I’ll always love him?

I hope so.

Jeez, I really wish I could get down to earth to tell him already.



What would you do if you knew you only had one more day on earth? Would you really do anything differently?

Let's just say, for argument's sake, you get up that morning and go to your e-mail and there's a note from yourguardianangel@heaven.com saying:

Dear Alex,

This is to inform you that this is your last day on earth. Make it a good one.

Signed,

Your Guardian Angel

Okay, so what would you do?

If I were to do it all over again, knowing what I know now, I'd think about it like a birthday. You know how when it's your birthday and you wake up a little happier that day and everyone is really nice to you and people sing "Happy Birthday" a couple of times and someone gives you the obligatory cupcake or piece of cake with a candle in it at dessert, but you go on with a normal day? You know how sometimes through the day, though, when it starts to feel like any other day you catch yourself and



say, “Wait, today is my birthday!” And then that little spark of glee is back inside you and you go on with a smile on your face? That’s probably the only thing I would have done differently. I would have taken a step back and taken a breath as I looked around and said to myself, “Today is the last day of my life—make it a good one.”

That’s about all I really would have done differently though.

See, I guess it’s a pretty good thing that we don’t know when our number is up. Had I really gotten that e-mail, I would have run to the airport to get on a plane to see my parents. I would have been freaking out in the security line at LAX, which is always so darn long, and lines make me really frustrated so imagine if I had to stand in that line and waste those precious moments? I know myself. I would have screamed out, “TODAY’S THE LAST DAY OF MY LIFE, YOU MORONS, AND YOU’RE WASTING IT!” The security people probably would have thought I was a terrorist, and then they would have taken me to airport jail (or wherever they take you at the airport; thankfully, I have no idea what they do with you). When I finally got onto a computer and showed them the e-mail I got and told them all I wanted to do was get to my parents to give them a hug and set everything straight with my dad, it would have been too late in the day. When I finally got to Philadelphia, my time would probably have been up before I even got to tell them anything. Not to mention the fact that you know with my luck we’d be stuck at the gate for like two hours with some air traffic control bullshit and I would have gone berserk and tried to fit my whole body through the little window on the

plane, and then I would have been arrested again—so vicious circle, why bother.

So, for that reason, I think it's a pretty good thing not to know.

Anyway, here are the facts of my last day:

First of all, Peaches had that bowel obstruction, and the poor girl was in so much pain I couldn't just say to her, "Sorry, toots, after tomorrow it's not my problem anymore." (Taking into account, of course, that I didn't know Peaches was going to die with me.) Also, it was Stan Mitchell's birthday party that night at Jones bar and I had ordered a pair of limited-edition Stan Smith Adidas from China. I had to pick them up at the customs office at the Los Angeles airport because of some annoying glitch in the paperwork. I would have to get to that at some point, but there were too many other things to take care of, first. And I couldn't think of a good enough reason to cancel on Stan Mitchell. I could have used Peaches's bowel obstruction, but just saying the words *bowel obstruction* in polite company sounds gross and inappropriate and you just know the talk at the party would have been that *I* had the bowel obstruction and just used Peaches as my fall guy (or fall dog). Then, of course, the rumor would be that I died of a bowel obstruction instead of a MINI Cooper, and how embarrassing would that have been?

So, on the last day of my life I woke up at 7:30 a.m. and promptly took Peaches over to the vet. The vet had told me the day before that it was just a matter of time before the obstruction cleared so I was to stay with her and soothe her pain. I was nuts over poor Peaches. She had been wailing all night and I

had gotten no sleep carrying her around the apartment like a parent who walks their baby around the house until it stops crying. Had it been a slow day (not even taking into account that it was my last day), I would have just stayed home from work to take care of her, but I was working for myself and I had a job to do so I had no choice but to leave her at the vet until after Stan's party. I could tell that Peaches didn't want me to leave her, and I started to cry right in front of the vet.

"You take wonderful care of her," the vet reassured me. "She'll be fine here."

"She's like my child," I cried. "I don't think I'll be able to think about anything else but her for the rest of the day."

"Call as much as you want," he said.

So I did. In between shopping for Lloyd and Kate's Hawaiian vacation wardrobe, I called the vet every hour on the hour to see how my dog was doing and, as we all know, the poor girl had that obstruction the entire day.

At about ten that morning, I was in Lloyd and Kate's bedroom hemming a Tory Burch sequined beach top for Kate.

"I look so fat in this," the five-foot-eight, 115-pound Kate complained as she looked at herself in the mirror.

"You do not look fat in this. I swear, the day I let you go out of the house looking like a hog, first of all, that'll be the day, but, second, I'd fire myself for that."

"Well, see what else you can find and get back to me, okay?"

"No problem," I told her in a way that really sounded like it was no problem, but it really was a problem.

"Are you coming back with something today?"

"Yeah, sure," I said, taking a look at my watch. "I saw this great top at Barneys. I can pick it up later today before Stan Mitchell's party."

"Great, we'll go over together."

Okay, so now I had that top to think about as well as the other things, and I still had to go down to the airport to get those darn sneakers since I was now totally committed to going to Stan's party. It was about noon when I left Kate, and I was having lunch with some agents about adding them as clients. I was meeting them in Beverly Hills at one and that allowed me just enough time to swing by the vet and visit Peaches, who was stoned on some pain-relieving drug.

"Look, I would know better than anyone in my kind of work that clothes really do make the man," I told the agents at lunch as I took a sip of my Diet Coke. "All you need is some guy from your office to show up at a meeting in a cheap suit and that'll be all people are looking at, trust me. I know, I've seen it before. I propose that you hire me as your office's personal shopper, and I promise you, you'll be the best-dressed agency in Hollywood."

"If you can do for our office what you did for Stan Mitchell and Lou Sernoff and Lloyd Kerner, we would love to have you on board," the agent in the Zegna suit agreed, extending his hand.

That was awesome. I left the lunch a little richer financially, and with a date with one of the guys for that Saturday night. (I wonder if he heard I died? I hope he didn't think I stood him up.)

At about two thirty, I knew I still needed to get to Barneys to pick up that beach top for Kate and then go down to the

airport to pick up those darn sneakers, but I also needed to run to Lou Sernoff's office and drop off some jeans I'd had hemmed for him. As I was calling over to the vet to check on Peaches yet again, Penelope called from New York.

"Did you ever send me that Cacharel jacket?" she asked.

"Oh my god, no," I said. "I'm so sorry, I've been crazy this week."

"Are you crazy busy today?" she asked. "Do you think you could FedEx it? I want to wear it to my breast cancer luncheon tomorrow."

"Pen, I'm nuts today. Don't you have anything else?"

"No, Al, I don't. I really wanted to wear that jacket."

"Fine, I'll run to FedEx."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes."

"Am I still your best friend?"

"Yes. Can you imagine ending a friendship after twenty years because of a jacket?"

"Love you, Al,"

"Love you, Pen."

Okay, so that was another monkey wrench in my day. I had just enough time to run back to Barneys, pick up the top, run to Tory Burch and return the other top, then run to my apartment to pick up Pen's Cacharel jacket, and then run over to FedEx and send her the jacket. Then I would drive down to the airport, but I still had to pick up Lou Sernoff's jeans and bring them over to his office, and, wouldn't you know it, his office was in Santa Monica, which could not have been more out of my way if I tried.

It took two and a half hours out of my day to find a parking spot at Barneys, pick up the new beach top for Kate, return the old one to Tory Burch on Robertson, then run to my apartment, grab Pen's jacket, dash to FedEx, ship the jacket, and then drive down to Santa Monica, stopping on the way at Denim Doctors to pick up Lou's jeans.

"These jeans are too short," Lou said when he tried on the hemmed jeans. "You think you can loosen the hem by Stan's party tonight?"

"It's done," I said, grabbing the pants and jumping in my car.

It was 4:47 according to the clock in my car by the time I got to the airport to pick up Stan's shoes. The customs office was closing at five and the only place I could find to park was in the United Airlines terminal when I really needed to be down at the US Airways terminal so I had to run as fast as I could in my goddamned brand-new Stephane Kélian leather boots, which I ended up scuffing (not that it matters now, but boy did it piss me off at the time). I bumped right smack into some family that wasn't looking and plowed their luggage cart into my toe.

The line at the customs office was about fifteen people deep. Now, as you know, normally lines piss me off, but since I had to let the hem out of Lou's jeans, I did that while waiting in line. In between, my cell phone rang twice:

"Hey, it's Kate. You know, I was just thinking, that Tory Burch top was really cute. Did you return it? Do you think you could pick it up again?"

"No problem," I told her, which couldn't have been further from the truth.

“Hey, it’s Pen, so forget about sending the jacket. I found something else to wear.”

“Next!” the customs lady shouted to me from behind the glass partition.

“Just one more second,” I shouted back as I yelled into the phone at Pen. “No, it’s already sent! You’re wearing that jacket or I’ll have to come to New York and beat you,” I shouted into my phone so everyone within earshot of the customs office at LAX told me to please be quiet.

“Ma’am, we’ve got other customers.”

“Pen, I gotta go,” I said—the last words I would ever speak to her. I didn’t even say good-bye.

“Ma’am,” the woman behind the desk shouted again, “we’re closing up here.”

“Just one more second,” I said, pulling the last of the threads out of Lou’s hemmed jeans.

“Ma’am, we’ve all got our problems. Now, where’s your form to receive your package?”

By six I was back at Lou’s house, handing him the jeans.

“Do these make me look cool?” he asked.

“Lou, the day I let you walk out of this house looking un-cool is the day I fire myself.”

“All right,” he said. “By the way, you’re going to Stan’s party tonight, right?”

“Yeah, I’ll be there. I just have to run by the vet to see about my dog and then I have to get over to Lloyd and Kate Kerner’s to get her a beach top for their Hawaii trip. Oh shoot, I have to go. I have to run to Barneys and return something and then

run to Tory Burch to pick up something. I'll see you tonight," I told Lou.

Now, if you've ever been in Los Angeles traffic in a hurry, especially if you're heading from Santa Monica into Beverly Hills, you know you might as well take a gun and start shooting if you want to get there in a hurry (kidding). I don't think there was anything that pissed me off more in that world than Los Angeles traffic, and I have to say, if there's anything good about dying, it's that I'll never have to drive in that traffic again.

"Come on!" I screamed as I flipped the bird at three separate people and beeped my horn at five more. "LEARN HOW TO DRIVE, ASSHOLE!" I screamed to another two.

By seven o'clock I had missed returning the Barneys beach top but got the saleswoman at Tory Burch to stay until I arrived to pick up the top I'd returned earlier.

Peaches was sleeping when I went back to the vet, so I left her there and told them I'd pick her up when I got out of Stan Mitchell's birthday party.

By the time I got to Kate and Lloyd's it was eight thirty and they were dressed and ready to leave.

"Did you even shower?" Kate asked me.

"I haven't had the time," I told her, looking down at my J Brand jeans and the black sweater with the neck that exposed my shoulder for that nice hint of sexy.

Everyone and everyone was at Stan's party that night at Jones. I had dressed Stan in a black cashmere sweater and a black Theory suit.

"Are you sure this is black?" he asked when I first saw him. "It looked a little blue in the car."

"It's black," I said, kissing him hello. "I'd fire myself if I ever screwed up your colors."

For the first time that day I found myself relaxed as Lou Sernoff handed me my first Grey Goose martini of the night.

"This is for the jeans," he said, kissing me on the cheek.

There were too many people to talk to. Don't you love that feeling when you go to a party and you know so many people that conversations start and end with, "Let's catch up when things calm down in here," as someone else makes their way over to say hello.

I threw back another Grey Goose martini as I laughed with Peter, my Barneys buddy, had my third as I talked to my new agent clients, and by the time 11:00 p.m. rolled around, I was leaning my head on Kate's shoulder, who was leaning her head on Lloyd's shoulder, who had fallen asleep amidst the throngs of people shouting and drinking and cheering.

"I gotta go soon," I moaned to Kate. "I gotta go and get Peaches from the vet."

"You've been so worried about her all day," she said.

"I know, I'm so stressed over her."

"Alex," she said, "I've been wanting to ask you something."

"Sure, what's up?" I asked her.

"Well, how do you do it?" she asked.

"Do what?"

"How did you get your life?" she asked me. "I mean, I can't do anything. I can't even go shopping for myself, and you seem to do everything so effortlessly. This is the first time I've ever seen you stressed out about anything."

"Effortlessly?" I asked her. "Are you kidding me? Everything

is an effort. I wake up every single morning with this pain of angst in my heart that I'm not going to succeed in anything. There just aren't enough hours in the day."

"Well, you hide it really well," she said. "I mean, you were working in the shoe department at Barneys and you turned that into a business of your own. How does a person begin to do something like that? I can't even begin to think about what I want in a career."

I had to stop and think about that for a second.

"I don't know, I guess when you're faced with realizing that no one is going to do it for you, you just have to make it work for yourself."

"So, is it fear that makes you succeed?"

"I think that's part of it," I told her and then I stopped. "No, it's not fear, I think it's more than that. I think it's really wanting to make yourself a better person. I don't mean to get all philosophical or anything, but now that you're asking me, I think it has more to do with making sure that angst in your heart won't be there another morning."

"So, it is fear."

"No, it's not fear, it's more . . . it's knowing that you're being the best you're able to be."

"So, is there anything missing from your life?"

"Are you kidding?" I asked her. "Everything is missing from my life."

"So what's everything?" she asked me.

"I don't know," I told her. "I'll let you know when I find out."

"You know, I just said to Lloyd the other night, 'Why doesn't

Alex have a great guy in her life?’ Have you ever had a serious relationship?”

“Well, yes,” I started to say as I began to tell her about my engagement to Charles but then decided against getting into that whole thing. “But, no, I wasn’t ready. It just wasn’t the right time for me.”

“Are you ready now?”

Again, I had to stop and think about it.

“I don’t really know,” I told her. “Yes, I think I’m at a point in my life now where I could be in a relationship with someone, but it would have to be someone who would give me the freedom to think for myself. I just don’t think I’m done doing all the things I need to do.”

“I get that,” she said, nudging Lloyd, who had since fallen asleep in her lap. “I just wish I knew someone for you.”

“That will come in time,” I told her.

“And that’s what I admire about you,” she told me.

“I don’t think I’m one to be admired,” I told her.

“You know what it is, Alex,” she said, putting her hands on my shoulders, “you just don’t see it,” she said.

I was too drunk to drive by the time I was ready to leave the party. I knew the first thing I had to do the next morning was return that beach top to Barneys, but I also wanted to pick up Peaches that night.

“Do you have your ticket, ma’am?” the valet asked me.

Just then, a cab pulled up. I remember thinking at the time how crazy that was. I mean, cabs just don’t pull up in Los Angeles. You have to call for that kind of thing.

"You need a cab, lady?" the female cab driver with the bad brunette dye job asked me.

"Uh, yeah, but I need to make two stops," I said, getting into the cab as I told the valet I'd pick my car up the next day.

"Hard day?" the female cab driver asked me.

"I don't even know where the time went," I told her.

"That's the best kind of day to have," she said and I agreed.

Peaches was still stoned out of her mind by the time I collected her from the vet. I placed her on one side of my bed as I got into it on the other and left my jeans and sweater on, which, as you know, I'm so happy I did.

As I fell asleep that night, I could only think of one thing: that conversation with Kate. One, Kate was out of her mind. Two, on the other hand, what was it that Kate saw about me that I didn't? What did she mean, "You just don't see it?" Why couldn't I ever just relax? Was my life really that good, the way she looked at it—or was it the way I looked at it, an existence fueled by this insane desire to make things right even though I probably never would have known what "right" even was?

It's funny because now that I think about it, life was good. What the heck was I trying to prove, and what would it have taken in the end for me to feel better about the way I lived my life?

I had gone from being a girl who had no idea what she was doing to someone who actually had a life in this world (or that world).

I guess it's the kind of thing, though, where you don't realize what a good time you had until the party is over. I had great friends. I had a great job. I loved what I was doing with my life. Why didn't I see it?

“I gotta get myself a boyfriend,” I thought to myself as I fell asleep. This was the last thing I remember thinking.

At four o’clock that morning, I was awoken by Peaches whimpering beside my bed. She was whimpering there for a good forty-five minutes before I finally got out to take her for the walk. I still feel bad about that. Peaches is such a good, sweet, wonderful dog. You know that feeling, though, when you’re sleeping and nothing else in the world matters, even if your dog is being so generous despite her own painful bowel obstruction as to hold it in until you get up to take her out?

Obviously, I did take her out. I was thrilled that I had on what I was wearing. It felt good to be outside in the middle of the night with the cold air on my face, and maybe I was still a little drunk, though I don’t think so, but I felt this great exhilaration to be out there all alone with Peaches. Everyone else in the world was asleep and we had the whole place to ourselves. There were no cars, that I saw, coming down Fairfax when Peaches’s obstruction cleared.

“You feel better now, girly girl?” I asked her as we started to head back to my apartment.

And that was that. That was the last thing I remember saying as I bent down to pick up Peaches and give her a hug. That’s when I saw the lights of the MINI Cooper come out of nowhere.

If you had told me then that this would be one of the best days of my life, I would have told you that you were crazy. I wouldn’t have thought about it that way at all. That day was full of stress. It was full of work and thought and wondering and worrying. When I look at it now, though, it was just the way it should have been.

See, on your birthday you look at the next year and what you're going to do. You look forward. If you knew that this was the last day of your life, you would have no other choice but to look back and reflect. There's something good and clean and final about that. And that puts everything, your whole life, right into perspective.

Do I have any regrets? Yes, I do, and now I know how to change them. I know what's been keeping me from being able to get to my parents. Alice was right. I just needed to find the strength within myself before I would be able to help them. I needed to see what everyone else could see. I know now that it's up to me to make everything okay.



I'm not in seventh heaven anymore.

I'm not in fourth heaven or fifth or second or third.

I'm in a place I never want to be in ever again, a place no one else should have to visit.

I'm at the door of my childhood home and about to enter shivah, the Jewish equivalent of a wake, for a twenty-nine-year-old woman who died suddenly.

Outside of the house there's a water basin where mourners dressed in black dresses and suits wash their hands before they enter. If I remember correctly from my grandparents' funerals, the washing of hands before entering the home after coming from the cemetery is supposed to separate the two acts, ending the sadness and beginning the act of comforting those who have lost the person they love: thus the shivah.

As I enter the house, about one hundred pairs of black shoes line the door to my parents' entryway. Usually, shoes were lined up in the foyer of my childhood home so no one would scuff the floors. Tonight, they are lined up in the ritual of Jewish tradition as another act of not bringing in the sadness, and as a way of comforting my parents.



Bedsheets from the house cover the mirrors for the next seven days so no one sitting shivah should have to see their own grief. I see Patsy Kleinman, a friend of my mother's, try to lift up a part of a sheet with a lipstick in her hand. Mr. Kleinman gives her a pinch in the arm followed by this hard, disapproving look. Good one, Mr. Kleinman.

The house is crammed with people. A lot of them are people my dad has worked with, but mostly it's friends of my parents' and mine. Trays of sandwiches and turkeys and briskets cover the dining room table, along with sides of coleslaw, potato salad, pots of soups, and various desserts. As I stand watching people place food on their plates, another tray of sandwiches is set in front of me on the table. I turn around and see that it's Penelope, my best friend, who is making up the table.

"I think we have enough for now," she says to a server. "And make sure that no one's glass is ever empty," she adds. "Alex would want everyone sloshed out of their minds."

This makes me laugh. It's so true. I only wish I could get a drink for myself.

There are people milling all around Pen, serving themselves sandwiches, whispering to each other, "What a shame, only twenty-nine." My Penelope isn't talking to anyone. After someone takes a sandwich, Pen spreads out the remaining sandwiches so the tray still looks presentable. This is so Pen, to be arranging the sandwiches like she is. Always the one to take charge to make sure everything is just right.

"Pen," I say, putting my hand on her shoulder, "have a drink or something, you're making me nervous."

That's when she stops arranging. Does she hear me? I keep

my hand on her shoulder as she puts both of her hands on the table like it's the only thing holding her up.

"Are you okay?" Dana Stanbury asks.

"Oh sure," she answers confidently. "I just need to take a moment."

I follow Pen as we navigate our way through the mourners and head into my bedroom. Pen shuts the door.

We look up at the shelves in my bedroom, at the collection of the dolls from around the world. Beside the dolls, there is one picture. It's the one we both love, the one taken of us at summer camp when we were kids. I have the same one up in heaven. We both look at the picture: two little girls, one overgrown and scraggly. Her Camp Wonderland T-shirt is too tight, exposing the mounds of fat on her stomach. She's got her circular glasses on and a huge smile exposing her oversize gums and teeth. She has her arm around the other little girl, who is much smaller than her friend, with pigtails and also smiling this huge grin.

"You stupid idiot," Pen whispers aloud, chuckling through her tears. "How could your fat ass get hit by such a small car?"

"That's what I thought you'd say," I laugh with her as she sits down on my pink canopy bed, taking the picture with her.

Pen really starts to cry now.

"What the hell am I going to do without you?" she whispers aloud as she slides to the floor and I go along with her.

She's facedown with her head buried in white shag carpet.

"What the hell am I going to do without you?" she asks again as I stroke her back.

"I'm here for you," I tell her. "I'm right here, you idiot," I whisper.

She picks up her head and rolls into the fetal position on the floor; her eyes open as she stares beyond the dust ruffle under the bed. I'm sitting up, leaning against the bed, watching over my dearest friend. I hear people outside the door—glasses clinking and mumblings of talk. It might as well be miles away.

Just then, Pen picks up her head, coming to life as she focuses on something under the bed. She takes her arm and moves it under the bed to grab something. When it comes out, she's got my old Snoopy dog, the one I threw under there the night of my first kiss all those years ago. Pen takes it into her arms and sits up next to me beside the bed, staring at the old stuffed animal and our picture.

"What are you going to do with that thing?" I ask her, though I know she can't hear me.

"I hope you're taking care of yourself, wherever you are," she whispers as if she were talking to my old, dusty Snoopy. "Who is going to look after you if I can't?"

"I can take care of myself now, Pen. I can, I promise you, I'll be okay."

"I just worry," she whispers.

"Don't," I tell her. "Please don't. I know what I have to do."

"Okay," she whispers as she wipes her tears.

We sit there for a few more seconds in silence, my best friend and me. I know she can't hear me, though maybe she can. It's kind of like it was on earth when I'd think of her and suddenly the phone would ring and I would pick it up without saying hello and say, "I was just thinking of you!"

"Okay," she says, confirming to herself as she gets up and places our picture and the Snoopy doll on the bed. "Okay," she

repeats confidently, grabbing a tissue from the bedside table and wiping her face.

Pen opens the door to my childhood room, and we step out among the crowd of mourners.

"How are you?" Kerry Collins and Dana Stanbury and Olivia Wilson ask as we head toward the living room.

"I'm okay now," she tells them.

"We're just talking about the time Alex and I went to get those perms. Remember how hers came out?"

"She lived through that, but she couldn't survive a MINI Cooper!" Both Pen and I start to laugh, but no one else does.

"Sorry," Pen tells them. "I'm just . . . I miss her."

"So do we," Dana cries as my friends embrace.

"How are you?" Charles Kitteredge, my ex-fiancé, asks as we pass him in the hallway.

"I'm fine," she tells him, taking his hand. "How are you?"

"She was an amazing person," he tells her.

"She was," Pen answers, as we continue to make our way through the crowd.

There are the twins, Seth and Tom Rosso, and Greg Rice on one side of the room. They wave hello to Pen, but Pen doesn't stop and I don't blame her.

"It's so those assholes to show up," I tell Pen.

"Assholes," Pen murmurs to herself.

"Penelope," we hear, making our way through the crowd. It's Andrew McAuliffe. "My brother sends his regrets," he says, putting his arm around her.

"Thank you, thank you for coming, Andy," she says, kissing him on the cheek.

"She was one crazy chick."

"She was," she agrees as we walk by.

I see my old buddies from the mailroom at my dad's office. Though aged, their suits have gotten much better. I see Stan Mitchell and Lou Sernoff and my buddy Peter from Barneys. How sweet was that of them to fly in? They're standing over by Lloyd and Kate Kerner. All that running around for Kate's beach top and they didn't even get to go to Hawaii. Kate is crying and Lloyd is wiping his nose, but I'm wondering if that's because he's upset or because of his postnasal drip. Then I suddenly realize that I've lost Pen in the crowd, so I turn away and look across the room to find her.

I'm looking over to the other side of the room as I maneuver my way among all the mourners. One by one they move out of my way as I make my way over to the couch.

There they are.

"You didn't tell me you'd be here," I say to my grandparents and uncle Morris.

"Talk to her," Grandmom instructs me as she takes her hand off of my mother's shuddering body.

"She just needs to know that you're okay, sweetheart," Grandpop tells me.

"How are you holding up?" uncle Morris asks.

"I'm getting through this," I answer in the best way I can.

"You did it," Alice Oppenheim adds, smiling, "you got here. I knew you would."

"I figured it out," I smile.

"Now go to your parents," she tells me. "They need you right now."

"Yeah, I can take over from here," I say, giving Alice a hug and adding, "Thank you so much."

Next to Alice is Adam. My dear Adam. Of course he's here with me.

"Do you need anything?" Adam asks, putting his arms around me.

"It was so sweet of you to be here," I tell him, giving him a kiss. "It's all going to be okay."

"I love you," he tells me.

"I love you, too."

"Mrs. Dorenfield," Pen gently prods, standing over my parents with a plate of food in her hand, "you should eat a little something."

"No, I'm fine, I'm fine," my mother cries.

"Mr. D.," Pen asks, "can I get you anything?"

"No, Penelope," he tells her. "Maxine and I are okay."

"Okay," she tells him. "I'll look in on how the food is going. I'll check back with you in a little bit."

As Pen starts to walk away, Dad takes her hand.

"Penelope," he says with tears in his eyes, "you were a great friend."

"Alex made it easy," she tells him.

"You were the dearest friend, Penelope," my mom cries. "I never saw two best girlfriends as close as you and Alex."

"She was my soul mate," Pen tears.

"She was mine, too," Mom weeps.

"Come on, Maxine," Dad softly says to my mother. "Let's go lie down for a little while."

"Yes, I'll take care of everything here," Pen says, helping them up. "You go rest and I'll be out here if you need anything."

My father takes my mother's arm as I take her other arm and we head through the mourners toward my parents' room.

"So sorry for your loss," Charles Kitteredge Sr. tells my parents.

"Thanks, Chuck," my father says, patting him on the back.

"She was a lovely girl," another mourner tells my mother.

"She was," my mother tells her. "Thank you."

The mourners continue to say things like this as we make our way.

"Thank you," Dad tells them.

"Thank you for coming," Mom manages to get out.

We finally make it to my parents' bedroom as Dad shuts the door and gets Mom onto the bed.

"I'm not going to be able to get through this," Mom says, "Why did this happen? Why did this have to happen?" She starts to cry.

"I don't know, darling," Dad tells her. "Just rest for now. Let's just rest together," he says, cradling her in his arms.

I sit by their bed as they cry together. There's nothing I can do at this exact moment. It's my hope that just being here with them will help in some way. That's all I can do for now.

It must be hours later. The chatter of people outside has calmed. The sounds of glasses clinking and silverware jingling against dishes have been replaced with the hums of car motors pulling away. I've watched my parents go from holding on to

each other and weeping to dividing themselves on either side of the bed and falling asleep. I know that now is the time, and I walk over to my mother's side of the bed.

"Mommy?" I whisper softly to her. "It's Alex. Please don't be frightened."

"Alex?" she whispers and then begins to become startled so I caress her arm. "It's okay, Mommy. It's just me. Please don't be frightened, Mommy, it's okay."

Her eyes are still closed, and that sudden jerk in her body upon hearing my voice dissolves back into silent sleep. "Where are you? Are you okay?" she asks through her sleep. "I miss you so much. I'm so worried about you."

"It's okay, Mommy," I tell her as I continue to caress her face and dry her tears. "I'm okay. I'm up in heaven with Grandmom and Grandpop. Grandmom still drives the car that Daddy gave her. Can you believe that?"

"That old Cadillac?" Mom smiles. "I knew she loved that car when Daddy gave it to her."

"uncle Morris only smokes Cuban cigars."

"He really is in heaven," she smiles again.

"Yeah, and Grandpop has Phillies games to watch twenty-four hours a day."

"Are Grandmom and Grandpop still bickering?"

"You better believe it," I laugh and she chuckles along with me.

"And I became friends with Alice Oppenheim. She's so cool, Mom, and we went shopping together and guess what? You get all the best clothes in heaven and shoes don't pinch and even the highest heels feel like sneakers."

"That's incredible!" she laughs. "Is Alice still saying that I stole her crinolines, because you know that's not true. I swear that I left her one."

"Don't worry, Mom, I defended you, and Alice sends you all her love," I tell her, beginning to get excited myself as I continue. "And you know what else?"

"What, baby?" she smiles through her sleep, full of energy.

"I met a guy! He's so cute and so nice. I finally met the man of my dreams!"

"Now I know you're in heaven," she laughs as she adds, "Is he Jewish?"

"You know what?" I tell her, "the subject never came up."

"Well, as long as he's good to you."

"Yeah, Mom, he is. He's wonderful. It's all fine. Life really does go on after death," I explain to her. "You know why it goes on?"

"Why, sweetheart?"

"It goes on because the love you had for the people on earth is still the same there."

"And you're not in any pain, Alex? Just tell me that you're not in any pain."

"I'm not, Mom. I'm fine. In fact, I'm in even better shape than I was before. When you get up to heaven, your cellulite is gone and you can run for miles and miles."

"No cellulite?" she exclaims. "Now I know you're really happy!"

"I'm perfectly fine, and Grandmom and Grandpop and uncle Morris are fine and Alice is fine. I'm okay now. Please don't worry about me."

She starts to cry again as we embrace, and then I lay her body back onto the bed.

"Alex, I just have one thing I want you to know," she whispers.

"What is it, Mom?"

"I always wished that I was more like you," she tells me.

"And I always wished that I was more like you," I say as I kiss her on the cheek and she settles back into a restful sleep.

I look over at my dad, who is also sleeping, but I can tell by his tears he's heard every word. I walk over to his side of the bed and sit by his side.

"Dad," I start, "I've had to do a lot of soul-searching up there. I've regretted one thing in my life and that's how I treated you."

"No," he starts sobbing, "don't regret anything."

"I have to, Dad," I cry. "I have to tell you how sorry I am for the things I did. I let you down. It was my stupid hard head."

"You are my daughter," he says, taking a deep breath. "Where do you think that came from? I knew things were going to get better though. I knew that one day you'd make me proud."

"But how?" I ask, really starting to cry now.

"You were starting to do it. You were turning that determination into something more positive. Baby, I always loved you . . ."

"And I loved you, too . . ."

"That's something you never had to worry about. You were just too much like me, that strong will."

And it's in this moment I know for sure. My life was not wasted. I was exactly like my father. There was no way I would

not have gone on to lead a fulfilling life. I wouldn't have let myself. After all, I am my father's daughter.

"As much as you loved me, though, there was one thing you couldn't give to me. I had to figure out my life for myself," I weep.

"As parents," he sighs, taking a deep breath, "it's hard not to give your child everything she wants."

"I know, Dad, but we never stopped loving each other and that's what's most important."

"Thank you, Alex," he cries. "Thank you so much for telling me that."

"I love you so much, Daddy." I wipe his tears and then my own.

"Will I see you again?" he asks me.

"I'll always be here for you whenever you need me," I tell him.

And with that, Dad falls back into a restful sleep and I take a few steps back to watch these two people, the ones I've loved most in this world. My mother's tears have subsided as my dad takes my mom in his arms and they continue to rest.

They are at peace.

I am at peace.

Only Heaven Knows

To Whom It May Concern:

This is to inform you that I am hereby handing in the essay assigned to me: "The Ten Best Days of My Life."

I have performed this task to the best of my ability. Each day was constructively thought out in the hopes that you would conclude that even though I was taken from earth at a young age, eventually I would have gone on to lead a fulfilling life.

When I started this essay, my goal was to ensure that I would be guaranteed all the material objects that I had received when I first arrived at seventh heaven two weeks ago. As I wrote the essay, however, something occurred that might make the whole thing moot:

See, as it stands now, I don't really give a crud where you send me.

To tell you the truth, you can take back the closet that was converted from a bedroom with all the latest styles and the shoes that don't pinch. You can have my bathroom with the nine shower jets and the grooming products and the

MacKenzie-Childs pottery and the Shabby Chic furniture. I don't even care if I can't eat whatever I want and still retain a perfect figure. You can take all of it and do whatever you want with it. Give it to someone who never had that stuff on earth, I don't need it anymore.

Since completing this essay, it has become perfectly clear to me that there are more important things than any material object seventh heaven could give me. If there is anything I have learned in these past two weeks, looking back on my short life on earth, it is this:

I have irrefutable, undeniable, incontestable, unquestionable love all around me and no one can take that away. No plane of heaven can ever change it. I know, without any shade of doubt, that had I lived longer, I would have gone on to lead a rewarding and meaningful life because I would not have allowed myself to do otherwise. The people who love me most wouldn't have stood for that. It would only have been a matter of time before I saw what they could see all along.

So, after you read the story of my life told through its best days, I am sure that you'll see what I do.

I was nowhere near perfect. (But, then again, let's face the facts: isn't that what the teenage years through the end of your twenties are all about?) I probably would have made a million more mistakes in my life on earth. I'll probably make a million more for the rest of eternity. I pissed off a lot of people and I'm sure I'll piss off a few more.

Still, it doesn't matter. There is a select group of people on both heaven and earth who know the whole story of my

The Ten Best Days of My Life

life, and not just the best days. They were there for the worst ones too. To me, they are my jury and I already know their verdict.

I do apologize if I have wasted anyone's time. My bad. It just took me a little longer to realize what I should have known all along.

So that's that.

Very truly yours,

Alexandra Joan Dorenfield,

aka:

Maxine and Bill Dorenfield's daughter

Evelyn and Harry Firestein's granddaughter

Morris Salis's niece

Penelope Goldstein's best friend

Peaches Dorenfield's guardian

Adam Steele's true love

TEN YEARS LATER



Knocking On Heaven's Door

My dad died today, which is so weird. I honestly thought he was immortal.

I got a call in the middle of the night from Deborah, my guardian angel. That's the way these things go down. We're not psychic up here. It's not like we automatically know when someone dies. Plus, there's no grand plan, no great scheme. When your number is up, it's up, which is not actually as much a number as it is your time.

Today was just my dad's time.

Dad was eighty-eight years old, and he died peacefully in his sleep from natural causes. He had actually been ailing for a while now, so it wasn't a huge surprise to anyone. People might be sad, but they know it's okay. Dad led a long and fulfilling life.

I'm standing here with my grandparents and uncle Morris in a waiting room in Building Blissful. We've been here about an hour. The lines must be long today. Grandmom parked the lemon-colored Cadillac Coupe deVille right in front so we could get in and out as fast as we could.

"He always gets hungry after a big trip," Grandmom said when she parked.

Adam is back at our Len Jacobs house conjuring up the finishing touches for our welcome celebration. We've got lox and bagels and whitefish salad, all Dad's brunch favorites, waiting for him when we get back. He'll be living right next to Adam and me in Adam's old house, only Adam's Hamptons-style house has been remodeled into a house that looks exactly like the one I grew up in. The only thing that looks strange about our old house is that all of Dad's suits are gone. Instead, his closet is full of Bermuda shorts and Ralph Lauren Polo golf shirts in an array of colors. His home office has been converted into a game room complete with a pool table, darts, and a pin-ball machine. I was surprised myself when I saw it. I thought he'd want to work through eternity. Who knew?

Even my old canopy bed and the dolls from around the world are there. I guess our old house was my dad's dream home. My old bedroom is not for me, though, it's for my eight-year-old daughter, Ruth; Adam's and mine. We adopted her when she came up to heaven five years ago. I've told Ruth about all the special times I spent with my grandparents, and she can't wait to be with her grandfather.

"Will Grandpop Bill play bridge and watch old movies with me like I do at Great-Grandmom and Great-Grandpop's house?" she asks me.

"I'm sure he'll want to do anything you want," I tell her. "I'm sure he'll spend hours and hours playing all the games you want." Actually, I'm not positively sure of this since he never really did these things with me. Something tells me, though, he'll be a little different when he gets here. Maybe it's because there are no suits in his closet anymore.

Ruth's bedroom is just beyond my converted bedroom closet, though these days that room is used to store all of Ruth's toys and games. The closet, which used to be lined with everything from Marc Jacobs to Oscar de la Renta, is now filled with tutus and feather boas and mermaid outfits, and one section of the closet is specifically for tiaras and costume jewelry and play makeup for her gaggle of girlfriends to play with. Adam says I spoil her, but I always tell him, "Every little girl should be spoiled." There's enough time to be otherwise.

My new converted bedroom closet, with all the latest fashions and shoes that don't pinch, is just on the other side of the bedroom that Adam and I share. What can I say? It's seventh heaven. You get what you want.

"He's just arrived through the gates," Deborah informs us as we continue to wait. "It should just be a few more minutes," she says, shutting the door to our waiting room.

There are so many things I want to show Dad. He's going to be thrilled at his eighteen-hole golf course and tennis courts. Adam has been practicing up so they can play together. Adam made sure the course is just like the one at Pebble Beach. The fourth hole always pisses off Dad, but, as heaven goes, I'm sure he'll sink each putt with ease, like his idol Jack Nicklaus.

He'll be so relieved to find that there's a Palm Restaurant just around the corner from us. I'm sure we'll go tonight for Dad's favorite T-bone steak and Gigi salad. They've already put his caricature on the wall, which he'll definitely get a kick out of.

"We're going to bring him through now," Deborah tells us from the door.

Grandmom and Grandpop and uncle Morris and I get up to

walk toward the door. My dad is just beyond it and suddenly all I want is to swing those doors open myself.

I see the door slowly open. Dad has no idea that we're here. How could he know? He must think he's in this by himself.

He's a little grayer than he was the last time I saw him. He's a bit thinner. But when he looks up and our eyes meet, he's suddenly back to the way I always remember him: tall, full of vitality, strong, no one can ever get in his way.

"Alex!" he shouts, with a huge smile on his face, his arms straight out to me.

"Hi, Dad!" I scream back, and I run toward him.

We hug and hug and hug. He smells just like I remember him, clean from Ivory soap, a little dab of aftershave on each of his cheeks.

He takes his hands and cradles my face as he looks me straight in the eyes.

"I always knew I'd see you again," he cries. "I told Mom I was going up to be with you. She sends you all her love. I just hope she's all right down there."

"We'll look in on her," I cry as we hug again. "We'll let her know that everything's okay."

"Good," he whispers. "You'll teach me how to do that later."

"What? I don't get a hug here?" Grandmom demands as Dad buries himself in her arms.

"You're still the same old battle-ax," he laughs.

"Someone has to keep this family in order," she laughs back.

Dad gives hugs to Grandpop and uncle Morris.

"He's got lots of time for all this," Grandmom shouts as she breaks up the reunion. "Come on, Bill, we've got all your favorites at Alex's house. I know you must be hungry. I've got the car waiting in front," she tells him, interlocking her arm in his as we head through the doors.

"The old Cadillac?" he pronounces when he sees it. "Jesus, Evelyn, with all the goddamned gripe you gave me, I knew you loved this car."

"It's still got a few good miles on it," she shrugs. "I've been waiting for you to pick me out a new one, and this time, please, nothing too fancy. Maybe something like Alex's car."

"I have a Porsche, Dad," I grimace as we chuckle together.

As we pull up to the house, Adam and Ruth are waiting in front. Peaches is jumping up and down, barking with excitement. Ruth made a poster board sign that says, "Welcome Home Grandpop" in crayon. We all go into the house arm in arm.

We're sitting in my dining room surrounded by our family in heaven. I watch Dad as he observes the commotion around him. Grandmom and uncle Morris are giving each other the latest gossip. Adam and Grandpop are discussing last night's Phillies games. Ruth is holding up pieces of lox for Peaches to jump up and grab. I'm just watching Dad as he takes it all in.

"So this really is heaven," Dad says to me. He takes his last bite of bagel and lox sandwich as he looks around at all of us and Ruth climbs into his lap.

"Yeah, Pop," I smile to him, putting my hand in his. "This really is heaven."

